

**“Where Is the One Who Has Been Born King of the Jews?”**

“We three kings of Orient are...” Perhaps you are familiar with that song. It is indeed a popular enough holiday song. It has risen to prominence since it was first used in a Christmas pageant in 1857. And yet, in just its first line, we find three facts that don’t necessarily match up with the biblical account of the visit of the Magi. We three kings of Orient. Let’s take the last one first. “Of Orient” suggests that the Magi came from the far East, whereas the Bible says that they simply came from the east, from East of the Holy Land to which they traveled. Very likely they came from Babylon or somewhere near there in the Middle East. Kings? Not necessarily. Our First Lesson this morning does reference kings coming to the brightness of the dawn of the Savior, but we don’t need to make that into a direct reference to the Magi. The Magi were wise men. They were advisors and astronomers. We don’t really have reason to believe that they were kings. And finally, three. Scripture never mentions the number of Magi. Sure, it mentions three gifts that they bring, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that there were three men. The tradition of three Magi is so powerful, though, that they have even been given names.

If you really think about it, we don’t know a whole lot about the Magi. The Bible doesn’t fill in a lot of details for us. We could come up with many interesting questions about this account and not come up with any satisfying answers. Today’s Gospel from Matthew is the only place in the Bible that records this account. And even though the details are limited, this account is incredibly encouraging. It may not tell us everything that we would like to know about the Magi, but it does tell us what we need to know about them. More importantly, it tells us about the one that they came to worship, the one that had been born King of the Jews.

That was the question that the Magi had: “Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?” Think about that question from their perspective. They had journeyed a long way because they had seen a special star. There’s another aspect of this account with unanswered questions: what did the star look like? How did they know that it was special? How did they know what it meant? Some people think this was an interesting alignment of planets and stars in the night sky, but that’s not really what the Bible describes. This was something different. It alerted the Magi, by the grace of God, to the fulfillment of the promise that they had come to know. God who sent his own Son into the world also sent a special sign for those who were watching and waiting for him.

So as these men journeyed into the land of Judea, they felt it natural to stop in the capital city of Jerusalem. That’s where the reigning king over the Jews was located. That’s where the Temple was located. Surely the new king would be found there, or could easily be found from there.

But what the Magi found when they arrived was something else. Herod the king was troubled by their question about a newborn king of the Jews. And when Herod was troubled, the people knew that they could expect trouble, too. Herod was well known for his cruelty and his jealousy. He would not take lightly any threat to his throne. He had no interest in the new king.

And yet Herod knew where to find the new king. He summoned his experts in Scripture and asked them about it. “Where is the one born King of the Jews” meant where was the Christ to be born. And the experts knew precisely where to find the answer. The promise was clear, and the prophecy certain. The answer was Bethlehem.

So the Magi went on their way. They saw the star again, leading their way not far from Jerusalem to the little town of Bethlehem, where they also found Jesus and his parents.

What a contrast between these men and the ones that they met in Jerusalem! They were journeying and searching and exited to find the one who had been born the King of the Jews. They were overjoyed to be pointed in the right direction and to see the star directing them to the very house. Meanwhile, the experts and the king, the men who occupied the loftiest positions among God’s chosen nation, answered the Magi and then went about their own business. They had the very Word of God pointing them to the Messiah,

the Chosen One, the Christ. They heard these foreigners inquiring about him. They knew the clarity of the prophecies and promises. And they stayed put in the palace in Jerusalem.

Do you recognize the lesson for our lives? We live at a time when God's Word has probably never been more accessible. You can find it in nearly every hotel room you visit. You can look it up online very easily. Many of us carry at least one copy of it around with us right on our electronic devices. And hopefully there is at least one copy sitting in your home right now. But our sinful nature tells us to ignore that Word. The world around us tells us that we don't need it. Some claim that it is too hard to possibly understand or even that it is more evil than it is good. And our great enemy the devil smiles as we ignore it and stay busy with our own lives in our own palaces.

That Word of God tell us that there in Bethlehem is the one who has been born King of the Jews, the Messiah, the Savior. It tells us why it is so important for us to know him and to trust him. It tells us about our innate sinfulness and our inborn inclination towards darkness. It warns us about the sins that so easily and so often ensnare us: things like our own greed or pride or laziness or apathy. It drives us to the recognition that I have nothing to do but to throw myself at the mercy of God because I have so incredibly offended him and spurned and scorned his love for me.

And then that same Word points to Bethlehem, where the One was born who is the King of the Jews. He is the Promised One. He is the Christ. He is the one about whom the angel proclaimed to the shepherds, "A Savior has been born to you." He is the one who in that same town but no longer in the manger received the praises of the Magi, the one who was taken to Egypt to escape the evil plans of King Herod. He is the one who grew up, just as the Scriptures said he would, in Nazareth in Galilee. He is the one who would one day hang on the cross with the weight of all the worlds sin pressing on him as the sign above him said, "The King of the Jews." Where is the one who has been born the King of the Jews? He is in Bethlehem, precisely where the Word said he would be born. And he is there in that Word to reveal himself to us.

And so we worship him. That's what the Magi had come to do. They told Herod at their stop in Jerusalem that their intention was to worship this king. And when they arrived at the house, that is exactly what they did. They bowed down and worshiped. They presented rich and royal gifts to him, gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Of course, their bowing down and presenting gifts was only a small part of their worship. They had already made their long journey. They had found the child. They trusted God's promise regarding the Savior. All of this was worship directed toward Jesus.

Again imagine the sight and consider the contrast. Here was a lowly family in a lowly house in a small town. In come the Magi, well dressed, well off, and carrying expensive gifts. But really they knew that the greatest gift of all was the child that they worshiped. Nothing that they had to offer to him could overshadow what he had come to offer to them. And even though it was plain for all to see that there in front of the Magi was a true human child, those who believed God's Word knew that he was also much more. He was and is God himself, come to earth to accomplish his work of saving sinners. Where is the one who was born King of the Jews? Yes, he is in Bethlehem, the place of his birth, but he is also found in believing hearts that worship him as God and Lord.

Our worship need not involve long journeys. It may not involve expensive gifts. Our worship ought to, however, reflect that of the Magi. It involves our dedication to Jesus as our Savior. It takes every aspect of our lives in order to demonstrate our thanks to the one who has saved us. As we celebrate Epiphany today, we begin a series of Sundays where we look to God's Word to see Jesus shine forth as the Savior not just of the Jews, but also of the gentiles—indeed of the whole world. We see him shine forth as our Savior who is worthy of all our worship in word, in deed, with our generous gifts, and with our whole lives.

Sure, there are many questions about the Magi and their visit that Scripture leaves unanswered for us. We won't sing of three kings today. But the Bible does give us a wonderful picture in the Magi of gentiles worshiping the King of the Jews. We will sing today, "As With Gladness Men of Old," and in that hymn ask God to bless us with the worshipful faith of the Magi. May we always find with them the important answer to the question, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?" May we always say, "We have come to worship him."

The text: Matthew 2:1–12 (NIV84)

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> 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.”

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> “ ‘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.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> 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.”

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.