

Sunday December 18, 2022  
Lesson 3: To Whom Do We Pay Homage?  
Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-12

**Context:**

We continue our unit “Power and Vulnerability” as we dive into parts of the nativity story. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, we look to the story of the Magi and the gifts they bring to Jesus. Today’s focus will be to proclaim Jesus as the true king whom we should seek.

The gospel of Matthew differs in the account of the birth of Jesus in several ways, primarily who are the focal characters. Luke focuses on the events and narratives of Mary and her relations, while Matthew focuses on Joseph and the genealogy connecting Jesus to the house of David. Likewise in visitors to the newborn king, Luke focuses on angels and shepherds, while Matthew focuses on the Magi and even the powers of the day with King Herod. Both give important details to the identity of Jesus and give us various perspectives to consider.

The Magi have been called many things from “wise men” to “Kings of the far East.” The adoration of the Magi has often been better understood by poets and artists as they have rendered numerous depictions of these mysterious visitors.<sup>1</sup> The word magi can also be referred to as *magoi*. It means “magicians,” and yet could also designate the Magians, a Persian priestly caste, possibly Zoroastrian.<sup>2</sup> Another scholarly consensus has been on how they are astrologers, a popular practice in “the east.”<sup>3</sup> They are most likely not Jewish as the text never depicts them as such and they are said to have traveled from far away.

The Magi are primarily known for the three gifts they bring to the newborn king. Their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh all indicate a focus on royalty and have later derived spiritual meaning. Gold is associated with monarchy, myrrh was used in anointing holy individuals, and frankincense was tied to being a sacred perfume used in the sanctuary and nowhere else.<sup>4</sup> These gifts of course have come to play a significant role in telling the story of Jesus: he was the highest anointed king whose body served as the greatest sacrifice for all humanity. Yet for the Magi, these are the gifts one brings for a king.

Their guide is a star to lead them there. Yet they are not alone in their interest in the star and its path to this newborn king. While the Lukan narrative contains but a mention of the political timeline for Jesus’ birth, Matthew’s gospel gives explicit details of how Jesus’ birth is political and a threat to the jealous King Herod. King Herod does not want a new king and thus the text gives a narrative to how the Magi avoid the machinations of one who will assert his authority and attempt to destroy the threat. Like Joseph given a message in a dream, the Magi are given a dream to avoid Herod and they go home by another way.

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, Douglas. “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

## **Application**

We rarely think of the birth of Jesus as political. Instead, during this season we think of Jesus' birth as a humble affair to inspire awe and wonder for us. Yet as we see with the presentation of the Magi, Jesus' birth is a threat to the current order. A new allegiance is being offered to people and it comes in the form of a newborn king with no army, no wealth, and visibly no power. And yet it is this monarch who will change the world.

The character of King Herod is one who rarely gets presented in the Christmas pageant. I imagine no one would volunteer in one place, and in the other, he makes us feel uncomfortable. King Herod is sneaky and manipulative, one who listens closely and then makes his plans to benefit Herod and Herod alone.

Yet Herod also offers us a glimpse into the question "Who do we worship?" It is very easy to say we worship Jesus, and we proclaim him as Lord and Savior. Yet if we are real with ourselves, we can admit we do not always worship and proclaim Christ as Lord and Savior in our everyday lives. We often too get ensnared with Herod because he offers us the ways of the world as a solution to all our problems.

The Magi offer to us an unadulterated form of worship to Jesus. When they come before him, the only thing they can tell you is they have followed a star and searched through the scrolls of old to discover his identity. The gifts they bring him are not practical baby gifts, yet they are the gifts you bring to any monarch. And when they arrive, they do not ask for special titles or privileges. Instead, they place down their gifts and worship, taking the moment as one to be reverent and in awe.

On the other hand, Herod takes this birth of a newborn king as a moment to plot and plan. He sees something to be gained in knowing who this child is and where they live. And ultimately, he sees the opportunity to bring a gift as a disguise to bring ruin.

In our lives as Christians, we are called to see the gifts of life we give to Jesus are meant to be pure and without strings attached. This includes our lives and what we offer unto him. We surrender to Jesus and as we give unto him, the belief he owes us something for it or we receive special privileges in the church negate this form of worship. Coming to worship the newborn king means we see the chance to grow closer to the one who comes to bring us hope, peace, joy, and love. This should be cause enough for us to draw closer unto him.

In today's church, this often causes more attention than we would like to admit. Our world often focuses on what we can receive out of things instead of what we can give. How many times have we believed because we belong to something whether a church or a club, we should receive certain benefits or privileges. In some ways, this is a good thing. Yet at other times, it can blind us to surrendering to Jesus and asking how we can grow closer to him. We lose our salt as we ask what is in it for us instead of how we can give back to Jesus and those around us.

Often the most beautiful gifts I have seen given are those when people simply give and ask it be used for the glory of God. It creates both a beautiful opportunity as well as a wonderful challenge to discern where those gifts will benefit the church and the kingdom. Yet what amazes me when people give so freely is the joy you see in their lives. They do not see it as a means to gain prestige or authority; instead, they see it as an opportunity to give back to God for the glory of our Lord.

In a world where there are sometimes more King Herods than Magi, we are invited to ask what we might do to honor the newborn king. The star guides us to the manger and shows us

where the ultimate ruler dwells not with the powers of the world, but as a vulnerable child cooing and crying. We are given a chance to adore him, to worship him, and to pledge our lives to him.

What gifts can you bring to the Christ child? Who are people who remind you of the Magi? What is your favorite aspect of this nativity story? How can gifts and power play a difference in our life together? Why does God give us an opportunity to give back to God?

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