

Wheelerburg Baptist Church 12/18/11
Matthew 2:1-12 ““When the Magi Worshipped the King”**

Brad Brandt

Main Idea: In Matthew 2:1-12, the magi teach us three things about Jesus.

- I. The magi teach us that Jesus is the king (1-2).
 - A. There's something peculiar about the magi.
 - B. There's something peculiar about the star.
- II. The magi teach us that Jesus is a threat to other kings (3-8).
 - A. King Herod was troubled (3).
 - B. King Herod became interested in the Bible (4-6).
 - C. King Herod said he wanted to worship Christ (7-8).
 1. When we look at Herod we see how sin works.
 2. When we look at Herod we see ourselves.
- III. The magi teach us that Jesus deserves to be treated like the King of kings (9-12).
 - A. He is sovereign over the stars (9).
 - B. He brings joy (10).
 - C. He deserves worship (11a).
 - D. He is worthy of all we can give Him (11b).
 - E. He is to be made known to the nations (12).

Make It Personal: Who is your king?

1. Do you know King Jesus?
2. Are you treating Him like He is King Jesus?
3. Are you ready to see Him when He returns?

They are hailing him as “a lighthouse of hope,” “the spiritual pillar,” and “a great person born of heaven.” Since this is Christmas day, you may assume I’m talking about Jesus Christ, but in fact, these very titles were applied to another ruler who hit the world scene just this past week.

A week ago reports came out of North Korea that the man known as their “beloved leader,” Kim Jong Il, died of a heart attack after a 17 year iron-fisted rule. Just a year ago he made preparations for his successor when he introduced the country to his 27 year old son, Kim Jong Un. I find it interesting to read the language being used by the Korean Central News Agency that describes Kim Jong Un as “a great person born of heaven,” a propaganda term previously used only for his father and grandfather.

You’ve, no doubt, seen the reports. Kim Jung Il was the center of a personality cult. He put his pictures up everywhere and forced North Koreans to essentially worship him. The State choir was created just for him and sang a song, “No Motherland Without You.” He murdered any who displeased him, including thousands and thousands of Christians.

And now he’s dead, and his son has come to power. “Young Koreans are burning with the faith and will to remain loyal to Kim Jong Un,” said the report.¹

We need to pray for North Korea.

In stark contrast, we gather on this Christmas morning to celebrate the coming of a very different kind of ruler. Not one who makes claims he cannot keep. Not one who coerces His subjects into mindless devotion. We gather to honor the birth of a King who humbled Himself, left His throne in heaven to come to earth as a baby, in order to rescue helpless people like us from sin’s bondage. And instead of demanding gifts be given to

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelerburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ http://old.news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20111220/ap_on_re_as/as_kim_jong_il

Him, He gave gifts to us, like forgiveness and favor with God, gifts that cost Him dearly, as you know.

Friends, in a world of rivals, we are here today because *The King* has come! Jesus is many things. Savior. Friend. Shepherd. Perfect Son. But He's also *King*, indeed, *King of kings*.

What kind of king is Jesus? The Bible presents Jesus' birth to us from so many perspectives. There's Mary's perspective, Joseph's, the shepherds, the angels, and so on. But today we're going to consider *the magi*.

Let's open our Bibles to Matthew 2. D. A. Carson remarks, "Few passages have received more diverse interpretations than this one."² And while that's true, this is a wonderful text to help us respond rightly to Jesus. In Matthew 2:1-12, the magi teach us three things about Jesus. I'll give them to you now, then we'll look at them one by one.

1. The magi teach us that Jesus is the king (1-2).
2. The magi teach us that Jesus is a threat to other kings (3-8).
3. The magi teach us that Jesus deserves to be treated like the King of kings (9-12).

I. The magi teach us that Jesus is the king (1-2).

Verses 1-2 "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² 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.'"

We've jumped right into the middle of Matthew's story. He just told us about Jesus' birth in chapter one, and now he informs us of something that happened *after* Jesus' birth. Specifically, he mentions two peculiarities.

A. There's something peculiar about the magi. *Magi from the east*, the text says. Who were these *magi*? The Greek word is *magoi*, and it refers to a wise man, or even a magician. The ESV & KJV call them "wise men."

