

Sermon Title: *The Humble Search of the Magi*

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

We come to the official end of the Christmas season today, Epiphany Sunday. The day when the Christian world remembers the long journey of the Magi, the Three Kings, or Wise Men (depending on your Bible translation). This is probably one of most beloved stories of the Bible, one that really captures the imagination. And it seems that the author of *Matthew* is wanting us to draw many comparisons in the telling (and hearing) of this story – comparing the different characters and how they act and react to the star, prophecy of old, and the news of a Messiah being born.

We are meant to compare the Magi and King Herod.

Both the Wise Men and Herod are people of means, education, and some stature – but how they use it is incredibly different.

The Magi seek someone different from themselves who is born king.

Herod is king, and seeks to stop anyone else from being king – history tells us that he killed some of his own family members to keep them away from the throne.

The Magi who bring gifts to offer this new king.

Herod who builds grand palaces and buildings all over Jerusalem to his own honor.

The Wise Men who are foreigners and not of Jewish faith, and yet they come seeking the Messiah.

Herod, who is Jewish and has no idea of a prophecy of any Messiah to be born.

The Wise Men who humbly seek to worship the Messiah that has been born.

Herod, who seeks to only worship himself.

And we are meant to compare the two kings, Herod and Jesus.

Herod who lives in a grand palace.

Jesus, who is born to working class parents in a stable.

Herod who lives in Jerusalem, the capital city and seat of Jewish power.

Jesus, who is born in the unimpressive town of Bethlehem, and is raised in the unimpressive town of Nazareth.

Herod who will do anything to stay in power, even slaughtering innocent children.

Jesus, who never seeks to be an earthly king or hold political office.

Herod who kills to keep power.

Jesus who will eventually give up his life rather than take up weapons.

And in this story, we also begin to see some of the ways that the author of *Matthew* is **wanting us to compare Jesus with Moses.**

They are both born when their people are not free: Moses under Pharaoh & the Egyptians; Jesus under Cesar & the Romans.

The one in power at the time of their birth tries to kill them when they are still a child. Pharaoh in his decree to kill all Hebrew male children, in fear that there will be too many young Hebrews and the Egyptians will be pushed out. And Herod, who after learning of the Messiah's birth from the Magi orders the killing of all children under the age of two near Bethlehem.

This comparison will continue throughout Matthew's gospel who hopes his Jewish audience will be moved by such comparisons.

And yet, what **the comparison I have found myself most reflecting on** during my 2018 reading of the story is not a comparison within Matthew's story, but a comparison between another Gospel – the comparison of those who visit the Christ Child in *Luke's* gospel. Our Christmas stories all come from either *Luke* or *Matthew* – our readings, our manger scene, our Christmas songs – they are mostly a blending of both *Luke* and *Matthew's* versions of Jesus' birth.

In *Matthew* we get Joseph's perspective with the angel appearing to Joseph;

in *Luke* we get Mary's perspective, with Gabriel paying a visit to Mary.

Luke tells us of the census and need to travel to Bethlehem;

Matthew gives us a genealogy that links Jesus to King David and eventually to Abraham .

And in *Matthew* it is the Wise Men who come to meet the Christ child;

While in *Luke*, it is shepherds who come to visit. And it is this shepherd and Magi comparison that I have been reflecting on – these different visitors who we put together in our manger scenes.

The Shepherds, *Luke* tell us, are just out in their field minding their own business when out of nowhere, the heavens burst open with angels singing – almost as if the angels are so excited, that they must tell someone, and they are given approval to sing and tell just this one small group of people, but that's it. A multitude of angels breaks into the sky and disrupts their evening –

disrupts their lives, for they were likely never quite the same again. The shepherds are doing nothing out of the ordinary – just their usual night, and they receive this news.

THE MAGI, they are diligently studying the heavens. Likely students of the heavens – astronomer priests, some have called them – those who notice what is happening in the sky and connect it to a meaning. No angels tell them what is happening – they must observe and interpret. They must be on the lookout; they must be paying attention for what God might be doing in the cosmos – for what God might be revealing, and then act upon it.

The Shepherds are likely Jewish – tending their flocks in fields somewhere near Bethlehem. And so, in their meeting Jesus we see that Jesus is for the Jewish people and the fulfillment of prophecy.

