

WISE MEN STILL SEEK HIM

MATTHEW 2:1-23

One of my favorite comic strips is Bill Keane's "The Family Circus." And I love the one with the little girl sitting on her bed with her baby brother in her lap.

She's reciting her version of the Christmas story...

"Jesus was born just in time for Christmas up at the North Pole surrounded by eight tiny reindeer, and the Virgin Mary... Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys, and stuff, and some swaddling clothes... The three wise men and the elves all sang carols, while the Little Drummer Boy and Scrooge helped Joseph trim the tree... In the meantime Frosty the Snowman saw this star..." Needless to say she has her facts a bit confused. *But she's not the only one.* It seems many Christmas presentations end up confusing the facts!

People tend to either **secularize** or **mythologize** the meaning of Christmas... The **secularized versions** feature Santa and Mrs. Claus, Rudolph, Frosty, the Grinch, Scrooge, and the Little Drummer Boy...

While the **mythologized versions** keep the biblical characters, but they're taken out of proper context...

How often have you seen pictures of the stable...

There's *Mary* with her hair freshly shampooed, and Joseph calm and collected... *Baby Jesus* is asleep on the soft hay - emitting an incandescent glow...

Barnyard animals well behaved and perfectly silent watch the miracle birth... Shepherds arrive on the scene neatly

dressed, clean cut, and wearing new bathrobes... They're joined by *wise men* who arrive at the stable the same night as the shepherds. They ride in on camels, wearing golden crowns on their heads...And *everyone* in the scene sports a golden halo.

I hate to burst your bubble, but none of the above actually happened! It's easy to develop wrong ideas.

One year the Youth Group of a church close to our house sponsored a live Nativity. Kathy and I decided to bundle up our small children and visit the manger.

When the wise men arrived, I'll never forget, Zack asking, "[Mom, did the wise men really wear high tops?](#)"

Even as a preschooler high top sneakers didn't strike him as authentic. Over the years we've all picked up plenty of misinformation about the Christmas story.

It reminds me of another cartoon.

Two kids are in the audience at the annual Christmas pageant when one child explains to the other, "[We know that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem at night, because everyone was wearing their bathrobe.](#)"

Well, this morning and next week I want us to look at the Christmas story in Matthew and Luke, and examine the biblical texts. We'll try to sort out fact from fiction.

We need to arrive at an accurate understanding of what happened two-thousand years ago on that first Christmas - *and again be challenged by its truth!*

Matthew 2, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.” These mysterious visitors to Jerusalem were called “*wise men*,” or in the original Greek “*magi*.”

Who were these mysterious magi? It reminds me of a joke. Two elderly ladies were talking to each other when one says to the other, “A virgin birth I can believe, but finding three wise men?” *It’s a corny joke!*

But actually, it’s not hard to find these wise men in history! The Greek historian, Herodotus, identified them as a priestly caste of Medes - men who served as advisors in the royal court of the Persians. Our English word “*magistrate*” is a direct derivative of “*magi*.”

The magi were skilled in mathematics, science, astronomy, and religion. They kept one eye on the sacred writings, and another eye on the heavens. They were on the lookout for a supernatural sign, and one appeared... They believed a star in the heavens was pointing out the location of the Hebrew Messiah.

Remember, the Hebrew prophet Daniel once served in the court of Babylon. He was head over the magi.

No doubt these first century magi would’ve studied Daniel’s seventh century prophecies. And Daniel 9 would’ve told them the coming of Messiah was near.

In the amazing prophecy of Israel’s Seventy Weeks, *600 years in advance*, Daniel calculated the exact day the Hebrew

Messiah would present Himself to His people. The magi knew **that time** was approaching.

These magi were also familiar with another oriental wise man named Balaam. Balaam too was privy to God's plans, and had seen this star years in advance.

Balaam lived 1400 years before the time of Christ, but in Numbers 24:17 Balaam predicted, "I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a star shall come out of Jacob; a scepter shall rise out of Israel."

What this "*star*" actually was we're not sure. Bible scholars have made all kinds of suggestions: *Halley's comet* - or *the dog star* - or *a nova* - or *a meteor*.