According to a tradition that goes back as far as Tertullian in the third century A.D., the magi were Oriental kings. By the end of the sixth century, the wise men were named Melkon, Balthasar, and Gasper.³ But that's tradition. The Bible merely calls them *magi*.

Although there is speculation, most feel the *magi* were men who studied the stars (the English word 'magician' comes from this Greek word). They were specialists in astrology. By placing them in the biblical record, God is not endorsing their practice of astrology (which He condemns elsewhere⁴). Nor is He saying that we should look to the stars for guidance, as the magi did.

The fact that there are astrologers in the Christmas story doesn't commend astrology. It commends God's grace. The same grace that placed ungodly Gentile women in Jesus' genealogy in chapter one, now brings Gentile astrologers to seek Jesus in chapter two.

You see, these men were pagan outsiders. They didn't belong at Jesus' birthday party, as if any sinner belongs. Yet God, in His kindness, privileged these magi, as He does us today, to come and behold His Son.

² D. A. Carson, p. 82.

³ Carson, p. 85.

⁴ When you read the Old Testament you find out that astrologers were condemned. In the NT, you look at Simon the *magos* in Acts 8:6-11 and not in a favorable light.

The text says they came “from the east,” possibly from Babylon, or from Persia, or from the Arabian desert. Think of the cost involved. These men traveled hundreds of miles. Their trip took many weeks, if not months. They left family and friends.

Let me remind you that the magi took off on a trip, *not* knowing their final destination. Apparently, they were familiar with Old Testament prophesies like Numbers 24:17, “A star will come out of Jacob.” They recognized this child to be the “king of the Jews” in verse 2. How did pagan magi in Babylon ever get a hold of Old Testament prophecies? Perhaps from Daniel, or one of the other exilic Jews.

How do these magi fit into the time-line of our Lord's birth? Were the magi at the stable the night of Jesus' birth? Did they meet the shepherds? No. How do we know? First, verse 11 says they came to the “house,” not the stable. Second, in verse 8 Herod calls Jesus a “young child,” not a baby.⁵ Third, when Herod tried to kill Jesus in verse 16, he ordered the murder of all male children under the age of two years.

So apparently, there is a time lapse between Matthew 1:25 and Matthew 2:1. My guess is the magi saw the star on the night of Jesus' birth. Then they made journey preparations and traveled for many weeks, if not months. Then they came to Jerusalem, and spent time with Herod (long enough for him to call his counselors together). Then the star reappeared, and they traveled another five miles to Bethlehem. By this time, Mary, Joseph, and the young child were living in a house.

So you might want to rethink how you set up your nativity scene. More than likely, the magi didn't arrive until much later.

B. There's something peculiar about the star. In verse 2 the magi said, “We saw his star in the east.” *In the east* isn't a reference to where the star was, or they would have traveled *east* to follow it. But they traveled *west*, because *in the east* is a reference to where they were when they saw it and began their trip.

What kind of star did the magi see? Suggestions abound. About 11 B.C. Halley's Comet shot across the sky. About 7 B.C., there was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. In the years 5 to 2 B.C., there was an unusual astronomical phenomenon in which Sirius, the dog star rose at sunrise.⁶

Those are interesting possibilities, but Matthew's text indicates that this star was unusual, perhaps miraculous. Perhaps it was like the “shekinah” glory of God that led the Israelites for forty years in the Sinai desert (Ex 13:21).

But if that's the case, if this star was some brilliant comet or spectacular display of glory, why didn't other people see it and follow it? The text seems to indicate that only the magi saw it. We have seen his star, said the magi in verse 2. In verse 8 Herod asked them when it appeared, indicating he didn't see it. And verse 9 indicates they saw the same star again, and this time it guided them to Bethlehem. Apparently, the others didn't see it.

Or perhaps others *did* see it, but just didn't know what they were seeing. The magi specifically call the star “his star” in verse 2. “We saw *his star* in the east.” Apparently, they didn't just see a meteor, or comet, or some flash of light. They saw something they concluded to be associated with the birth of the King of the Jews,⁷ a conclusion they made because they were students both of the stars *and* the Old Testament prophesies.

