



Sermon Preparatory Notes

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The story of the magi foreshadows later developments in Matthew's narrative. Even in infancy, Jesus inspires both worship and hostility, responses that are repeated throughout the story.

Worship - The magi represent the first of many characters to worship Jesus in Matthew (2:11; compare 8:2; 9:18; 14:33; 15:25; 20:20; 28:9, 17), a point that may be obscured in English Bibles that choose a soft translation for *proskyne* \acute{o} . In this Gospel, the latter word refers to a type of devotion shown only to God (Matt 4:11). Thus, the attribution of worship to Jesus here and elsewhere in Matthew has Christological significance, marking Jesus as the one in whom God is present (1:23).

Hostility - The story also foreshadows the opposition that will be shown to Jesus by the powerful people of his day. In this story, the religious leaders of Israel do the bidding of a political ruler who wishes to destroy Jesus. Later the situation will be ironically reversed: the political ruler (Pilate) will do the bidding of religious leaders who have decided Jesus must die (27:1-2, 11-26).

A literary masterpiece, this brief episode in Matthew's story has captured the imagination of Christians for centuries and inspired the formation of numerous legends. The magi came to be identified as kings, probably due to an association of this passage with Isaiah 60:3, part of our First Lesson for today. They came to be called "wise men," an identification so pervasive that it is even used in English translations of the Bible (including NRSV). In the Middle Ages, the Western Church decided there were three magi (the Eastern church has twelve) and assigned them names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

Such legends are not insignificant for Christian piety, but they may distract us from the story Matthew tells. Matthew's story is indeed about kings and wise men, but these figures are people other than the magi. The *kings* in Matthew 2 are Herod and Jesus. Herod exemplifies the sort of king whom Jesus later denounces in Matthew 20:25. He is a tyrant

who lords over those he rules rather than serving them. He is not a ruler who "shepherds" God's people (v. 6). By contrast, the infant king Jesus is helpless and vulnerable, a ruler whose power is hidden in humility (compare 21:5). The *wise men* in Matthew 2 are the chief priests and the scribes who function as Herod's key advisors. Learned in the scriptures, they possess academic knowledge that both Herod and the magi lack. But what good does it do them? It does not lead them to their Messiah but causes them to become involved in a plot to kill him.

Responsible exegesis has always resisted the identification of the magi as kings, but it is the identification of the magi as "wise men" that may ultimately be more problematic: a major theme in Matthew is that God does *not* reveal things to "the wise and intelligent" (11:25). Such withholding of revelation, furthermore, is actually evident in this text, but only with regard to the chief priests and scribes, the true "wise men" in the story.

If the magi are not kings or wise men, what are they? In Matthew's narrative, kings are contrasted with *servants* (20:25-28) and wise men are contrasted with *infants* (11:25). The magi in Matthew 2 are depicted as persons who do as they are instructed, who seek no honor for themselves, and who gladly humble themselves, kneeling even before a woman and a child. Clearly, they fit the image of servants better than that of kings. Surprisingly, they also embody perfectly the two traits that are ascribed to infants in Matthew's story. They are persons to whom God reveals what is hidden (11:25) and from whom God derives worship or praise (21:16). If Jesus as a literal infant is contrasted here with Herod, the magi as metaphorical infants may be contrasted with Herod's advisors, the wise men of Israel.

In short, the central message of this text may be framed as an answer to the question, whom does God favor? *Not* kings or wise men, but the magi who embody qualities that this Gospel will declare antithetical to the traits of the royal and the wise. Ironically, in recasting the story so that the magi actually become kings or wise men, readers subvert the message until the text actually supports notions it was intended to suppress. But we must not be arrogant in judging such tendencies too harshly. They tell us that the message of this text has been a hard one to hear. It still is.

