



The Great Return of Christmas

Matthew 2:1-12

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Merry Christmas!

You do know that we're still celebrating Christmas, yes? Regardless how many retailers hold their "12 Days of Christmas" sale over the 12 days leading up to Christmas, the 12 days of Christmas – according to our liturgical calendar – don't start until Christmas day. So, if you're keeping track, today we're singing of six geese a-laying.

And for those keeping record, I do know that our Matthew 2 text this morning is usually saved for the day of Epiphany, which comes *next* Sunday, after the 12 days of Christmas. Epiphany is a time when we celebrate the revelation of God to the Gentiles in the person of Christ, as represented by the Magi.

So yes, I'm calling us to keep to the liturgical calendar, while at the same time not keeping to the liturgical calendar. Deal with it. ... Why don't just say we're bringing in the Magi a week early so your nativity scenes can be correct for a full week, instead of just a few days before they go back into their storage boxes?

The story of the Magi is an interesting passage in the Biblical text. It's one of those texts no one seems to really know, because throughout the years, we've created our own narrative about the Magi, their arrival, and their gifts. We've let ourselves believe in a storybook definition of the Epiphany gathering.

For example, consider the song which we opened with this morning, *We Three Kings*. In the Biblical text, we're never told there are three kings; we're told there are three gifts, but not three people. Perhaps we make the assumption that each person brought one gift, and thus assume there to be three who travelled together.

And we call them kings – yet nowhere in the Biblical text are they given such royal credit. The Greek word used in this text to refer to these men is *magos*. It's not used a lot in the Biblical text. In fact, outside the second chapter of Matthew, the only other place it is found is in Acts 13, in verse 6 and 8, where it is translated as *magician*. Are they sorcerers? Are they wizards?

Scholars have offered all kinds of speculations about these men, gleaning what one can from the text that is available. Knowing they are coming from the East, many scholars suggest them to be from a Persian priestly caste known as Zoroastrianism. At a minimum, they are speculated to be engaged in astrology, for they are keenly aware of the star which has been leading their path. What about the star? Was it Haley's comet? Was it the North star? Perhaps it was a supernova – the death of a star we have no astrological record of? All speculative possibilities.

Yet, for as interesting as these particulars make the story, none of these details are specified in the Biblical storyline. What we know from the Biblical text is that a group of undeterminable size came from the east following a star that they believed was leading them to a child who was to be born king of the Jews.

That they are “from the East” seems to indicate these men are not Jews – these are men of a Gentile, or pagan, community. To support this claim, we find that they come to *Jerusalem* seeking the child who is to be born king of the Jews. Going to Jerusalem makes sense to everyone outside the Jewish faith because Jerusalem is the central political and religious center for the Jews. It would be like a tourist going to London or to Buckingham Palace to see the future Monarch of England. It’s just expected that’s where the lineage of leadership would be born.

Arriving in Jerusalem, the Magi began asking people, “Where is the one who is born the king of the Jews?” It’s as if they expected that it would be common knowledge to everyone in town where the child was born – this is a city full of Jews, and he is their king. As they are walking around town, inquiring about the location of the child, the local Roman King, Herod, hears of these foreigners who have come to find the new born king of the Jews. When he hears of this news, Herod is frightened, and all of Jerusalem with him.

Have you ever picked up on that detail? It’s such a small detail that somehow escapes the peaceful nativity display. When the local Roman lord – who himself asserted the title of King of the Jews – found out that these foreigner travelers had come looking for a child who was born the king of the Jews, Herod was scared, and his fear prompted the fear of the whole city.

Why on earth would Herod, a ruler known for his political cunning and ruthlessness, be fearful of a child? Much less, why would he fear a birth announcement from non-Jewish foreigners looking for the child in Jerusalem? If such a child of such importance were born in his city, surely Herod would have known.

Yet, Herod is not satisfied with unanswered questions. Herod himself is not Jewish, and so he does not have the Biblical knowledge to determine if these foreigners are prophets or trouble makers. So, he summons his Jewish elite – the chief priests and scribes of the Jerusalem temple – and he asks them about the location of the birth of a Messiah who was to be born for the Jews. They confirm for him that the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures do proclaim that a child will be born – a Messiah for the Jews – but that the child is to be born out of Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Bethlehem is not far – just a day’s walk from Jerusalem. After consulting with his “wise men,” Herod calls the Magi back.

Verse 7 says, “Herod secretly called for the Magi and learned from them the exact time the star had appeared. 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.’”

