

*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.”³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ 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.⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:
⁶“ ‘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.’”⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ 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.”⁹ 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.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ 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.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12)*

What Can We Learn from the Wise Men?

When I read the words of our text this morning, did you groan to yourself? Christmas was two weeks ago, but we’re hearing another Christmas story – the visit of the Wise Men. Are you ready for Christmas to be over? Are you ready to move on? Believe it or not, the story of the Wise Men does move on from Christmas. Now, I know that this story is most familiar to us from Christmas art. The manger scenes in our homes invariably come with three wise men and so we associate them with the Christ child in the manger. But the truth is, the Wise Men did not come to the stable. The child was already born when they arrived in Jerusalem. When King Herod killed all the children in Bethlehem, he thought the child might be as much as two years old. Joseph and Mary did not stay in the stable all that time. I’m sure they found better lodging just as soon as they could. The visit of the Wise Men is the first major event to happen to Jesus after the events of Christmas. In fact, this account is one of only a handful of incidents from the childhood of Jesus that God bothered to tell us about. Why did he include this when he left so much out? Clearly, there is a lesson for us in this account.

What can we learn from the wise men?

I.

God uses the wise men to remind us of a truth which is at the heart of the new season of the church year which we begin today. Today we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. Today, God shows us who Jesus really is. **What can we learn from the wise men? How God reveals our Savior.**

When the Wise Men came from the East, they came to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, because that’s where they expected to find the newborn king. That’s where King Herod lived. This was Herod the Great. Herod was not a Jew. Several of his wives were, but he was not. He was not the rightful king. The Romans had made him king and it took a three year war to put in him on the throne. Herod was nearing the end of his life. He had had ten wives and multiple sons, several of whom wanted his kingdom. To this man, the Wise Men said, **“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.”** This question worried Herod. Anyone with a better claim to the throne was a threat.

Matthew tells us, **“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.”** When Herod was upset, people died. He had a long history of killing off his enemies – even some his own sons. During his final illness, he arrested a large number of prominent citizens and ordered his soldiers to kill them as soon as he had died. Do you know why? Because he wanted someone to mourn his passing.

Herod is a wonderful example of how wrong people can be. Jesus did not come to take away his precious throne. Herod had spent his whole life trying to build a dynasty, trying to make a mark on history by rebuilding the temple as a monument to himself and by playing strong arm politics. But today, who is better remembered, Herod or Jesus? Unless you’re a history major, chances are the only thing you know about Herod is that he killed the babies of Bethlehem in an attempt to kill the Christ child.

Herod didn't understand what was happening when the Wise Men showed up asking for the king of the Jews. Now, he did understand that they were asking about the promised Messiah. He called in the religious leaders and asked where the Christ was to be born. They quoted from the prophet Micah and told him that Bethlehem was the place God had designated. But Herod couldn't get past his own idea of what a king would be. He knew they were looking for the promised Savior and still, all he could think of was a potential threat to his power. So he responded to the news that the Savior had been born with abject fear and murder.

That's terribly sad because God was sending him a message. God was sending a message to everyone living in Jerusalem at that time. He was telling them that the world had changed. Oh, it looked the same. The Romans were still in charge. Herod was still raging. People still got up in the morning and went to work and came home at night. But when that baby was born in Bethlehem, a new era began. The Savior was here. And he was going to die and rise to save all people – not just Jews. No longer would God confine the gospel to one people. From this time on, the whole world would hear about Jesus. God used strangers from a foreign country to announce the changes he was making.

Herod completely missed the point but you and I can see it. The Wise Men show us how God reveals our Savior. When we least expect it, God sends someone to speak about Jesus. God doesn't wait for unbelievers to stumble into his house and hear the message and be struck by lightning, he sends us out into the world with the good news that the King has come to bring us peace and forgiveness. How do we respond to that good news? Are we like Herod? Are we afraid of the gospel?

That might seem like a silly question, but it isn't. The gospel is the most radical, the most other worldly message ever preached. The gospel says that God has a solution for a problem that most Americans don't even want to admit they have: sin and guilt. So for the gospel to be meaningful, we have to understand just how far from God we've fallen. We have to understand what it means to live in this sinful world and crawl around down here thinking that we have everything, when in reality we live in a garbage dump of sin and corruption. We have to understand that God hears every thought we think. He knows when we don't want to listen to him. He knows when we dismiss his messengers. He knows that even at our best, we don't measure up to what he wants us to be. No human being wants to hear that. We're afraid of the gospel because we're afraid of the law. We just don't want to see ourselves as God sees us.

