

Dec. 24, 2017

Lesson 4: Faithful Seekers of the King

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Context:

Today we jump to some of the beloved favorites in the Christmas pageant: the Magi, “Wise men,” Kings from the Orient Far. Throughout the centuries, poets and artists have filled in the gaps of the Gospel of Matthew to present these mysterious visitors who come to see Christ, the newborn king. They are a part of our Nativity sets and provide a little more flair juxtaposed next to the plain and simple shepherd with their turbans, flashy robes, and unique gifts brought to a little one.

From a scholastic viewpoint, there is not as much known about these visitors. The Gospel writer refers to them as *magoi*, which has several distinct uses in biblical and ancient texts.¹ In Acts 13: 6 the word means “magician” and this appears in other Christian literature.² Their name could also designate them as Magians, a Persian priestly caste, those who were Zoroastrians.³ But a third and most prominent theory is that these individuals were astrologers, those from “the East” who studied ancient texts and looked to the heavens for signs.⁴ Whoever they were, they were more importantly Gentile, those who didn’t belong to the Jewish faith, but were nonetheless intrigued to come and visit a child. They are the special visitors who are the first to come and visit Christ.

Much significance has focused on the gifts that were brought to Jesus. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh are unusual gifts for a baby, but this wasn’t your usual baby shower. All of these gifts are mentioned in scripture as things associated with a king. Gold was a precious commodity signifying wealth and frankincense and myrrh were special fragrances that were expensive. Myrrh was often used for anointing and burying, while frankincense was used as a perfume in the Temple.⁵ Theologically, these gifts have been explained as symbols for Christ’s Kingship, and for his death and resurrection. The number of gifts has also helped with coming up with the number of “three kings” as the text never explicitly gives a number. (I also do think it’s easier to “direct” three “kings” in the Christmas pageant as opposed to a whole caravan of them.)

The final important part of this story has been the star. Most people have tried to figure out how bright it was and if it was a comet or meteor. While definitely important to the story, it more importantly helps to introduce the “other” King as these Magi follow the star to Jerusalem to find this newborn King in the official residence. Instead of meeting the child, they meet King Herod, a puppet of the Roman Empire. They terrify him along with all of Jerusalem when they hear that a new king has been born. The scrolls are pulled out and then prophecies are read about a ruler from Bethlehem.

The scene has been set as the Magi now travel to see Christ with all their gifts and

¹ Douglas A.R. Hare, “Matthew,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 1993), 13.

² *Ibid.*, 13.

³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ *Ibid.* 14.

find him with his mother Mary. There in Bethlehem, they bow before the Christ child on their knees and give these expensive gifts. After they deliver them, they turn the road after a vision and decide to go another route. King Herod won't be on during this one.

Application:

I think there's a reason that the Magi have been a beloved favorite of artists and poets. There is something magical about these individuals who bear these wealthy gifts and are the first to visit the newborn King. They capture our imagination and allow us to paint a picture of the nativity that both amazes and humbles us as we see grown men, dressed in finery, giving gifts and bowing on their knees to a child.

I think a more amazing part of this story is that the Magi are Gentiles, people who are outside the faith, yet give what they possess to someone else. They don't come because they are wealthy and will receive recognition, but because they are intrigued and want to honor a newborn king. From the Magi we learn about humility and how giving is not about us. We give because we want to share something we have with someone else. How is God calling us to be generous at this time of year and always? In essence, everything we have belongs to God so we are to share what we possess with others since it first belonged to God.

The second thing that we can take from the Magi is their ability to discern. In the text, they are open to Herod about their reason for visiting in wanting to see this newborn King. Yet, after visiting, they have a dream by which they are warned to go home a different route. They do not obey King Herod by returning to tell him about where they found Jesus. While it may not appear to be obvious at first, the three kings exercised civil disobedience. They were not going to be controlled by someone and they were able to see beyond the machinations of Herod about what was truly taking place. How do we listen to God about certain situations and how to do what is right? I think everyday we have to be vigilant to what God is calling us to do regardless of what is popular or easiest.

The third thing I think this text invites us to do is simply marvel at the birth of Christ. I know that the season always brings a to-do list that marvels the size of Mt. Everest. But for a moment, think about the journey that the Magi took to see Jesus and the wonder that they felt in making that journey to the newborn King. Imagine their joy, their elation, the wonder of it all. Every Advent/Christmas season I strive to make sure that I take a night or a moment to pause and think about how the King of all Kings was born to bring hope amidst the Roman Empires and King Herods of this world that seem to blow up our news every day. Hope was born two thousands years ago and we were given a Savior who came into this earth to save all people: the Gentile and Jew, male and female, young and old. Let us bow down before him, adore him, praise him, and marvel at the birth of our King.

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