

## THE CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE – WHO WILL WORSHIP THE KING?

Matthew 2:1-18

December 18, 2022

During this Advent season – we are thinking about this this question: “*What will my Christmas experience be like this year?*” Every Christmas brings us new experiences plus new challenges, and to help us face Christmas this year, we are looking at the very first Christmas Experience, trying to mesh together the events that took place 2000 years ago with the events that are taking place within our lives and within the world today.

This morning I want to contrast King Herod with the Magi that visited the Christ child in Bethlehem. Matthew is the only Gospel that tells the story of the visit of the Magi and Herod’s reaction, plus includes the story about Mary and Joseph’s escape to Egypt to save Jesus from Herod’s melt down. Matthew includes this story because Matthew’s audience were predominately Jewish believers, and he needed to show them how Jesus had fulfilled the Old Testament (their Jewish Scriptures). Showing them that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, the hope of Israel. The Jews living during the first century would have heard stories from their ancestors about evil King Herod, who had ruled Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth, and they would have also most likely heard about these mysterious Magi, taken right out of the pages of the Old Testament book of Daniel. Matthew’s version of the Christmas story would make sense to the Jewish readers, as they would have known the hardships their ancestors would have faced under Herod’s rule!

King Herod the Great was not called great because he was a gifted leader – he was called great because of his ambitious building projects. King Herod actually wasn’t a Jew, but an Edomite who had converted to Judaism, and ruled Israel from 37 BC until his death from a kidney disease around 1 BC. Herod was a resourceful and highly ambitious ruler, who was politically motivated in everything he did, who wanted to be remembered for his great building projects, whose ruins can still be seen today when visiting Israel. Herod had ten wives and many children, and was highly paranoid over his rule, willing to eliminate anyone who was a threat, killing even some of his wives, his sons, and even Rabbis in the process. Whenever Herod got angry or upset, everyone would get worried. Preserve, protect, and control at all costs – was the way Herod ruled Judea, and no one would stand in the way of his ambitions. It was said of Herod, “*it would be far better to be Herod’s pig than his son.*”

Turning to Matthew doesn't give us a great deal of information about these Magi from the east – we don't know the number, only the number of gifts. But we know that it took them several months or possibly a year to reach the Christ child, because now Jesus is no longer an infant in a stable but a toddler living in a house. So, who were these Magi? These highly educated men of the ancient world were not only known as a group of astrologers from Persia (modern day Iraq and Iran); they were also known as “*dream interpreters*,” and “*king makers*,” as one of their duties included choosing the next ruling king of the region. So, you can understand why Herod was distraught when their caravan arrived in Jerusalem as he was now old and ill, coming to the end of his reign. Herod wanted to see one of his sons take over ruling Israel, rather than some unknown child in Bethlehem, and that's why he went ballistic, on a killing rampage in trying to control his legacy at all cost.

After hearing the story of the Magi from the pastor, some clever women in the church pointed out – if the Magi had been women, things would have been a lot better. For instance, they would have asked for directions sooner, so they would have arrived on time; they would have helped Mary deliver the baby; they would have cleaned up the filthy stable; they would have brought practical gifts like Pampers, baby-wipes, and formula; they would have left behind a casserole; and after leaving, they would have whispered to each other, “*The baby doesn't look a bit like Joseph, does He!*”

Most scholars believe these Magi, were pagans, but they could have been Jewish. At the time of Jesus' birth, many Jews continued to live in Persia, especially in Babylon, where they were exiled 500 years earlier. Deep Jewish roots continued to remain in Persia in the first century, which means that these Magi could have been from an ancient school of scholars started by Daniel centuries earlier. Daniel was one of the Jewish captives taken to Babylon when the Babylonians invaded and conquered Israel, destroying the Temple in 586 BC. Daniel was widely known for his wisdom, as well as an interpreter of dreams, and also as a prophet. Within the book of Daniel, we are told that the angel Gabriel, the same angel that came to see Mary, also visited Daniel telling him exactly when the promised Messiah would be born.