A common theme in the three lessons appointed for this day is the manifestation of God to people outside the religious community. Isaiah reminds the community of its call to be a light to the nations and destroys the false dichotomy between internal and external ministry by suggesting that expansion and restoration are integrally connected. The author of Ephesians suggests that the ultimate purpose of God is the unification of humanity in a truly multicultural community where all distinctions between "insiders" and "outsiders" have vanished. The Gospel of Matthew reminds us that such distinctions began to erode with the coming of Christ, who was revealed to some who were thought to be on the outside and paradoxically rejected by many who were thought to be on the inside. The church's observance of epiphany ought not be a triumphal occasion for those who have seen the light to celebrate their privileged status. The lessons appointed for this day encourage humble admission that God's glory may be manifested where we least expect it. Sometimes God's people become light for others (Isa. 60:3; Eph. 3:10); sometimes they appear blind to the light others can see (Matt. 2:1-6). But always, the light is there, as God graciously, mysteriously, and defiantly breaks into human lives.

Commentary 2

God is so determined to proclaim the “good news of great joy for *all* the people” (Luke 2:10) that God reaches beyond fields in the region around Bethlehem to “the East” (some scholars say Persia).

God reaches beyond shepherds at the bottom of the barrel to Wise Ones at the top. God reaches beyond people scared witless by God’s glory to those who observe the glorious star at its rising, and methodically, persistently, and sincerely follow it to a king. All along the way, God directs them, first by a star, then via a verse from Micah, and finally in their dreams.

Yes, I am aware that I am conflating Matthew and Luke; this is precisely what the liturgical year does as well. Preachers overly concerned about biblical literacy might use this occasion to untangle the Christmas story in order to teach that the Magi never made it to the manger. But then the preacher needs to explain that Matthew makes no mention of a manger. Better to save this for Sunday School and preach the Epiphany gospel in its liturgical and calendar context.

That said, at our house and in the congregations where I’ve served as pastor, we move our Magi from windowsill to windowsill during the days of Christmas, rather than placing them in the crèche on Christmas Eve, and only bring them to “the house [where] they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage” (Matthew 2:11) on Epiphany. Placing the Magi in the manger on Christmas Eve misses how far God reaches to ensure that all people -- emphasize *all* -- receive the good news of Christ’s birth.

While Christian tradition holds that the Magi were kings (an interesting contrast between these kings’ response to Jesus’ birth and the way Herod, king of God’s people, responded), a more precise description might be that the Magi belonged to the priestly caste of Zoroastrianism, which paid particular attention to the stars. This priestly caste gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science.

So these Wise Ones from the East were scientists and practiced other religions, and God used their faith and knowledge to bring them to the Christ. More ironic, God used scientists who practiced other religions to let King Herod and the chief priests and scribes of the people in on the news that their Messiah had been born.

God seems to do whatever it takes to reach out to and embrace all people. God announces the birth of the Messiah to shepherds through angels on Christmas, to Magi via a star on Epiphany, and to the political and religious authorities of God’s own people in through visitors from the East. From a manger, where a child lies wrapped in bands of cloth, God’s reach, God’s embrace in Christ Jesus, gets bigger and bigger and bigger. Jesus eats with outcasts and sinners. Jesus touches people who are sick and people who live with disabilities. Jesus even calls the dead back to life. Ultimately, Jesus draws all people to himself as he is lifted up on the cross. In Christ Jesus, no one is beyond God’s embrace.

God’s radical grace is wondrously frightening. I experience a bit of a shudder as I think of the implications of portraying the Magi as scientists who practiced another religion, because to do so pushes me to expand my understanding of both the ways God reaches out to

people to announce good news in and through Christ and what it means for individuals to have faith and for gatherings of the faithful to be church.

The Magi did not come looking for the Christ through preaching, liturgy, sacrament, a welcoming congregation, or a vital social ministry -- things I hold dear. They came seeking the Christ after studying the night skies. As someone who holds on to favorite, cherished ways that God works to proclaim the gospel and bring people to faith, it's always wondrously frightening to realize anew that God's own work of embracing all people is more "mystery" than "formula," because God's ways are always bigger than my understanding. It's much safer to spend the sermon piously and sentimentally embellishing the Magi and reading meaning into the number and kind of gifts they bring.

