

Reactions and Responses

Matthew 2:1-12

Having just celebrated Christmas, the nativity fresh in our minds, we turn to the season of epiphany. In Greek, *epiphaneia*, means something like ‘appearance’, ‘revelation’, or ‘manifestation’. Epiphany serves as one of the seven principal feast days in the Christian calendar. It is a fixed day, the twelfth day after Christmas, so it migrates throughout the days of the week. This Wednesday, January 6th, is Epiphany. So, at Covenant Presbyterian, we begin this Sunday, instead of next week, as the lectionary prescribes. We give this major feast its due. Today, we begin to celebrate the manifestation of God in human form. The revelation of God: Jesus Christ. The breaking in of a blinding new light: the Son of God.

In my younger days I had a crystal clear, controversy-free image of the nativity. This image was principally formed by the nativity set that was by the fireplace in my parent’s house each December. With these memories, I can confidently tell you that on the night that Jesus was born, Mary was on the left hand side of Jesus, and Joseph was on the right. I can tell you that there were several sheep and a few cows nearby, all reverentially kneeling. There were three shepherds wielding staffs on the left, and three Wise-Men with treasure chests, two on camels, one leading his camel by its bridle. And, on certain years, there was a misty, almost plastic like snow hanging from the roof of the peculiarly constructed one-sided barn.

It seems like we are never satisfied with the Bible’s stories. The Image of the Nativity, a great example of our inclination to invent new identities for Biblical characters, new purposes and themes for stories; almost to the point where no semblance of original meaning remains. Today, let us focus on Matthew’s Wise-Men.

Over the years, the principal characters in Matthew 2:1-12 have undergone some drastic re-characterizations. For instance, popular knowledge tells us that there were three of these people: Wise Men. We also know that they were Kings: we all know the song “We Three Kings”. We know that they were from the Orient: “we three kings from orient are”. We all remember that they were present on the night that Jesus was born. One commentator even went as far as to give those Kings names and descriptions:

1. Melchior – an old man with white hair and a long beard
2. Gaspar – young and beardless and ruddy complexioned
3. Balthasar – black-skinned and heavily bearded

And some traditions hold that these three Wise-Men were eventually baptized. Hmm. This is nice information, but regrettably, when one takes the scripture into account, not much of this is left standing.

The Wise-men, the magi, are actually, based on the fact that they were clearly in tune with the movement of the celestial bodies, astrologers. They most likely studied the heavens for signs of significant events, and since this practice was centered in Babylon, we assume this, or somewhere nearby, is where their travels originated. They see a sign, a star, coincidentally a new bright light. We are never told how many wise men there actually were. The text never actually

gives us a number, but some assume that the fact that there were three gifts points to the presence of only three wise men, but the evidence is not conclusive. We could just as easily picture a caravan of traveling wise men. They were most certainly not there on the night of Jesus birth, because they visit Mary and Jesus in a house. Based on the age range of the murdered children in the tragic verses that follow this story, one is safe to assume that Jesus was somewhere between birth and two years of age. So, what does this tell us? What is the purpose of clearing up this muddled picture? Well, understanding exactly who the Wise-Men were will help inform our overall understanding of Matthew 2:1-12. It will pull us past the image of those nativity sets in our childhood homes, and bring us face to face with the text.

So we have Astrologers from Babylon, or maybe farther east, Persia, and they are following a star. But, it is not just curiosity that causes them to travel. The Wise Men travel with a known purpose: to pay homage to the King of the Jews. How? How do these individuals know this? Well, we do not know. Given the fact that highly knowledgeable and important Jews had lived in bondage in Babylon, some assume that this information was passed on through oral tradition, stories passed down from generations. But we cannot be sure. Maybe they had some divine assistance. The text records the fact that they certainly benefited from highly unusual occurrences: stars and dreams. Who knows? What is important to remember is that they came. They sought the King that they knew had been born.

They traveled, using unknown amounts of money and time. They sacrifice the security of their homes, for the inhospitable conditions of traveling from afar. They make it to Israel, but not quite to Bethlehem. Now, they could have been misled by making use of confusing Old Testament scriptures, or muddled oral translation, but nevertheless. Although they are close to Bethlehem, close doesn't cut it. I like to imagine the decision to enter Jerusalem. I have decided that there must have been a wise woman somewhere in the mix that forced at least one of these wise men to ask for directions. So, they start asking around, and eventually even King Herod is briefed on this matter. King Herod is definitely interested in the questions these travelers are asking.

I don't know about you, but it seems odd to me that misdirected foreign travelers are immediately given an audience with the King. It highlights the importance of this matter. It seems to me that Herod may have been waiting for just this type of information. But, then I began to think, "What would I do if travelers came into the capital city of my Kingdom and asked where the real King was located?" Imagine Herod's surprise.

