

*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. (Matthew 2:1-12)*

### **What Happens When God Reveals his Son?**

My son works at a movie theater. During the week before Christmas, we didn’t have the chance to go see the new *Star Wars* movie, but he was working there. Of course, the ushers don’t stand around watching the movies, but they do see parts of them while they work. So I asked him how much of the movie he had seen. He told me, “Enough to know what all the big plot twists and revelations are.” So when we finally did go see the movie, he had already pretty much figured the whole thing out. Now, *Star Wars* is just a movie. I don’t think his life is going to be permanently scarred by having some of the details revealed before he got to see it. But some revelations do change your life. Discovering that people you trusted have lied to you can cause you to rethink your entire life. Some revelations pull you up short – many Americans remember where they were when they first heard that President Kennedy had been shot. Some information is just so important or so surprising that it has an impact. Today we’re celebrating the Festival of Epiphany. This festival is all about God revealing information that is so important that it can never leave a person the same. My friends, **what happens when God reveals his Son?**

#### **I.**

God does have to reveal him. You’ve all heard me say many times that there was no halo in the manger. That baby who lay there on the first Christmas night looked like any other newborn baby boy. If the angels hadn’t told the shepherds what had really happened, they easily could’ve stopped by the stable and seen the baby and walked away thinking of nothing more than how nice it is that mother and child were both doing well. God had to tell them who that child was and what his arrival meant. That would be true for as long as Jesus walked this earth. Even when he did miracles, if you didn’t want to see him for who he was, you could make up some excuse, as Jesus’ enemies did. When he walked and talked, when he preached, even when he died, he looked like any other man, because he was a real human being. So when God showed that there was more to him than just a man, it invariably shook things up. **What happens when God reveals his Son? Mysteries are revealed.**

A mystery in this text is the Magi themselves. God just doesn’t tell us who they were or how they knew the things they knew. But they came following a star that God sent to reveal to them a far greater mystery: it told them that the promised King of the Jews had been born. How did that work? It’s just not possible to say, any more than it’s possible to say what that star really was. I mean, if you consider the description, it appeared

to them “in the east” – wherever that was – and they followed it. It moved. Then it disappeared, so they went to Jerusalem, the capital to look for the king. Then when they headed to Bethlehem – which is south of Jerusalem – it reappeared and led them to the exact house where the family was staying. Clearly, this wasn’t a normal star. And how they knew that it meant that the king had been born is a real mystery. But God somehow revealed that good news to them.

They revealed that good news to Jerusalem even before they saw the child. They showed up at the court of Herod the Great 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.**” Their question fell like a thunderclap on Jerusalem. Matthew tells us that Herod was disturbed by it and all Jerusalem with him. Part of that, no doubt, is just how dangerous Herod was. He had a lot of blood on his hands and when the king was disturbed people died. But I don’t think that’s all there was to it. This question lay at the very heart of God’s promises to his people. One day, everyone was going about their business and the next, these Magi showed up asking about the king. It stirred up a complex set of emotions that would be stirred again and again over the next thirty plus years.

Why? Because they weren’t just asking about the heir to the throne. As Herod himself recognized, they were asking about the true King of Israel, the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the one that the Jewish people had been waiting for since Old Testament times. And God revealed a mystery that they never would have known otherwise: he had now come.

What happened next is fascinating. Herod went to the religious leaders of the day and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. Herod clearly wasn’t up on all the ins and outs of Old Testament prophecy. But the religious leaders answered correctly by quoting the prophet Micah and pointing to Bethlehem, the town that King David was born in. Their answer shows us something important about God’s mysteries: if we want to find the answers, we need to go to his word. However God revealed to the Magi what the star meant, his normal way of communicating with us is in his word. Now, he does not tell us everything that we might like to know there. But what we can know, we will find there. For us today, that is the only way to get to the answers we need.

The amazing thing about that word is that it is more than just information. It is information written and collected by the power of the Holy Spirit. So it is the perfect record of the mysteries God wants revealed. St. Paul calls the gospel a mystery hidden in former generations but now revealed. That mystery is what the Scriptures were written to show us. God planned and prepared and preserved those writings so that today, they are spread throughout the world and available in almost every language known to man. So right now, all over this planet, the mystery of Christ is being revealed every day to more people. The Magi were some of the first people to know this mystery: the Christ, the true King of Israel, had been born.