Famed astronomer, Johannes Kepler, theorized the "*star*" or "*heavenly object*" was an alignment of planets.

Kepler had read a Jewish rabbi, Abarbanel, who predicted that when a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter occurred in the constellation of Pisces the Messiah would come. That alignment was seen from Jerusalem over Bethlehem three times in the year 1603. Kepler's calculations showed this alignment occurred once every 800 years. That meant the same configuration would've been visible to the magi at the time of Christ.

Of course, how an alignment of planets could yield precise enough navigation to pinpoint a single house we're not sure. This leads me to think the star wasn't a natural phenomena at all, but perhaps supernatural.

Could it be God put a light in the heavens for this very purpose. *His Shekinah glory pointed the way?*

Whatever the star was, the magi reacted properly. Like the Jews, the Persians too were living under the Roman oppression, and longed to be free. They heard of this Savior - *a king* - and they came to worship Him.

And their worship was a role model for all who would follow their example - **they came, they bowed, and they gave.** And true worship does all three. It doesn't expect Jesus to meet me on my terms, it comes to where He's at... It swallows it's pride and bows down... And it gives something of value... This is true worship.

Verse 3, **“When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.”** All Jerusalem was frightened by the appearance of these magi.

We usually think of **three** wise men. Probably due to the three gifts they brought to Jesus. Tradition even lists three names: **Casper, Balthasar, and Melchior.** *But nowhere does the Bible say there were just three...*

Notice, when their caravan enters Jerusalem, looking for the Messiah, they create quite a stir among the locals. *Three lone riders would've barely been noticed.*

These were Persians traveling through Roman territory. They might've been accompanied by a small army for protection. Their caravan must've been larger than a small posse'. It scared the puppet king, Herod.

And the magi would've been strangely dressed. They probably wore cone-shaped hats. They resembled the stereotypical picture of a wizard. And it's more likely they rode *horses* than *camels* - Arabian steeds.

But what disturbed Herod most were their words. They said they were looking for the "*King of the Jews.*"

This was the official title Caesar Augustus had given to Herod when he made him king of Judea. *Herod was king of the Jews...* Now these Oriental bigwigs were looking for another king. *Herod got a little harried...*

"And when (Herod) had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born." The word "Christ" is Greek for "Anointed" - in Hebrew it is "Messiah."

All Jewish kings were anointed with oil; thus the action became a title for a special king, yet future.

God promised King David an heir - an offspring - an eternal king who would rule over an eternal kingdom.

Herod calls the leading Bible scholars to search the Scriptures as to where this Messiah was to be born.

And "They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.'" The Jewish theologians point to Micah 5:2. Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. It's astonishing, that 730 years before the first Christmas God revealed His Son's birthplace. It's a strong testimony to the divine authorship of Scripture.

The full quote from Micah is as follows: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah (that's like Atlanta, Georgia - the city then region), though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel..." This is why we sing, "O Little Town Of Bethlehem." It was a blip on the screen. Blink and you miss it. Yet ironically, one of the smallest cities of Judah would birth its greatest king.

And what follows in Micah is amazing... He says of Jesus, "whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting." The word translated "everlasting" means "from eternity onward." It speaks of an immeasurable duration. As Buzz Lightyear would say, "to infinity and beyond." Go back in time as far as your mind will allow... 5000 years - 50,000 years - 500,000 years - 5 billion years - 5 quintillion years - and there was Jesus.

Someone translated this term "everlasting," as "beyond the vanishing point." When time fades into eternity there is Jesus, the Hebrew Messiah. The child who was born in the little town of Bethlehem and laid in a manger - had been around since before time began.

His birth was not his beginning!

And the implications are provocative! The Babe of Bethlehem was the Eternal God. The Ancient of Days became a child of time. The Infinite became an Infant. Jesus is Alpha and Omega - the first and the last. He has no beginning, and He'll have no end. Jesus is God.

Oh, if Herod had just kept reading in Micah it might've dawned on him the vanity of his resistance.