The prophetic message found in **Daniel 9:25-26** tells us not only when the Messiah would arrive, but that He came to die, “*Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the*

*ruler, comes, there will be seven ‘sevens’ and sixty-two ‘sevens’...After the sixty-two ‘sevens’ the Anointed One will be put to death.”* The Jews lived in exile for 70 years and then returned under the decree of King Cyrus to rebuild the first Temple build by King Solomon. So, counting from the time the second Temple in Jerusalem was be rebuilt by the returning exiles, *“seven sevens and sixty-two sevens”* = 483 years according to the Jewish lunar calendar of 360 days/year. Thereby, a number of scholars believe that generations of Magi had been counting off the years waiting for the fulfillment of Daniel’s prophesy, and then, when they saw this miraculous star, they believed it was a signal from God that the time had come – the Jewish King has been born, so off they go on this quest to find this newborn King. While the Magi may have had access to Daniel’s prophesy, they didn’t know where the birth would take place, since they didn’t have access to Micah’s prophesy. If they would have had both pieces of the puzzle, they would have bypassed Jerusalem and King Herod, and proceeded directly to Bethlehem, thereby saving the lives of many children, but then the prophesy of Rachel weeping would not be fulfilled. In contrast to the Magi, it so happened that the chief priests and teachers of the law back in Jerusalem had both pieces of the puzzle. They knew Daniel’s prophesy as well as Micah’s location of the Christ child’s birth but missed both the miraculous star and the birth of their King!

With this background let’s go to the Christmas story – Matthew’s Gospel tells us that when Jesus was a young child, most likely between 1 and 2 years old and now living in a house in Bethlehem, a caravan of Magi from the East arrive in the city of Jerusalem, and this would have been an entourage of at least one hundred people and animals, coming with pomp and fanfare. The whole city of Jerusalem would have been turned upside down by their unexpected arrival, especially when they asking this question of the king: *“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”* (Matthew 2:2), as well as Herod’s reaction: *“Herod was disturbed, and all of Jerusalem with him”* (Matthew 2:3). Of course, all of the citizens of Jerusalem would have been disturbed, wondering what this madman was going to do about this news! Everyone knew that Herod was paranoid, that’s why he built a fortress like Masada on top of a mountain; everyone knew he was highly ambitious, suspicious, and jealous of any contenders, and everyone knew he would never allow anyone to sit on his throne. The arrival and request of the Magi was a serious threat to the peace of the city – of course everyone was disturbed!

It seem strange to me that the chief priests and teachers of the law didn't happen to see this miraculous star, or pay attention to the timing of Daniel's prophesy, even though they were experts of the Old Testament prophecies. And then, why didn't these highly educated religious leaders bother going along with the Magi to worship this child for themselves? As we continue to read Mathew's Gospel we discover that the religious Scribes and Pharisees, not only missed the birth of the Messiah, they didn't go to worship the Christ child, and later on they didn't believe in Christ as the Messiah or surrender to Christ when He walked this earth thirty years later; instead, they found Jesus as a threat and constantly tried to trap Him, and eventually had Him crucified. The four Gospels clearly tell us that the most religious living in Israel missed Christ and persecuted Christ, while the sinful, the tax collectors and prostitutes recognized Christ, embraced their Messiah, flocking to Him to hear His teaching, worshiped Him, with the end result of having transformed lives. It was a heart issue back then and continues to be a heart issue today! Those that desperately need a Messiah will find Him, surrender to Him, bow down, and worship Him, while the most religious will not because their hearts are cold and judgmental. **Jeremiah 29:13, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."**

Herod decides to meet secretly with the Magi, most likely also offering some bribe money or gifts, telling them this lie: **"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"** (Matthew 2:8). As the Magi leave Herod's place, I'm sure Herod paced the floor, distraught as he waited for the Magi to return, while everyone in Jerusalem knew that the great King Herod would never-ever-ever bow his knee to this would be child king and worship Him. Ambitious Herod has never worshipped anyone but himself and his great achievements. The point I want us to realize here is that Herod was trying to deceive the Magi into believing the lie that he was a worshipper. And the same thing can be true for us today – there are true worshipers and false worshippers in every church. And it all comes down to the condition of our heart!