The always-crafty Herod works the situation. Hearing of a possible challenger, he decides to use these men in order that he may also find this King. He calls on the Jewish chief priests and the Scribes, he asks them the question, "Where is the Christ to be born?" They respond by quoting the scripture from the book of Micah. "Bethlehem, in the land of Judah". Then Herod, again remember, always crafty, meets secretly with the wise men, asks them just when this star appeared, and then tells them to report back so that he may also, "pay homage" to this King. Right.

The Wise-Men continue towards Bethlehem. Then, suddenly, they see the star again, and it does something peculiar...It stops. It stops. Imagine what these trained astrologers reaction must be

when one of the ever-rotating celestial bodies ceases. It must have been pretty amazing. A first for them, I would have to assume. When this occurs, they also do something peculiar, they become overwhelmed with joy. Wow! Joy takes hold of these men. Their journey is over. The King is at hand. The foreign travelers find what Israel has been waiting hundreds and hundreds of years for.

Then, upon entering the house, they see the child with his mother, Mary. Maybe she was holding him. Maybe he was stumbling around the room. Maybe he was crying. Maybe he was smiling. But, alas, this is to befuddle the story. It is at this point that the Magic of the Story of the Wise-Men takes root. This is the namesake for the sermon. It is the Magi's *response* to this child that should amaze the reader. It is the *reaction* of these foreign travelers that should cause chills to rush over our skin. They bow down. They kneel down. They acknowledge the glory and the splendor of the King. Think of the characters in this story. In Matthew's Gospel, written by a Jew for Jews to read, foreign astrologers from Babylon are the first to recognize the Christ Child. The Child that will take on the burdens of a sinful and ungrateful world. This Christ who will grow and build community, eat with least of society, encourage peace, attract large crowds, who will cast out demons, cure the sick, raise the dead, preach about loving God and neighbor, who will be captured, tortured, crucified. They bow to Jesus Christ, without knowing any of this. Without the knowledge of the coming Kingdom. Without the benefit of two thousand years of theology and critical editions of the Bible. Without the understanding and knowledge of modern society. They simply bow and kneel and recognize Christ as King.

They don't stop there. They give gifts. They offer their riches to the King. They give what they have to what they recognize as the legitimate power and authority. We read of no offerings given to Herod. No stops at temples along the voyage. One purpose, one destination, one King.

Let me ask you this:

What is your reaction to the knowledge that Jesus Christ is alive within our world?

What is your response to the knowledge that Jesus Christ is alive with us?

Before you answer think about the story.

Will you respond with Herod's jealous anger to the knowledge that you might not be as in control as you had previously thought? Does the knowledge that you do not have complete authority over your life, or family, or resources bother you? The idea of having rights, a right to do this, or a right to do that, often interferes with our obligation to serve and to love, and to properly bow before the King. We must surrender control and selfishness to fully kneel before Christ. Think about that. You are not in control. We cannot control. We cannot grasp for power. Read the Bible and find one example of a story where someone is reaching and grasping for power that ends in a happily-ever-after. This is key to seeking the Christ-child. To follow as the Wise-Men did. Relinquish the struggle, give praise to the King.

Do we respond with the fear of Jerusalem, the chief priests and scribes, with blind ignorance and regrettable fear? The text states that these men were afraid of the possibility that the Savior had been born. Learned men whose main purpose in this world was to glorify God and to await the coming Messiah totally and completely missed it. They failed at something they had been

trained at for their entire lives. What a biting criticism of the established religious authority in Jerusalem. There is definitely criticism of the governments of men in this story, but this is directed at the religious juggernauts of Jerusalem; the respected religious leaders of the day. The author of Matthew intentionally frames all those in power, who should have known better, as obviously afraid. Almost intentionally unwilling to accept the possibility that the Christ was actually alive, walking with them. And with this moment, we begin the thirty-three year struggle between Jesus Christ and the entrenched powers and authorities of this world: placed at odds against one another in chapter two. As you know, the fear of the chief priests will not fade away. The possibility of shifting status-quos and the acceptance of Jesus' new path would eventually lead this same governing body to play an all important role in the death of Jesus. Will we fear and resist Jesus' message as much as the chief priests and scribes? Will we allow the fear of loving one's neighbor, really loving one's neighbor, allow us to turn our backs on Jesus? Will we respond by refusing to acknowledge the breaking in of Jesus' Kingdom into our world?

The wonder of the Wise-Men: who followed a new light, for a great distance, with immense difficulty, for a King that they knew little about, a journey that brought them face-to-face with hostile governing authorities, that threatened the security of themselves and their families: to this they bow and give offerings. They recognize Jesus as King.

Can we bring ourselves to do the same?