THE MAGI are foreigners, they are not Jewish – likely Zoroastrian Priests (many scholars believe), who are the forerunners of the Yazidi people of Northern Iraq. And so in their meeting Jesus, we see that Jesus is for all people – that the Love and work of God knows no political, or apparently even religious boundaries.

The Shepherds are considered, in their society, **the lowest class** – they are in a dirty business in a society that values purity and ritual cleanliness. They were poor, having no gift to offer but their presence – not even the gift of mutton or a sheep skin, as they were likely tending the flocks of others' their lives were worth less than the sheep they guard by night. Apparently they are so

unimportant that they are not even recalled to the cities of their birth to be counted in the census – while the inns of Bethlehem are so full that there is no room for a pregnant mother, the shepherds are still out in their field – apparently not important enough to even be counted in the census (perhaps they were deemed 3/5 a person the way we once considered Black Americans in our own country).

THE MAGI, they were people of means – likely men who were educated, people of stature and status in their home country, men of wealth – wealth enough to travel what would have been at least 1,000 miles through a foreign land; wealth to offer gold and expensive oils (oils that would have cost the shepherd at least a year's salary).

And so what point am I making, you might be wondering by now, in all this comparing and contrasting?

In holding these stories together, in holding these manger visitors side-by-side, what keeps jumping out at me is that I am, that we are, much more like the Magi, I think. We are much more closely related to those of means and education and status than we are like the shepherds.

And on one hand this does not matter, in holding these different Gospel stories together – in putting these first manger visitors side-by-side in our manger scene and Christmas story, we see the depth of breadth of God's love in this event: that the Jesus event is for those of status and those not even counted in the census; it is for foreigners and citizens – for Jew and Gentile; it is for those with expensive gifts to offer and those with nothing; it is seekers of all religions; it is

for those who spend their evening studying the stars and those who are exhausted in the evening after a long days work in the sun. So, perhaps in all these important areas, it doesn't matter too much if we are more Magi or More Shepherd. This is the beauty of how we have combined these different versions of the story – this is probably how it should be.

And on the other hand, I think about the difference for how they receive and act upon the news. It comes to the shepherds, right there in their fields – it comes to them and they act upon it - they do not have to travel far, nor does it seem to disrupt more than one evening for them.

But for the Magi, for these people of wealth and status and education, they have so much more to do, so much more to give and sacrifice. They must be on the lookout; they must be searching the heavens. They must leave their homeland in pursuit of this sign in the heavens; they must give up their security and journey through a foreign land; they must even disobey the order of a foreign king, likely putting their own lives at risk. In this one case, it seems that the Magi have it much more difficult. While in almost every other part of life, it is the Magi who have it much easier.

But in the case of seeking and finding the Christ child – all the shepherds had to do was be shepherds.

For the Magi, it seemed like it took almost a Herculean effort for them to notice and seek and find this Jesus. And while I might not be part of the 1% wealthiest Americans, I am part of the 5% of wealthiest people in the world – as I mentioned last Sunday, as are all who make over 33,000 year.

And often for those of us living in this time and this place, it is usually easier to trust in ourselves than to trust in God.

It can be hard to see the movement of God in the world from behind a computer or phone screen.

It can be hard to humble ourselves, to kneel down and worship something outside of ourselves.

It can be difficult to notice the activity of God in creation, when our lives are so full and busy.

It can be challenging to continue seeking God when we have a shelves full of books we have studied, and degrees reminding us of our own brilliance.

It can be difficult to keep following the light God has set before us, when we think we have already arrived.

I am not sure if this is more *Good News* or *Disturbing News* that I am relaying this morning – perhaps they are one in the same. We often say that the words of the Prophets and the Gospels are to *give comfort to the afflicted and affliction to the comfortable*.

In this New Year, may we learn from our friends the Zoroastrian Priests – the Wise Men – who:

-used their knowledge and education to continue to be on the lookout for God at work in the Cosmos;

-who despite their comfort, acted when they saw God moving;

-who knew enough to know that they did not have all the answers, and so sought wisdom even from another religious tradition;

-who gave of their wealth when they met a family in need;

-who refused to follow the unjust laws of a government though it put themselves at risk;

-who humbled themselves enough to bow down and worship.

Thanks be to God for the example of these Zoroastrian Priests. May we follow the path that lead them to the life changing joy of an encounter with the Christ who lives and moves among us.

Amen.