What is miraculous about this story is the reaction of the Magi once they find the Christ child. Can you imagine Mary and Joseph's reaction as this caravan comes to their humble home, coming to their door wanting to see their child? And then when the Magi see the Christ child, I believe that Mary and Joseph would have been shocked to see what they did next, **"When they came into the house and saw the young child with Mary, his mother, they fell to the ground at his feet and**

**worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests full of gifts and presented him with gold, frankincense, and myrrh”** (Matthew 2:11). These Magi, who may not have been Jewish believers but pagans, ended up being the true worshippers in the Christmas story, bowing down and worshipping a child who could do nothing for them. How can a child ever benefit these legendary, wealthy, generous Magi from the east? But the Christ child did give them the gift of worship, the opportunity to truly humble themselves in total abandonment to worship the King of kings and Lord of lords!

In the Christmas story we also find that worship is tied to generosity! True worshippers are generous of their time, gifts and talents! These Magi gave up months and even years of their lives in travel to worship the child and then return home again. These generous gifts the Magi brought were not only expensive, helping to finance Joseph, Mary and Jesus’ exodus to Egypt, and supply their living expenses for a number of years, but were very appropriate and prophetic, speaking to Jesus’ future role as King, Priest, and Prophet. Gold is often used as a symbol of the deity of Christ. Frankincense points to His perfect life of holiness, excellence, and devotion. Myrrh, an embalming spice, speaks to us of the suffering love that would lead Him to death on the cross. What a contrast these Magi are to King Herod – true worshippers – knowing how to worship, as they dropped to their knees in reverence, knowing they were in the presence of someone far greater, far more powerful, and far more important than they were. True worshippers are also willing to part with their wealth, sacrificially in their generosity. After their long journey, they have finally found WHO they had been seeking, and they weren’t disappointed. They seemed to know this child was the promised Messiah. The greatest gift God has even given this world!

When you look at the Christmas story – who do you identify with? We have looked at John the Baptist who prepared the people for Christ’s first coming, as well as humble Mary and courageous Joseph, and now the Magi and King Herod. If we are totally honest, I think all of us would have to say that we have issues in all of these areas in pointing others to Christ, in humbling ourselves, and in having the courage to defend our faith, and then we possibly all have reservations in worshipping Christ as He deserves to be worshipped. Sure, we may not have problems singing a few hymns and other praise songs, and even lifting our hands in praise, but humbling ourselves and falling to our knees in complete abandoned adoration and reverence is much more difficult – for you see, like Herod, we all probably have a worship problem, a problem surrendering completely, and

worshipping Jesus wholeheartedly. We all tend to be reserved, holding back from fully surrendering our lives to Christ, not only in worship, but in all areas of our lives!

After worshipping the Christ child – Matthew tells us that the Magi return to their country by another route, bypassing Jerusalem because these, “*dream interpreters*” had been warned by God not to give Herod the location of the Christ child. As well, Matthew tells us about another dream, the angel of the Lord also appears to Joseph in a dream, telling him: “***Get up...take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him***” (Matthew 2:13). Like in the first dream when Joseph is told to take Mary as his wife, he doesn’t delay, but immediately heads out of town with his family, in the middle of the night. When Herod realizes that the Magi have pulled a fast one on him, he was furious, and whenever Herod is furious, people are going to die. And that’s the case as he orders his soldiers to kill all the boys in Bethlehem, and its vicinity who were two years old and under. This event was also prophesied by the prophet Jeremiah that there would be “***A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted because they are no more***” (Matthew 2:18). Here's another depiction of life on this earth, as sorrow and weeping are also part of the Christmas story for some of us, as we celebrate Christmas 2022!

