



Matthew 2:1-12 - After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Jesus is for all people!



*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!
(1 John 3:1)*

“I don’t know.” Those are often the three hardest words for the average, somewhat intelligent, adult human being to say. “I don’t know.” If you’re anything like me, you don’t want to leave someone hanging out to dry with a non-answer like that ringing in their ears. You want to help. You want to fill in the blanks. So, it’s really unsatisfying and leaves a bad taste in your mouth to have to say, “I don’t know,” and leave it at that. Well, this morning I’ll have to confess, when it comes to the gospel lesson for the Festival of Epiphany from Matthew 2, there’s quite a bit “I don’t know.”

First of all, who were the Magi? There are a lot of guesses about who they were – maybe learned wise men, probably astronomers, but most likely astrologers. How many were there and where did they come from? You might think you have those questions nailed, and so you’re humming the tune of the popular Christmas/ Epiphany song, *We Three Kings of Orient Are*, but do you know what’s wrong with that song title? Almost everything. We don’t know whether there were three or thirty of them. Most people assume there were three simply because of the three gifts they presented, but there’s nothing definitive in the gospel account. These guys weren’t kings, but likely scholars and royal advisors who studied the stars and probably even dabbled in the dark arts. They weren’t likely from the Orient, but most think they hailed from Babylon (around modern day Iraq). But perhaps the biggest question of all is this: How did they know about the promises of a King to be born? About six centuries before the visit of the Magi, the people of Judah had been taken as exiles to live in Babylon. During their exile, a faithful believer named Daniel was put in charge of this group of wise men, so people assume that Daniel must have shared the promises of the Savior to be born, but again we don’t know for sure. And that’s alright, because for as much as we don’t know about these mysterious Magi and the Epiphany gospel account, there is one truth that shines through this account with the brightness of the morning star: Jesus Christ is revealed as God and Savior of all people. This is what Epiphany is all about. Jesus is for *all people*, but not everyone reacts to that beautiful truth in the same way. In Matthew 2, we get to see three different kinds of people illustrate just how this happens.

Jesus is for all people - this is good news! But not everyone thought so. **When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.** King Herod was no dummy. He knew that a new king, even a small child, could pose a threat to his power. Sure, King Herod had some positive qualities as a leader – he wanted to be loved by the people, so during a time of famine, he footed the bill, melting down gold from his own palace, to support the poorest and hungriest. His people loved entertainment and the arts, so he built racetracks and amphitheatres. The people wanted a sea port, so King Herod did what no other leader had been able to do – he built the port of Caesarea and an entire city around it. But best of all, Herod rebuilt the great temple of Jerusalem; the heart of Israel’s worship life. Even though he was a non-Jewish king, this earned him some serious points with his very Jewish subjects. But the pages of history are also jam-packed with the darker side of Herod’s rise to power and prominence. To consolidate his power, he invited his wife’s brother to a pool party in the Jordan River, bribed the man’s guards to drown him, and then Herod pretended to mourn at the funeral. Herod had his own wife and three sons killed so none would threaten his rule. Not long before his own death, Herod had over forty of the leading citizens of Jerusalem imprisoned with the orders that at the moment of his death, they should be killed, too, so that he could be sure there would be mourning on the day of his death.

King Herod didn’t get where he was by just being a nice guy and he wasn’t about to give up his throne to some newcomer. He had expended a lot of political and financial capital. So, when he heard of the birth of the so-called King of the Jews, all he saw was someone who would cramp his style and threaten his precious autonomy. Isn’t that the way some people still see Jesus today? *Why would I ever go to church – I don’t need someone else controlling*

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my life, my thoughts, my money. So this Jesus is going to tell me that what I do in the privacy of my home on the weekend isn't my business and personal right? That it's actually sin? Have you ever been there? Trying to keep Jesus at an arm's length so that you can embrace your sin of choice with the other arm? Not really wanting to hear what the Word of God says, because there's a pretty good chance it will confront you and call you to the carpet for sin? Jesus is for all people, but the King Herods of the world don't want anything to do with him because he loves you enough to call your sin what it is – a damnable thing that separates you from your God. There's no question about that.