But “Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared.” This provided Herod the newborn king’s approximate age. Apparently, He was born when the star appeared. Later, Jesus is called “a young child.”

He’s no longer an infant. By the time the wise men arrived in Bethlehem Jesus was likely two years old.

“And (Herod) sent (the wise men) to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search diligently for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.” And of course, as we’ll see later, this was a cover-up. Rather than worship the King, Herod wanted to assassinate Him.

“When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him.”

How many of you have a nativity set? Does it include wise men? Most nativities do - they depict wise men and shepherds together - but the magi’s visit occurred months after Jesus’ birth and the shepherds departure.

Luke 2 tells us that Jesus was born in a stable, but here in Matthew 2, by the time the magi actually arrive, Joseph has moved his family into a permanent house.

Here’s a picture that better portrays the reality.

Pretend you lived in Bethlehem at the time. You own a nice little ranch on Poplar Street. *Imagine the scene...* An oriental caravan, conspicuous enough to shake up the capitol city, descends on your tiny village.

This entourage turns down your street. Oriental dignitaries walk up to the rented house next door.

They're greeted by the humble peasant couple who've just moved in. *What are kings doing at a carpenter's house?* Curiosity causes you to peer through the windows, *and you see the strangest sight...* oriental noblemen bowing before a toddler!

If you're the parent of a toddler I'm sure there're a lot of things you've wanted to do with your two year old, but I'll bet *worship him* has never been one of them!

How would you respond to see global ambassadors on their knees worshipping the kid next door?

It's interesting the reactions to Jesus we see in this story. Even today, people respond to Him in one of three ways: **antagonism, ambivalence, or adoration.**

Some people, like **Herod** are *antagonistic*. Herod hated the thought of a rival king. He didn't want to serve, but to be served. He opposed Jesus at all costs.

And there are folks today just like Herod. They want to be their own king - and thus view Jesus as a threat to their autonomy and lifestyle. They don't want God in their life. God cramps their style. He gets in their way.

They prefer to sit on the throne of their life and call their own shots. Any interference ends up the subject of their hatred. A rival king provokes their hostility.

Other people are like Herod's **scholars**: *ambivalent*. They were religious. They knew their Bibles - Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. They knew His whereabouts, but they never bothered to come to Him.

And likewise, there are folks today who understand the truth. They know a lot about Jesus. They even study the Scriptures, but make no attempt to seek Him. They keep a safe distance. They ignore the living Lord.

They like religion - *even say they believe* - but they prefer to view Jesus as a relic of history - a tradition to spice up their life. They keep Him in the past, and treat Him as if He has no relevance to their life today.

Some people *hate Jesus*, others *ignore Him*, but like the magi, there are still a few folks who **adore** Jesus.

They're so consumed with the Lord Jesus that they're willing to sacrifice, and embark on the longest of journeys, and risk their safety to come and worship.

Wise men come on Jesus' terms, not their own. They humble themselves and bow before His will. They give back to Him of the blessings He has given hem.

I hope you examine your heart this Christmas season - *which type of person are you?* Do you despise Jesus and view Him as a threat?... Do you ignore Him and consider Him irrelevant?... Or are you a wise guy? Do you live to worship Jesus... I hope so!

Verse 11 tells us what the wise men gave to Jesus. “**And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.**”

There may’ve been 3, or 30, or 300 wise men, but we know they brought three very appropriate gifts...

Gold was the gift for a **king**. Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords, and wants to be king of your heart...

Frankincense is for a **priest**. And before God, Jesus is our go-between - a faithful and merciful High Priest..

And **myrrh** was a strange gift for an infant. In antiquity, myrrh was used as a burial spice - it was an embalming fluid - given to **a man sentenced to die**.

Of course, this was Jesus’ mission. His purpose in coming into the world was to die *in our place, for our sin*. *From His crib Jesus was focused on His cross*.

Famous artist, Holman Hunt, painted this scene of Jesus in His father’s carpenter’s shop. The shadow behind Him foreshadows His inevitable destiny. From the day He was born He was headed to the cross...

Here’s an eloquent description, "Those soft little hands, fashioned by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, were made so that nails might be driven through them.

