

January 5th, 2025

Matthew 2:1-12 “The Road Isn’t Straight”

As I mentioned a few weeks ago, only two of the four gospels in the New Testament tell the story of Jesus’ birth. Luke is the one that’s most familiar to us because it’s the most detailed of the two. That’s the story of Mary and Joseph making the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That’s the story where they had to stay the night in a stable because there was no room for them in the Inn. It’s about shepherds who were watching their flocks in the field when a host of angels told them where they could find the Christ-child. It’s the story of how after he was born, Jesus was placed in a manger. Luke’s story is the version of Jesus’ birth that Linus told in “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” Luke’s takeaway message? Jesus was born in the humblest of circumstances because he is the savior of all, not just the religious and social elite.

Want to know what Matthew’s gospel says about the shepherds, the heavenly host of angels, and the baby Jesus’ manger? Nothing. Here’s what Matthew says about Jesus’ birth – “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he (meaning Joseph) named the child Jesus.” That’s it. Okay, but Matthew’s gospel is where we learn about the Magi, right? “We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we travel afar?” Yes, and we’re even going to sing that song in a bit. Matthew mentions three gifts but says nothing about how many wise men delivered these gifts. Think about it – There could have been two wise-men or fourteen. Matthew doesn’t specify. And the wise men didn’t come to see the Christ child until after he was born, and most scholars say that this event could have taken place up to three years after Jesus was born. Way to ruin our picture-perfect little nativity scene there, pastor. I suppose now you’re going to tell us that there was no little drummer boy either. Hey, I’m doing what I always do – I’m just telling you what the Bible says. In Matthew’s Gospel, the story of the wise men starts with King Herod.

Who was King Herod? He was “the king of the Jews” – sort of. Judea was an occupied territory of the Roman Empire. Kind of like how the United States was a colony of Great Britain before we declared our independence. Rome was quite savvy when it came to empire-building and colonization. They learned a lot from many of the failed empires of the middle east. Before Rome, empires like the Assyrians and the Babylonians would take control over a region and place a governor there to rule with an iron fist to keep order. Rome set up regional governors too. The gospels tell us about two of those governors – Quirinius who ruled during Jesus’ birth, and Pontius Pilate who oversaw Jesus’ crucifixion. But the Romans discovered that by letting each of these regions have their home-grown “Kings,” there weren’t as many rebellions and uprisings. So long as these kings knew that whoever sat on Caesar’s throne in Rome was boss, they could “rule” over their people and be the guardians of their cultural and religious traditions. And if these puppet Kings wanted to rule with an iron fist, then chalk it up as a win for Rome. In Judea the Herodians were part of a family dynasty that had been in place since all the way back when Alexander the Great of Greece conquered the land. When Rome took over the region, they kept the Herod family in power because they were easy to manipulate. Give them enough powers, privileges, and perks and they’d lie down and roll over any time the governor snapped his fingers.

Herod the Great is who we’re talking about this morning. He was the poster boy for what the Roman government wanted in a puppet king. He was insecure, jealous, needy and loved the power and respect he got from the social and religious elites in Jewish society. Matthew 2 starts out with, “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East [or Magi depending on what translation you’re using] came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.’”

So who were these “magi” from the East?” Well, the word “magi” means “astrologers” and “east” is most likely Persia which is mostly

where modern-day Iran is now. Since they weren't Jewish, they were considered pagans, and they were most likely practitioners of Zoroastrianism, a religion that incorporates astrology and had been around thousands of years even before Christ. Probably the most famous Zoroastrian in the Bible was Cyrus the Great, King of Persia who ended Israel's captivity in Babylon. The most famous modern-day practitioner, at least in the Western world, was the late Freddy Mercury, lead singer for the rock-band, Queen. These magi in Matthew's gospel received a sign indicating a future king of the Jewish people was going to be born in the Judean region and that they should start a long, winding, twisting journey to try to find him. What better person to ask about a future king of the Jews than Herod the Great, the current "king" of the Jews?

Let's take a minute and put ourselves in King Herod's position. If you were part of a dynasty of kings whose power has been passed on for generations, how would you feel if someone came along and said, "Hey! We just received a sign from the stars that a baby who is going to grow up to be King of the Jews is going to be born around here. Since you're the current King of the Jews, could you tell us where we can find him? We've been tracking this star for quite a long time over a great distance. Plus we've got a load of treasure here for him." Herod said, "Right. Let me consult with some of my folks and I'll get back to you." So he called some of the elite religious leaders together and said, "Do you know anything about what these pagan astrologers are saying?" They said, "Yes, the prophet Micah, wrote about Israel's future king being from Bethlehem." Herod wasn't happy about this. Neither were the chief priests and scribes. A king outside of the Herodian dynasty could be a threat to all the perks and power they received from the Romans! So Herod secretly went back to the magi and said, "So roughly when did you first see this star?" They told him. He said, "Well why don't you keep following that star over to Bethlehem, and if you find him, let me know so I can ... go welcome him into the world and give him some ... treasure of my own."

So they followed the star until they came to the house where Mary and Joseph were staying. And sure enough, there's the Christ-child. And as I pointed out last week, they were overwhelmed with joy. They presented him with the gifts that they brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Then they had some a dream where they were warned not to return to Herod as he had asked them. And that's where our scripture ends this morning. We aren't going to go into Herod trying to hunt the Christ-child down and Mary and Joseph fleeing to Egypt to protect their son because that's not the point of Matthew's account of the Magi.

If the point of Luke's story is to say that Jesus is savior of all, not just the elites, the point of Matthew's story is that even foreign-born pagan astrologers recognize Jesus' importance. They are willing to leave the comfort of their homeland and follow a winding road with a lot of starts and stops to find him. In Isaiah 43:19, the prophet writes, "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert." That was the path of the Magi.

Like the Magi, we are often called to take unexpected paths and find new ways. Every journey carries risks and revelations, but God actively carves paths in the wilderness, guiding us through uncharted territories with the promise of making all things new. Each movement forward in faith brings us closer to where we truly belong. This perspective empowers us to face the uncertainties of our journey with courage, knowing God is with us in the detours.

Here's something for you to consider, not just for this week, but for the following year -- The star is a guiding force of hope for the Magi as they embark on a long journey. When you feel as if you are in foreign territory (literally or figuratively), what are the guiding forces of hope in your life? What signs do you look for to show you where to turn?

In this new year, may you find comfort knowing that, like the Magi, a light will guide you home. Turn to your neighbor and say, "follow the

light, stay on the path.” Did that sound weird? I hope it’s what you needed to hear this morning. Rest in the hope that you never truly go alone—the love that knows your name goes alongside you and before you. Let this assurance fill you with peace and courage, open to the new and unexpected paths that God may reveal in the days to come.