⁵ Luke's account a different Greek word, *brephos*, which signifies a newborn infant

⁶ Barclay, p. 26.

⁷ I recommend a very interesting website, www.bethlehemstar.net, for this explanation.

Amazing, isn't it? The Sovereign Lord has so many ways to get people's attention so they see their need for His Son. He can use a job loss, or an illness, or even a special star, as He did with the magi. There's point one. The magi teach us that Jesus is *the King*.

II. The magi teach us that Jesus is a threat to other kings (3-8).

Verse 3 says, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." Why was he disturbed? Because if you're a king, you don't want some other king invading your turf. We'll come back to that thought in a moment.

We need some background to appreciate what happens next. There were actually six Herods, and this one is Herod the Great. Herod the Great was a half-Jew, a descendant of Esau. By cooperating with the Romans, he was appointed governor of Israel in 47 B.C. In 40 B.C., he received the title 'king,' and he reigned as such until his death in 4 B.C.⁸ After his death, Israel was divided up between his sons who were known as 'Tetrarchs' and 'Ethnarchs.' But Herod the Great alone was called *king*.

In some respects, Herod the Great was indeed 'great.' He was a great builder. He is the one who built the massive, ornate temple in Jerusalem. At times, he was generous. In the famine of 25 B.C., he actually melted down his own gold plate to buy corn for the starving people.

But he certainly wasn't a liked man. Herod was insanely suspicious, and the older he became, the worse his paranoia grew. He trusted no one. He was a hated tyrant. He also, apparently, had some diseases that added to his mistrust (hardening of the arteries, sexual diseases). Any threat to his power could turn him into a madman.

Herod suspected anyone as a potential threat. He murdered his wife, Mariamne, and her mother, Alexandra. He assassinated his oldest son, Antipater, and two other sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. Augustus, the Roman Emperor has said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.⁹

Barclay says that the extend of Herod's corruption is seen most vividly by what he did at the end of his life. When Herod knew he was going to die, he gave orders that the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem be arrested on trumped up charges. Then he gave instructions that when he died, these citizens were to be killed. Why? Because he knew that no one would mourn at his death, and he was determined that some tears be shed.¹⁰ Such was the man known as Herod the Great.

Now, let's look at Herod's response to the magi. Herod did three things.

A. King Herod was troubled (3). The word means "to stir up." Why was Herod so bothered by the magi's message? He had good reason to be. Herod knew he wasn't the rightful king of the Jews, but a half Jew, half Idumean, self-declared, self-imposed ruler. And now he hears that there's one *born* "king of the Jews."

That news upset Herod, and all Jerusalem with him. Another king born? You can't have two kings ruling the same realm at the same time. Where is this king? And so...

B. King Herod became interested in the Bible (4-6). I find verse 4 to be humorous, "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."

⁸ See Barclay, pp. 28-9.

⁹ Barclay, p. 29.

¹⁰ Barclay, p. 29.

Herod is the king of the Jews, but he doesn't know the Jews' most holy and sacred book. And now he wishes he did! All of a sudden, this powerful, self-promoting man wants to know what the Bible says.

But don't let his interest fool you. People get interested in the Bible for lots of reasons, and some not so noble. I remember a time when I was in Junior High when my classmates got on a Bible discussion kick in study hall. Everybody seemed to show an interest in talking about the Bible, probably just to avoid studying. It lasted about week.

You say, "How can you determine a person's motive for wanting to study the Bible, your own motive, for that matter?" Just give it time. See what they do with what they learn.

Let's see what Herod did. He assembled a Bible study task team in verse 4. His assignment? Tell me where the Christ is to be born. Interesting that he equates *the king* with *the Christ*.

The Bible teachers gave Herod this answer in verses 5-6, "In Bethlehem in Judea, 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.'"

They cite the prophet Micah and his seven hundred year of prophecy in Micah 5:2. "It's The House of Bread, *Bethlehem*. That's where you'll find him." And with that information in hand, notice Herod's response...