And then fleeing your home and living as refugees in a foreign country is also part of the Christmas story for some in 2022. A children’s Sunday school class was drawing pictures of the Christmas story, and the pastor had visited the class to admire them. Most of them showed pictures of the stable, shepherds and wise men. But one little boy had drawn a jet airplane with three figures going up the steps to board the plane and one figure in the cockpit. The pastor couldn’t figure it out, so the little boy explained the picture to the pastor, “*That’s the flight into Egypt.*” The Pastor asked, “*Okay, but who is that guy flying the jet?*” The little boy answered, “*Oh, that’s Pontius the Pilot!*”

The story of the Magi and King Herod tells us that at the core of every human heart is sinful, in rebellion to God – the natural and powerful impulse that says, “*No one tells me what to do, or who to worship.*” According to the Bible, the evil we find in the world ultimately comes from self-centeredness, self-importance, and pride within every human heart that causes us to worship ourselves, our faith, our wealth and possessions rather than God. Because of original sin, every one of us has been

infected by this disease of the heart, wanting the world to revolve around us, our needs, and our desires. So, in every heart there is a “*little King Herod*” that wants to rule and is threatened by anything or anyone that tries to take that rule away from them, even God. In Paul’s letter to the Romans he defines our problem clearly, **“*There is on one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one*”** (Romans 3:10-11). Paul is making a very general and condemning statement about our human nature, but if you are completely honest with yourself, Paul is right – no one will do good, and no one seeks after God unless there is a greater force working within them, called the Holy Spirit, drawing them towards God. This is our constant battle in living out our faith – there’s a war that rages within every soul that needs to be surrendered over to God to be able to worship Christ, like these Magi, worshipping the Christ child!

In every heart there is a “*little King Herod,*” which is revealed by this dark episode in the Christmas story! So, if this would-be king, this King Jesus, whose birth we celebrate every Christmas is the true God, will anyone seek Him on their own in 2022. The Bible clearly gives us the answer to that question in the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans, where he says that all humans are naturally God’s enemies, and would never seek God on their own, so God had to intervene and come down to us. **“*But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*”** (Romans 5:8).

This is the true meaning of the fourth Sunday of Advent – **“*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish by have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him*”** (John 3:16-17). Some go to church for their own selfish reasons, for what they can get from God. And then some in the name of religion try to tame God or do religious things so God has to bless them in the ways they want to be blessed. But God wants us to come without an agenda, come because of our love for God and our love for those believers we worship with. **“*Who will bow down and worship the King?*”** Is the question I want us to all answer this Christmas season. And we can’t remain neutral here and we can’t sit on the fence – either Jesus is sitting on the throne as King, or we are!

We celebrate Christmas 2022, because King Jesus has come into the world – but the Bible also tells us that Jesus doesn't come as King once, but twice. However, the second time Jesus will not come in weakness and in gentleness as a baby in a manger but will return in power and justice to rule and judge sin, and that should make everyone tremble. Today, it's completely voluntary for us to pay attention to and worship King Jesus, but it won't be that way when King Jesus comes the second time according to **Philippians 2:9-11**, *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord (KING).”* If we don't acknowledge Jesus Christ voluntarily as King today and worship Him as King today, we will be forced to do so one day in the future. Even though King Herod wouldn't acknowledge the baby born in a stable in Bethlehem as his King 2000 years ago, one day Herod will stand before God's throne and will be forced to bend our knee and acknowledge Jesus Christ as King!

This part of the Christmas story tells me that we only have two responses to Christ – resistance or worship. We can be like King Herod, resistant in bowing down and worshipping anyone, going through life building empires and kingdoms of wealth, careers, affluence, fame, and achievements, and end up being spiritually empty. Or we can be like the Magi, who were also very wealthy, influential, and important men, like King Herod, but didn't let that stop them from humbly bowing down to the Christ child in worship and adoration. And once they did, I'm sure they returned back home filled with peace and joy, and spiritually full, knowing that they found what they had been seeking. Matthew's point in his Christmas story is that King Herod got it all wrong; however, the Magi got it all right!

Today, God is still seeking true worshippers, but today, He no longer places stars in the sky to guide people to Jesus – instead, He now places us, His true worshippers in the pathway of people to guide them to Jesus. True worshippers who know how to bow down and worship Christ with full surrender! So as we end 2022 and begin a new year – I pray that each of us would re-engage with the light of the world this Christmas, and truly bow down and worship the Messiah, as John tells us in his version of the Christmas story found in **John 1:1-5**, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the*

*darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* The light has come into this dark world and that light is Jesus!