Those baby feet, pink and unable to walk, would one day walk up to a dusty hill to be nailed to a cross.

That sweet infant's head with sparkling eyes and eager mouth was formed so that someday men might force a crown of thorns onto it. That tender body, warm and soft, wrapped in

swaddling clothes, would one day be ripped open by a spear.” Jesus was born to die.

All three gifts were fitting for Jesus: Gold for **a king**, frankincense for **a priest**, and myrrh for **a sacrifice**.

Verse 12, “Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, (the wise men) departed for their own country another way.”

Some divine intelligence was passed on to the wise men. God made sure they were privy to Herod’s real motives. Rather than return the way they came - *through Jerusalem* - they took a different route home.

I’m sure the phrase “*another way*” referred to roads, and crossings, and caravan routes charted on a map, yet *I can’t help but think when they went home “another way” it might also imply another way of life.*

For when you meet Jesus and bow your life to Him you leave headed “*another way*” - *His way*. The word *repent* means *an about face* - a change of directions. *A Christian is a person who’s under new management.*

“Now when (the wise men) had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream...

Joseph is also given some top secret instructions.

Again, an angel appears to him, “Saying, “Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him.” And just like that, *the heavenly Child* becomes *an earthly refugee*. He flees His country and seeks political asylum in Egypt.

It's a good thing the Egyptians didn't build a wall.

Of course, back in Jerusalem King Herod continued to seethe. History tells us Herod was a little man with a big ego. He stood just 4'4", and he suffered an extreme inferiority complex. Herod was a paranoid person.

Once he suspected his wife and brother-in-law of plotting a coup. He had his own family executed.

Five days before the little king died he put to death his oldest son for the same reason. Caesar Augustus said, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than to be his son."

Jewish history says when Herod died he knew no one would mourn his death. Thus, he arrested seventy of Israel's most respected citizens, and gave orders to slaughter them all the moment he passed away. He wanted to be sure there was someone crying when he passed. Trust me, the man was a certifiable sick-o.

This is why God knew King Herod would never rest knowing that a rival king was waiting in the wings. And so, to protect our Messiah, the angel instructed Joseph to leave for Egypt with the Child and His mother.

And Joseph immediately obeyed. In fact, this was the man's trademark. Joseph never had to be told twice. I'm sure *Obedience* was Joseph's middle name.

"When he arose (*the next day*), he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, and was there until the death of Herod, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

It reminds me of the little girl who painted a strange picture in Sunday School. It happened to be Christmas time, and what she had drawn was supposed to be a nativity scene. Instead, the little girl had painted what looked like a few passengers on a 757 jet airplane.

That's when she explained to her mother, "That's Pontus the pilot in the front seat. And that's Joseph and Mary behind him, and that fat man in the back row, he's Round John Virgin." But the mother asked, "*Honey, why are they all on an airplane?*" The little girl answered, "*Why mom, that's the flight to Egypt.*"

Verse 16, "Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry (this is the anger of a madman); and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men." This is where we get the idea Jesus was around two years old. That was the target age Herod deduced from his conversation with the magi.

And what followed was a case of mass infanticide.

This was Bethlehem's holocaust. Thanks to Herod, 16 years later Bethlehem High School would graduate very few students. He wiped out an entire age group.

Matthew notes Jeremiah 31 predicted Herod's terror 600 years in advance - 31:17, "Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying: "A voice was heard in Ramah, (a nearby city) lamentation, weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be

comforted, because they are no more." Moms who lost their kids couldn't stop weeping.

According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, a few months after Herod's despicable genocide of the babies of Bethlehem the Lord judged the evil tyrant. Herod contracted a fever, as well as other symptoms.

Here's Josephus' description, "Infection seized his whole body... there was a gentle fever upon him, and an intolerable itching over all the surface of his body... continual pains in his colon... tumors on his feet, and an inflammation of the abdomen, **and a putrefaction of his privy member, that produced worms.**"

Some historians believe Herod's malady was a kidney disease coupled with gangrene - others think it was an STD - whatever it was I think all men would agree that "a **putrefaction of your privy member**" *accompanied by worms* - is a serious suffering indeed.