C. King Herod said he wanted to worship Christ (7-8). "Then Herod called the Magi secretly [he doesn't want others to know about this conversation] and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared [which seems to indicate he hadn't seen it]. He sent them to Bethlehem [about a seven mile trip south of Jerusalem] 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.'"

Of course, Herod had no intent of worshiping this new king. It was all a sham. The only thing He wanted to do was kill him, which is why when the magi *didn't* report back to him, he gave the order to execute every little boy in Bethlehem two years old and younger.

We learn something from this man. First...

1. *When we look at Herod we see how sin works.* The focus of sin is self. Self-obsession. Self-seeking. Self-promoting. Self-protecting. And most of all, *self-rule*.

When a person sins, he's showing where his allegiance lies. He wants to be in charge. He wants things done his way. He's preoccupied with self. Not the glory of God, and not the good of others. It's all about *self*.

That's easy to spot in a man like Herod, but the fact is...

2. *When we look at Herod we see ourselves.* Listen to this confession by commentator Frederick Bruner, "Herod is what I am deep down inside."¹¹ But it's not just Bruner. It's us, too. Oh, we may never resort to Herod's tactics, but we all struggle with the same internal drive.

Herod teaches us that one of the first reactions we have, once we learn about King Jesus, is to feel threatened. And why would that be the case? Because if Jesus is King, then we are not.

¹¹ Bruner, p. 51.

Earlier I made the remark that if you're a king, you don't want some other king invading your turf. That's what troubled Herod. He thought he was the king. He called the shots in his realm. But if Jesus is king and Jesus comes into his realm, he's no longer going to be calling the shots.

You see, that's our problem as sinners. If you see yourself as the king, you don't want another king around. We want to call the shots. We want to be in control.

You say, "That's not me. I don't want to be king." Really? Why is it then that when you hear the gospel invitation calling you to Christ for salvation or even for service, you find yourself wondering, "I wonder what I'll have to give up?" That's the way a king thinks when he hears there's another king in town.

Let me encourage you with something. Jesus is unlike any other king. Who ever heard of a king choosing to lay down his life for his rebel subjects? And who ever heard of a king inviting his subjects to rule with him? And yet, that's what King Jesus has done. Why would you not want to turn the controls of your life over to such a king?!

That brings us to our third point. One, the magi teach us that Jesus is king. Two, the magi teach us that Jesus is a threat to other kings. Now three....

III. The magi teach us that Jesus deserves to be treated like the King of kings (9-12).

As we watch what the magi did in scene three, we learn five things about Jesus.

A. He is sovereign over the stars (9). Verse 9 says, "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."

There it is again. The star, the same star they saw back home, now reappears and shows them the way to the child-king. Don't miss the Lord's sovereignty in this. The reason He is the King of all kings is because He can do what no other king can do. He controls the stars, in this case, this very special star.

B. He brings joy (10). "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." It wasn't the star per se that produced the joy, but the One they knew they'd find if they followed the star. My friend, if you're wondering why you should come to King Jesus, it's because He once again can do what no one else can do. He alone can bring joy to your heart! And because of this (and ten thousand other reasons!)...

C. He deserves worship (11a). "On coming to the house [not the stable, but to a *house*], they saw the child with his mother Mary [where's Joseph? he shows up in the next scene in verse 13, but he's not mentioned here], and they bowed down and worshiped him."

This is an incredible sight, grown men bowing down in adoration and devotion before a little child. But of course, their actions reveal their conviction that this is no ordinary child. He is not just *the king of the Jews*, as they had announced earlier. He is *the King of all kings*, and therefore worthy of their worship, even though they're not Jewish. Furthermore...

D. He is worthy of all we can give Him (11b). We're told what the magi gave Him in the second part of verse 11, "Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."

As you can see, the gifts the magi gave were not cheap, but were indeed gifts worthy of a king. *Gold, incense, and myrrh.* Three gifts, probably the reason tradition says there were three magi.

I wonder what Jesus did with these gifts. The text says that the magi presented *him* the gifts. What would a toddler do with gold, incense, and myrrh? We know that at some point they were put to use because by the time Jesus left the world, He had only a cloak to His name. It's possible that God provided these gifts as the means by which Joseph would take his family to Egypt and live during the time of Herod's plot.