However the Magi learned about the King to be born or determined that they should follow the star, they couldn't find this King through their own mental powers or choice. They were looking for a king, so they went to Jerusalem, the city of kings, but came up empty. Instead, notice another very important Epiphany truth: King Jesus was found the way he still is today: through his Word. **When [Herod] had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"** God is revealed through his Word of promise. Jesus is for all people! This is good news, but not if you don't see a need for it. When these Magi came looking for a king, Herod called together the religious leaders of the Jews to find out where this would happen. These were the good church folks, and true to form, without missing a beat, they rattled off the seven hundred year old prophecy from the prophet Micah – **In Bethlehem!** The teachers of the law knew the prophecy, likely from memory, but did you notice what they didn't do? They didn't go! They basically printed off the Google Maps directions to Bethlehem, but didn't hop on a donkey or hoof it the five and a half miles south to see this long-awaited fulfillment of prophecy. Why not? Because rejoicing in the birth of a Savior is an admission of something about yourself – that you have sins and you need saving. The religious leaders could've been interested in Jesus as political messiah or cultural redeemer, but not as Savior, because then they'd have to admit their sinfulness.

Isn't that the way some people see Jesus today? To think that having at least a shirt-tail relation to Jesus or nominal connection to his church is sufficient? To see no real need for a Savior from sin because I don't see that I have all that much sin to forgive – at least not as much as my neighbor! *I know what Jesus is all about – I mean not everything, but more than most. I come to church when it works for me.* I hear words like "sinful, wicked, or proud," and I'm more than willing to classify the world out there as all those things, while refusing to see those same traits lurking around my heart. Jesus is for all people, but the good-churchy-folk religious leaders of the world don't want anything to do with him, because all those other people are "real sinners," not me.

So far, we're 0 for 2. The King Herods and the religious leaders of the world don't want anything to do with Jesus. Jesus is for all people, so who in this account welcomes him as Savior and King? Not the people you'd expect – not the Jews in Jerusalem, but emigrants from the east. **They went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.** Their star chasing journey comes to a satisfying end. Magi stoop down to the level of a small child and worship him, pouring out their treasures of gold, incense, and myrrh. Their outward action was simply a reflection of what was going on inside – the Savior of the world had been revealed to them; to men who could never have hoped to find this Savior-King on their own. God's revelation of salvation comes to some unlikely candidates, and they couldn't be more thankful. The Savior of the world had come, but not just the Savior of the world – *their* Savior.



This is perhaps the most important Epiphany truth: Jesus is the Savior of all people, yes, but he's *your* Savior, too. Jesus didn't come to save a nameless, faceless, mass of humanity. He came to save sinners, to save people, to save *you* from your sins. In response to that full and free salvation, today we see the Magi pouring out their costliest treasures at the feet of their Savior out of thankfulness, and so I have to ask myself, "What gift can I give you, Jesus?" Money...When the earth and everything in it belongs to you? An hour in worship...When you call for my entire life to be a living sacrifice? My heart...though its affection is more often turned in on myself than on you, my Savior? Perhaps it's best to kneel with the Magi of old and receive all of the Epiphany blessings that Jesus comes to bring you, as God pulls back the curtain and gives humanity its first unhurried look into the face of God in Christ. "What can I give you, Jesus?" *Give me your sin. Give me your guilt and shame. Give me your burdened conscience, and see that all I do, I do for you!* This King without a crown would get one about thirty years later. Roman soldiers would pound a diadem of thorns into the head of the Son of God. They would spit on him and beat him. They would take spikes and drive them through his skin, nailing him to a cross to die like the guiltiest criminal. There, on the cross, Jesus takes your every sin, and with his divine blood washes every spot and stain from your record. And to leave no doubt about your forgiveness, he didn't stay dead. He walked out of his tomb, and do you know what he left behind in there? Your sin, your death, your shame – forgiven, forgotten, forever.

There are a lot of things about the Epiphany gospel that I just don't know – from the mysterious Magi to the suspicious star. I guess we'll just have to wait until we get to heaven to ask God for ourselves. But for as much as we might not know, don't miss the beating heart of the gospel behind this special celebration of Epiphany. The Son of God is revealed as the Savior of the world, even *your* Savior. This Epiphany, take this message to heart and take it to the heart of someone who needs to hear it: Jesus is for all people!

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

(Jude 24-25)