Again, the small details of the text are often lost in the picturesque nativity scenes that adorn our greeting cards and homes. Herod called for Magi in secret. He invited them in behind closed

doors. “He calls them in secret because he does not want to make credible the presumption that a king has been born.”ⁱ If he built up the expectation of these foreigners that a king had been born for the Jews, surely every faithful Jew would be on the road to Bethlehem searching for the very king the Magi proclaimed was born. Herod’s positive reaction would only peak the interest of the Jewish faithful that there had been a fulfillment of the Hebrew Scripture’s promise. Such a Biblical revelation would mean nothing but bad news for Herod. So Herod calls the Magi in secret. The Apostle John’s words seem fitting, “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”ⁱⁱ

Herod is fearful at the alignment of the Magi’s inquiry and the proclamation of the Biblical text. The promise of a Messiah to come wasn’t fearful information for Herod until he realized that the timing was *now*. The promise of a Messiah was old news for the Jews – they all knew there was a child to be born, and they knew where he was to be born, they just didn’t know when.

And no doubt, Herod was frightened at this alignment of promise and possibility, for, though not a Jew, he knew enough of the Jewish literature to know that the coming of a Messiah – the coming of a new King for the Jews – meant that the justice of God was coming to reign. At such a thought, he was rightfully fearful, “for all who oppress the poor, take advantage of the vulnerable, and stand against dignity and justice should tremble at the coming of the Lord.”ⁱⁱⁱ

At the fear of a challenger to his rule, at the fear his own ruling practices would be called into a higher court, Herod seeks to alleviate the concern.

Don’t let anyone tell you that the news of Immanuel, God with us, doesn’t have a political impact. Scholar and theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, offers, “Too often the political significance of Jesus’ birth, a significance that Herod understands all too well, is lost because the church, particularly in America, reads the birth as a confirmation of the assumed position that religion has within the larger framework of politics. That is,” he continues, “the birth of Jesus is not seen as a threat to thrones and empires because religion concerns the private”^{iv} Yet, the gospel of Matthew makes clear, there is no distinction between the political and private.

The political leadership of the time – King Herod himself – was fearful enough of Jesus’ arrival, that he schemed to destroy the very threat he felt at the announcement of the birth of the infant. Talk about fragility. These non-Jewish foreigners came in to town talking about some infant born in a pheasant community on the outskirts of the city, and instead of simply sending them away, Herod decides to use them for his own political gain. I’m sure it didn’t help that the Magi came seeking to pay homage to the child – to worship him – and didn’t pause once to worship Herod himself.

The Magi go forth, as directed by Herod, and they arrive in Bethlehem, where the star had stopped. They entered the house and found Mary with Jesus, and there they knelt down before him and paid him homage. They worshipped him – they laid themselves before him and offered him gifts.

We aren’t told a whole lot more about the Magi. The parting verse offers that having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. ...

Their story is not like the story of the shepherds – who went forth praise God and singing glory in the night. The Magi simply disappear.

I struggled this week trying to find some grand connection between the Magi and faithful living, which I could proclaim to you today. I had hoped for a personal epiphany, which would give me some great message of personal transformation that I could offer you as we prepare to head into a new year. I had even hoped that the Grinch could make a reappearance and have a closing swan song.

But the reality is, the Magi aren't really a vision of faithfulness. We're not even told they come to believe in Christ as the Messiah, as we are told of most who encountered Christ during his earthly ministry. The Magi simply come, worship, and leave with little additional certainty regarding their state of belief. I'm even wondering, perhaps Matthew didn't write about the Magi as a witness to faithfulness. Perhaps the Magi are just fodder in a lesson we are to learn from Herod.

There's a lot we can learn from Herod, though, little of it would be defined as faithfulness. The Roman King is offered here by the Gospel writer more as a "do not do what I do" kind of character lesson. Again, as Hauerwas offers, the "Herods [of the world] know no limit when they sense their tenuous holds on power are threatened."^v And so at best, Herod can only be a witness to how Jesus' entrance in the world sparks fear in those who demand earthly power.

And I began to wonder if perhaps this text isn't meant to teach us about *us* at all. I wonder if our desire to build pomp and circumstance around the entrance of the Magi is that we want to be in the scene. We want to create a snow-globe set where-in we can visit the nativity with the Magi, to be present with the shepherds, to lie before the child who is Immanuel. We want this text to be about us, narcissistic as we can be. But I wonder, instead of being about Herod, or the Magi, or even us, is this text just calling us to see Christ? Are we written out of the story for the very purpose of the epiphany – of seeing God revealed in Christ?

And so, with little fanfare, here is what I can proclaim as the good news – Herods will come and go. They will rise to power, and lose their power. Magi will come and go. They will seek what they cannot explain, and will often leave not fully understanding. But God's will will endure because God has made endurance possible through the kingdom begun in Jesus. He won't rule from power and might, nor of great wealth and status, nor of the capital city. But Christ does bring to light the justice of the Creator, the love of the Redeemer, and the endurance of the Sustainer. For he is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

ⁱ Stanley Hauerwas. *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ John 3:20. NRSV.

ⁱⁱⁱ David Lose. Davidlose.net. Retrieved December 27, 2018.

^{iv} Hauerwas.

^v Ibid.