That's speculation. This is not. When we look at the magi's actions (the costly trip, the costly gifts, even the risk they eventually took when they defied Herod's order), we find out that King Jesus is worthy of all that we can give Him.

What have you given Him? You say, "What does He want from me? He already owns it all!" True, yet in His Word He tells us what He wants from us. First, He wants our love, our first love (Rev 2:4). Second, He wants our abiding fellowship. "Abide in Me, and I in you (John 15:4)." Third, He wants our obedience. "If you keep my commandments, you shall abide in My love (John 15:10)."

And He is worthy of this, and everything else we could ever give to Him, for He is the King of kings. Why would we not want to give our all to the King who gave His all for us?

There's one final insight we learn about King Jesus in verse 12, which says, "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." Notice the phrase, "to their country." What country? Matthew doesn't tell us, but he wants us to know that some of the first people to worship Jesus weren't even Jewish. They were Gentiles from another country.

What's that tell us about Jesus? Something wonderful for those of us who live outside of Israel, namely...

E. He is to be made known to the nations (12). In fact, Matthew finishes his story of Jesus on the same note, with Jesus speaking in the final chapter of the book, "Go and make disciples of *all nations* (Matt 28:19)."

So if we know King Jesus, it's our responsibility to spread His fame to those who do not know Him. Because He's not a regional king. He is *the King over all kings*.

They need to know that in North Korea. And quite frankly, we need to know that in the United States of America, too. There was a child born who is sovereign over the stars, who brings joy, deserves worship, and is worthy of all we can give. He is the King, the rival of kings, and the One who deserves to be treated like the King of all kings. He so loved the world that He gave His life as a ransom payment for sinners, to grant eternal life to people from every nation, language, and tribe.

"I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10-11)."

Now let's make it personal. If He is the King of all kings, then there's a question we must answer...

Make It Personal: Who is your king?

We all enter the world, in essence, like King Herod. I am my own king, and I don't want anybody else trying to control my life. But today we've been reminded that there is a King, a good King, a King who loves me and deserves my love and allegiance. So I ask you...

1. Do you know King Jesus? Do you know Him personally, as your King, your Lord, your Savior? Jesus said that eternal life is *knowing Him* (John 17:3). Do you? Perhaps

you entered this room knowing *about* Him, but today the Spirit of God has convinced you of your need to truly *know Him*. Then call out to Him. Tell Him about your need and your desire. “O Jesus! I need You. I need You to save me from my sins. I believe You died on the cross in my place, and I believe You conquered death to prove that You are the King. And I want you to be my King, and I submit my life to You.”

The Bible says in Romans 10:9, “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

So here’s the first and most fundamental of all questions. Do you know King Jesus? For those who do, we need to answer another question.

2. *Are you treating Him like He is King Jesus?* I find it intriguing to think about how the people in this story responded to Jesus. We’ve talked about Herod, who gave lip-service to the King, then tried to eliminate Him. The scribes and priests played intellectual games with the King, they even knew where He was, just five miles away, yet they didn’t go to see Him. Just think, they pointed others to Jesus, but would not worship Him themselves.¹²

Yet the magi did. These men who shouldn’t even be at the party are there, by the grace of God, giving honor to the King.

The commentator Frederick Bruner had this to say, “If Jesus is Lord then we are not. If Jesus *is* king then what we thought was our sovereignty is over.”¹³ He’s right. If we’ve come to know King Jesus, and if we say He is our King, then the days of our sovereignty, of our independence, of our calling our own shots, of living as if we were king, *are over*.

So we need to ask ourselves, have I been treating King Jesus like He is my King? Have I been honoring Him on the job, in my family, in the way I’ve been using my time and money? We all fall short, don’t we? Here’s the good news about this King. He says, “Just confess your rebellion. I won’t destroy you. I’ll restore you. And I’ll help you to start living for My kingdom rather than your own.”

One last question...

3. *Are you ready to see Him when He returns?* The last thing He said before He left the earth was that He’s coming again. Yes, The King is coming. That’s the hope of this sin-cursed world. Are you ready to see Him?

¹² Wiersbe, pp. 14-15.

¹³ Bruner, p. 51.