

## Week of December 6, 2020

### Matthew 2:1-12

<sup>1</sup> After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> They asked, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. <sup>4</sup> He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They said, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote: <sup>6</sup> *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.*"

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him." <sup>9</sup> When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.

<sup>11</sup> They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> Because they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

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### Prophecy Fulfilled

George RR Martin's epic fantasy series *A Game of Thrones* begins with a red comet in the sky heralding the fulfillment of a five thousand year old prophecy. The prophecy told of a ruler who would unite the various kingdoms in its world. The presence of the comet convinced many people that they were the promised ruler, leading to factions around each who made a claim and warfare. Sounds pretty familiar, doesn't it? The visit of the magi/wisemen to the newborn Jesus is one of the most storied parts of the birth narratives. Countless legends have been created surrounding these twelve verses - from saying there were three magi (Matthew is silent on an actual number) to the creation of intricate backstories for the magi (which again, is nowhere to be found). In reality we don't know too much about the magi - we don't know where they came from, when they appeared in Bethlehem, or even how many showed up. But what we do know gives us plenty of information to see the importance of their appearance.

The title "magi" itself is telling - the word is likely of Persian origin and speaks of astrologers who looked to the stars to interpret events. Their astrological interpretation powers gave them lofty positions throughout the near east where they'd advise kings, much like Prophets in ancient Israel. It's odd, though, that the magi would respond to a sign for a foreign ruler. In fact, it would be fair to ask how the magi could know about Jewish prophecy in the first place. The logical answer seems to be the Babylonian exile. When Babylon was defeated by Persia and King Cyrus allowed the Jewish diaspora to return to Jerusalem, there were many who stayed in the places they made their home and their faith remained with them, creating pockets of Judaism throughout the region. The magi took the sign of the star in the sky quite seriously, enough so that they likely traveled hundreds of miles to go and celebrate the birth the star pointed to. Their stop to King Herod makes sense, too, because anyone would feel safe assuming the birth of a new king would happen in the realm of the ruling elite, if not the current king's own offspring. That Jesus was born totally outside the purview of the rulers of Judea should tell those of us who put our faith in Christ that he didn't fit into any norms of traditional leadership in that day or any other. Herod had to ask the chief priests about what scripture had to say about this birth, and they quoted passages about David, another unlikely king who did big things for Israel. Finally, Herod told the magi to return to him once they found the child - a very thinly veiled threat.

Once the magi finally showed up to see the baby Jesus they were filled with joy: they fell to their knees and worshipped him and then they gave him extravagant gifts. I've only wept once at the presence of a child - my own on the day he was born. What it must have been like to walk into a house, in a foreign country, and see a child whose presence made even strangers weep with joy. Even as a baby, Jesus was something special, and those who were looking for God's promise to be kept took notice. The gifts the magi gave Jesus point to their understanding of Jesus being the fulfillment of God's promise to uphold the covenant - gold was a gift for royalty and frankincense and myrrh were aromatic resins used in many rituals, including burial rituals. Even in his birth, Jesus was recognized as a king who would die for the sake of humanity.

Christmas isn't the most important holiday in the church year, not by a long shot, but it being the early signal that God has not forgotten us and has redeemed us is worth celebrating. So celebrate, we will!

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*Shepherd of Israel, you sent a star to enlighten the wise and a child to topple the tyrant. Make us wise enough to seek you among the least of your children, wise enough to trade our treasure for the gift of overwhelming joy. Amen.*