Apparently, in the end Herod got what he deserved.

"When Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

It was time to head home. And home for Joseph and Mary was Nazareth. They had come to Bethlehem because of the census requirement decreed by Rome.

“But when (Joseph) heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there.”

After King Herod died his kingdom was divided among three sons... Archelaus ruled Judah. Antipas the Galilee. And Philip was king over the Golan - *the land northeast of the Jordan River.*

And of his sons, Archelaus was the most ruthless.

Like his father he used the sword to solve his problems. Josephus recounts how once he put down a revolt from some religious Jews by having 3000 Pharisees slaughtered in Jerusalem at one time.

Archelaus' cruelty created such opposition among the Jews the Romans deposed him and sent him to France. Later, Rome turned Judea into a province and placed it under a governor, *the infamous Pontus Pilate.*

Verse 22, “And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.” Joseph had dealt with Herod, he was happy to avoid his crazy son.

“And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.”

The OT never predicted that Jesus would come from Nazareth per se, but He would be called a “Nazarene.”

The root word “netzer” means “to sprout.” The OT also translates the term as “branch.” A *sprout* or *branch* was the name given to Messiah since He would be a branch from King David's family tree. Isaiah 11:1 reads, “There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse (David's father), and a Branch (or netzer) shall grow out of his roots.” When you

referred to Jesus as the Nazarene you were actually calling Him the Branch.

Thus it fulfilled Scripture for Jesus to hail from Nazareth - not because of the city of Nazareth per se, but because of the meaning of the word. Since He was from Nazareth, He was called “**netzer**” or *branch*.

This may’ve been in the mind of ole blind Bartimaeus when he heard “**Jesus of Nazareth**” was passing by.

Remember his response, “**Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!**” Bartimaeus associated Nazareth or “**netzer**” with the branch from King David’s family tree.

And here’s where I want to end it this morning, *what kind of **associations** do you make at Christmas time?*

So often this time of year, we use the term, “**the Christmas spirit.**” It’s odd, but we don’t say that about any other holiday. You never hear of *the Labor Day spirit*, or *President’s Day spirit*, or even *Thanksgiving spirit*. But there is a special mood associated with Christmas. There is a definite **Christmas spirit.**

Some folks in our society associate the Christmas spirit with **a spirit of revelry.** Christmas is a time to party. It’s an excuse for excessive eating and drinking.

For other people it’s **a spirit of greed**, and instant gratification, and conspicuous consumption. It’s a time to run up the credit card to keep up with the Joneses.

For still others *the Christmas spirit* is **a spirit of human kindness.** It’s the glorification of “*the best of humanity.*” It’s a

time to whitewash our flaws and pretend that we're not as bad as we might have thought, and we're capable of solving our problems.

I was once watching a televised Christmas special, hosted by the famous radio DJ, Casey Cason.

At the end of his program Cason stated, "Christmas used to be for Christians who worshipped Jesus. Now, Christmas is for all men, for everyone interested in peace on earth and good will toward men." As if lasting peace can truly be brought about by man's ingenuity.

Mankind has had 6000 years to create peace on earth and good will toward men, and we've struck out.

On that first Christmas morning the angels promised, "Peace on earth and good will toward men." **But their promise of peace came packaged with a Savior.** Only Jesus can bring true peace to our hearts, and marriages, and homes, and families, and communities.

Here's what I believe... the true spirit of Christmas is a spirit of worship, and adoration, and submission!

The wise men came not to a party, but to bow to the Savior. Not to get, but to give. Not to display faith in humanity, but to express their faith in the chosen King.

In fact, without **Christ** I believe you're not even entitled to Christmas. If you haven't embraced Jesus just sleep in on December 25. For the true Christmas' spirit is not *a spirit of revelry, or a spirit of greed, or a spirit of human achievement.* It's the Spirit of Jesus.

It's the spirit of worship, and praise for our Savior.

Never forget the words of the wise men, "*we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.*" Wise men and women still worship Jesus Christ.