But without that knowledge, the gospel cannot help us. People who don't understand their guilt, don't understand the love of Christ. So they can't understand the radical commitment that God calls Christians to make. God does call for a radical commitment. He doesn't just want his fair share of our lives and our love. He wants all of it. He doesn't just want his hour on Sunday. He wants every day of our lives to belong to him. He wants to tell us how to treat our wives or husbands. He wants to tell us how to raise our children. He insists that we love him more than our jobs, more than our greatest ambitions, more even than our own parents or children. He demands first place in everything. That's terrifying to us because we can't give it. If we don't understand his love in the gospel, all we hear is, "Live like that or else!" All we feel is guilt and shame.

Now the gospel changes us. It makes living for God something we want to do. But until we understand the gospel, we can only be afraid of it. Until we understand the endless love that God showed for us we can only resent the place God demands in our lives. Until we accept that we're born sinners, and every day of our lives we earn God's anger because we fail to listen to our pastors, we refuse to let God tell us how to be spouses or parents or children, we refuse to make God the first person in our lives – until we accept that every time that's true for us we are worshipping an idol and so we deserve hell – we cannot understand or accept the gospel. We cannot help but be just like Herod.

Yet, my friends, there is hope for us because God never gives up on us. Before the Wise Men came, God sent angels to tell shepherds that the baby lying in the manger was Christ the Lord. And those shepherds went to Bethlehem and then they told everyone what they had seen and heard. Now most people didn't listen, so God sent the Wise Men. God sent foreigners to tell them what was happening in their own country. Most people didn't listen. So God sent John the Baptist to preach and teach and baptize and prepare the way for the Lord. Most people didn't listen. So God sent Christ himself to spend three years proclaiming as no one ever had before or since. When they killed him, he rose and he gave his Holy Spirit to his disciples and he sent them back to proclaim forgiveness and life starting in Jerusalem.

God keeps bringing the gospel to us. Most of us have been hearing this message all our lives. Still God comes to us today in his Word. Still God sends pastors and teachers to announce to you that your Savior has

come. Every one of us has failed to receive him as we should. Every one of us has worshipped family or money or work and put them ahead of God. But Jesus came and he died for all that sin. He died because we are natural born idol worshippers. He died and paid for us. Then he rose and announced that our sin is gone forever. We are free and forgiven. The Wise Men teach us how hard God works to drive that message through our thick skulls.

II.

God's greatest work for you is Jesus. It's so sad that Herod didn't understand that because he certainly needed to know his Savior. Because he didn't understand, he tried to manipulate the Wise Men. He 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.”** He didn't want to worship him; he wanted to kill him. When manipulation and subtlety didn't work, he resorted to brutality. He killed every child in Bethlehem under two years old. That shows how dangerous Herod was. But it also shows how hard the devil was working to stop God's plan and destroy the Christ child. But you can't beat God. **What can we learn from the Wise Men? How God protected Jesus' mission.**

God warned the Wise Men not to go back to Herod. They went home by another route. Before they left, they gave Jesus precious, kingly gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh. Frankincense and myrrh were expensive, luxury items. They were not fit for a carpenter's son. They were the kind of things that nobles and kings bought for their children. God provided these things to care for Jesus. God provided the wealth necessary for Joseph to take his young family to Egypt and to stay there until Herod died.

Yet, God did not do the same for the other families in Bethlehem whose children were in just as much danger. Those children died. How many died, we don't know. Bethlehem was a village, and so maybe it was less than ten or twenty children. But they died. And it seems terribly unfair. In this sinful world, God allows tragedy to strike. The truth is, Jesus had a full share in all of it. God protected Jesus from Herod because Jesus was the Savior. He was God and man and he came to take away all our sin and to put an end to death and suffering. The only way for him to do that was by sharing all our suffering on the cross. God did not protect Jesus in place of those babies who died, but because of them. God protected Jesus because every one of us humans has to die.

Jesus came to change that. To set us free from death, he had to die himself. But not yet. First, he had to reveal himself as the Savior. He had three years of preaching and teaching to do. He had to die, not when his enemies forced him to, but when he chose to. That's the real difference between what Herod did and what Pontius Pilate did. God would not allow Herod to take Jesus' life. But Jesus forced Pilate to take his life because that was when the time was right.

God made sure that nothing could stop our Savior from winning eternal life for us. God's love continues to spread that message across the globe. We know it today because the same love of God is still at work. Behind every disaster, God is working for the spread of the gospel. Even when we Christians suffer – when persecution devastates the visible church, when finances cripple our work, when division and hard feelings and false teaching slow us down, God is always working. The gospel will continue to be proclaimed until the King comes back. The Wise Men teach us that.

The Wise Men following the star to Bethlehem is one of our most beloved Christmas images. But today, we begin a new season of the Church year. Not Christmas, but Epiphany. Epiphany means “revelation” or “showing.” God makes clear who Jesus was and what he did. For the next four weeks, we will see Jesus, as God and man. We will see Jesus as the Savior of the world. We will hear how God reveals his Son and we will see how he advances his Son's mission. In that hearing, we will grow in our faith. Amen.