## II.

How did that revelation affect those men? How did it affect Jerusalem? **What happens when God reveals his Son? Sinners see their Savior.** The Magi were sinners who saw their Savior and through them, countless Christians have seen the Son of God in the baby they came to worship. But that isn’t the only response we see. In Herod, we see the response of unbelief. In his case, the response takes a particularly ugly cast. First of all, we see Herod scheming and lying. He pretends that he believes in the Savior and he shares the information about Bethlehem with the Magi and then he sends them on to look for the child. He asks them to let him know when they find him so that he, too, could worship his Savior. But, of course, that’s the last thing on his mind. Herod plans to kill the child and eliminate someone with a better claim to the throne than he had. When the Magi didn’t return, you all know what happened. He slaughtered every baby in Bethlehem from two years old on down.

All those things are the natural fruit of unbelief. Now, it takes different forms today, but how often don’t we see unbelievers lashing out at believers? How often don’t we see the media mocking Christians and portraying anyone who would stand on what God’s word says as some kind of fanatic? In universities all over the country, Christianity is regularly held up to scorn and ridicule. In the Middle East, Christian communities that have existed almost since the time of Christ have been all but wiped out in our lifetimes. But if you say anything critical about Islam, you’re the bigot. Not all people who are opposed to Christianity slaughter babies. But again and again, they attack us, they distort our message, they lash out at us and are enraged if we dare to point out how unfair their attacks are.

You know what? That will be true until the Lord comes back. Jesus never promised us that the world would welcome our message or respect our human rights. He promised us persecution and the need to sacrifice until he comes back. Herod shows us one way that happens. But he also shows us something deeper: the power of the gospel. What do I mean? The gospel never leaves anyone unchanged. Whenever a person hears the gospel, one of three things happens: a believer is strengthened in his or her faith, an unbeliever is brought to faith, or an unbeliever is hardened in his or her unbelief. That's what happened to Herod. The Magi told him the promised Savior had finally come, and all he could do was try to kill him. In our society, many people who hear the gospel reject it and are hardened in their unbelief, even while they deny that they hate our faith.

But not everyone who hears the gospel rejects it. Many people hear and believe. Somehow, the Magi heard and believed. They have the distinction of being the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. Did they understand all the ins and outs of how he was going to save them? Probably not. Did they know that they were looking at the Son of God when they looked at this child? It's hard to say, although it is taught in the Old Testament. But they came from a distant country. They clearly were not Jews, and they brought offerings – rich gifts – to show their faith and their love and they worshipped their Lord and Savior.

Somewhere in our lives, that happened to us, too. At some point in our personal histories, God brought the gospel to us unbelievers and he made us believers. He entered our hearts and changed us, so that now when we hear the good news, the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith and our commitment to our Lord. When did that happen for you? For me and all my family, it happened when we were baptized as babies. We don't remember a time when we didn't believe. But that time did exist. And God claimed us in spite of our unbelief and rejection. For many of you, it's the same, although some of you did come to faith later in life. But somehow, at some moment in your life, God moved you from being an unbeliever who didn't want to know any more than Herod wanted to know, to being a child of God who comes and worships his Savior.

And he did that without any help from you. We didn't cooperate, or choose to believe or just resist less than other people do. We were born sinners. We were born no better than Herod and left to ourselves, we would be just as evil, even if we never slaughtered babies. We would be just as guilty of sin, even if we never had innocent blood on our hands. We would hate God and deserve his punishment in hell. But all the while, we would believe that we were good people and that, of course, we deserved to go to heaven. You might even catch yourself believing things like that now. That shows just how powerful the sinful nature inside us is. It can only lead us to hell.

But Jesus came. He was born with a perfect heart. He had faith in God already when he was conceived. He was perfect in all he did and said, in all he thought and felt. And God gave that perfection to you and me. Then Jesus died and he paid for Herod and his slaughter of the innocents, he paid for all the unbelief of all the enemies of the cross in our day and in every age, and he paid for you and me. Our sin is gone. It is forgiven. Jesus rose to tell us that and to promise us eternal life with him. That is the mystery that God revealed somehow to the Magi. It's the mystery that Jesus came to proclaim in his own ministry. It's the mystery that was hidden in the past while the whole world waited for Jesus to come, but now it is revealed in his word, a word that God is sending to the ends of the earth even while we hear it here today.

Whenever that mystery is revealed, the Holy Spirit reaches into the heart of the person who's listening and he acts. That mystery can never leave a person unchanged. Why do some believe and others don't? I can't answer that question for you. All I can do is break it into two parts. Why do some believe? Because the Holy Spirit overwhelms all our resistance and all our unbelief and he gives us the gift of faith. Why do some reject? Because their hearts are hardened and they refuse to believe. That isn't a completely satisfying answer, but it is what God tells us. What it means is that you believe today because God loves you. You believe today because the mystery was revealed to you. You believe today because you know that you are a sinner and you know that baby in the manger was God's chosen instrument to set you free. You believe today. That's what happened when the mystery was revealed to you. And your life will never be the same. Amen.