

“We three kings of Orient are
Bearing gifts, we traverse far
Field and fountain
Moor and mountain
Following yonder star”

Tonight, we’re going to talk about the Three Wise Men from the east, about who they were, what they did, and how we might emulate their devotion to God in our own walk with him.

OPENING PRAYER

MATTHEW 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶“But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” ⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” ⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

“We three kings of orient are”: Funny how songs can take on a life of their own. The Magi from the east weren’t kings and we don’t know how many of them

there were, except there was more than one. There could have been two, three, or thirty-three. They weren't "kings," a title attributed to them about 500 years after Christ's birth, but they were stargazers—astronomers and astrologers—which meant they watched and measured the stars, and they believed they contained hidden meanings which it was their job to discover and interpret. Not a bad gig if someone's paying you to do it.

The song says they were from the "Orient," which was Persia, present day Iran. If you know your Bible history, you know the Jews were in exile in Persia until 536 BC when they were freed. Many returned home to Judah, but many stayed in Persia, however. In fact, until recently there was a very large Jewish community in Iran which traced its roots all the way back to that time.

The Magi read the stars and one lit up over Judea. There's nothing in the Bible about the birth of a king with a new star or comet or meteor shower, or whatever it was they saw. But the Magi had something that led them to that conclusion.

One of my favorite action movies is Conspiracy Theory with Mel Gibson and Julia Roberts. Gibson plays a former government spy who has become a little bit crazy. He has a thousand conspiracy theories about everything from the cabal to chemtrails. And they're all wrong, except for one. He gets one right, and, with Julia Roberts' help, he saves the day. That's what it must've been like for the Magi. All their earlier predictions and interpretations of the stars were probably in left field, except for one, this one about the newborn king. Nailed it!

But what they saw didn't get them to Bethlehem. The star hovered over Israel, and so they went to the capital, Jerusalem, and got an audience with King Herod, for what could be more logical than to inquire of the present king about his apparent successor?

You can imagine the Magi standing in front of the king, smiling ear-to-ear. "We're here!" they proclaimed. "We've got gifts and we want to pay our respects to the King of the Jews!"

Herod was a Jew, but he didn't practice the faith. He and all his followers were known for their decadent lifestyles, not to mention his murder of two of his sons and his wife. Not a pleasant fellow. So, as you might suspect he did not sing the Halleluiah Chorus when the Magi told him that his heir-apparent had just been born!

He was totally unprepared. He didn't know the Scripture, and he certainly didn't know the first thing about God's promise of a redeemer. But he knew men who did. He called in the "**chief priests and teachers of the law,**" and they recited the prophet Micah to him, and he learned that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, a small town of the tribe of Benjamin.

The Magi are often called "wise men," but that's a title they didn't get until about eight hundred years after Christ's birth. The mythology of a Persian elite class of intellectuals became popular at that time, and it was assumed the Magi were among them. It has since been discovered that first century Persians never held a high view of astrologers. But they considered them to be crackpots, kooky old men who had too much time on their hands.

Of the four Gospels, Matthew is considered the "most Jewish." It includes lots of Old Testament references, for example, and it traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and King David. But the Magi were not Jewish. In fact, they were probably Zoroastrians, which is a religion of many gods founded in Persia around the time of Moses, about 1500 B.C.

So after the Jewish teachers revealed to King Herod and the Magi that the Messiah would come out of Bethlehem, he told the Magi to "**Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.**" And they intended to do just that.

But the Lord was in control. The other story about Christ's birth in Matthew's Gospel is Joseph's story. In chapter one we read about how after he discovered that Mary was pregnant, he intended to divorce her quietly. But an angel appeared and interceded. The Lord was in control.

In tonight's reading, after the Magi left Herod, they went to Bethlehem, and they found Jesus. You can see them standing at the door of the home of Mary and Joseph as they gaze intently on the baby Jesus. And they say, "We're here! Let us see the little tiger! We've got gifts—wonderful gifts—and we have come to see the King of the Jews!"

And with these naïve and goofy smiles spread across their faces, they placed their gifts at the foot of the basket that held the baby: Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But as they looked upon the child, they had no idea what they were looking at or

how their gifts were only kind of right. He was a king, but not the kind of king who anticipated a gift of gold. He would be anointed as king, but not with frankincense and myrrh as other kings were, but with a baptism in the Holy Spirit in the River Jordan by John the Baptist years later.

But God was in control. As the Magi prepared to return to Jerusalem on their way home to tell Herod about the Christ-child, the Lord spoke to them in their dreams and redirected them on a path which avoided the Holy City.

Herod didn't give up, though. As we continue reading the Gospel, we see that he tried to find Jesus and kill him. But the Lord was in control. His angel warned Joseph to flee Bethlehem for Egypt, and he obeyed, and Herod lost that round.

The baby Jesus would grow up, and he would be our Lord Jesus. He would suffer and die for our sins, and he would overcome death and rise from the dead on the third day ushering us into eternal life. God was and God is in control.

This is how the Lord works: He led the Magi to the Christ through a series of unlikely events until they found him. They were shocked, they were surprised by what they found. But they worshipped him anyway. But Herod and the others should've beat them to the punch! They should've been prostrate before the baby king long before the Magi showed up. But their pride got in the way.

One commentator wrote that the original readers of this Gospel—first century Jews who were thinking about what it meant to be a Christian—must've thought "God revealed the truth about the Christ to a bunch of pagan fools while those who were wise enough to figure it out for themselves missed it."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, remember, God loves fools, drunks, and little children, and he loves you and me! God is in control. Let us give thanks for that.

Let us pray that all the people we hold in our hearts would turn to the Lord during this season and give thanks to him for his gifts, especially the gift of life in his son, Jesus.

And let us take opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.