Yet, if I am honest with myself, these days I sense God reaching out to embrace me in new ways. God is using late Saturday nights spent metaphorically studying the stars to lead me to Christ, more than early Sunday mornings spent sitting in church. Even as I write these words, I worry about a phone call from my bishop warning me that I am in trouble for saying this out loud. A sermon that leaves me basking in the light of Christ's star, rather than worrying about the implications of the Magi coming to faith apart from the church or outside our formulaic approaches of how faith happens, would be really good news.

The alternative, of course, is to join Herod in not seeing God's ever-expanding embrace, or feeling threatened by it, and instead giving way to just plain fear: "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him" (Matthew 2:3). Herod jealously reached out himself, just far enough to violently protect his place and preserve his power.

We too can feel jealous when visitors show up seeking Christ due to experiences outside of our purview and control. We have our own ways of reaching out, just far enough to slaughter someone's experiences of God's grace for the sake of our patterns, practices, and perspectives. And so the stage is set for another liturgical year of proclaiming Christ overcoming the conflict between God's ever expanding embrace and our need to protect and preserve, a drama resolved on the cross and continuing in our day.

Commentary 3

The story of the visit of the Magi has the ring of a folk tale, as is obvious by how the narrative threads begin to unravel when subject to the questions one might ask about a "real life" situation.

There is the matter of the encounter between the Magi and Herod, and the larger questions this encounter provokes concerning human agency and knowing, the brutality of political tyrants, and the workings of divine providence. How could the magi be so naïve as to press the king of a country for details about a future king of a different lineage coming to power, without any thought to the jealousy and violence such an inquiry might unleash? Remember that the inquiry of the magi is the prompt that eventually results in Herod's decree to slaughter the innocent children of Bethlehem. After the magi visit the Holy Family, they are warned "in a dream" not to return to Herod. But why couldn't they have received information about how to find the child through such a dream in the first place, which would have enabled them to avoid Herod altogether, thus giving him no cause to issue his murderous decree?

There is the matter of how the story lumps “all Jerusalem” with King Herod (Matthew 2:3), as if all citizens of this city were Herod’s allies, fully in support of his tyrannical reign. We know from historical sources that many Jews resented and resisted Herod’s alliance with the Roman Caesar, including many Jerusalemites. Surely some of the people of Jerusalem would have been hopeful, rather than frightened, by the appearance of the magi, longing as they were for a different political configuration in the holy city. Always be cautious when you are told that an entire people is of one mind -- for in such instances you are most often in the realm of a simplifying stereotype.

There is the matter of the star -- “his star.” How can the star arise in apparently so vague a way that at first the magi need to ask directions on how to find the child to whom the star belongs, but whose guidance eventually becomes so specifically focused that it is said to rest over only one house, the house in which the child lies. It is as if the star becomes in the end a laser beam. And this is to say nothing about why Matthew, a good Jewish author, steeped in Jewish piety and scriptures, turns astrologers into heroes. The magi are practitioners of what might be regarded as “pagan religion.” Their beliefs would have been dismissed as superstitious, if not evil, by most Jews of the day, in the way that such beliefs concerning the role of stars in human fate eventually come to be dismissed by orthodox Christians.

And yet, even if the story does not ring “true” by a certain set of historical criteria, it does lead us into reflection on very profound truths concerning our own experiences of the working of the world and of God in the world. Anyone who follows world events is no stranger to the phenomenon of political tyrants, who live in perpetual fear of losing power, and who think nothing of subjecting their own people to the cruelest exercise of that power. If we are honest with ourselves, we may recognize that we, like the magi, may engage in actions that ultimately work in the service of tyrannical power, even if we are sometimes too naïve to recognize how our behaviors and decisions fuel that power. We may remember times in our own lives that we were keenly aware of the workings of divine providence -- we might have experienced our own version of the dream of the magi -- the word from God that kept us or our loved ones out of harm’s way. But we also know that harm is not always providentially avoided. Our Christian faith is deeply rooted in our scriptures, our doctrine and our traditions, but sometimes we are also guided by something more -- something else -- the light of a star that comes not from our familiar religious practice, but a light that still leads us onward.

Perhaps then our journeys are not so different from those of the magi, with their turns sometimes into safety, sometimes into precarious territory. Sometimes we may be needing to ask for directions, sometimes divine guidance may be so obvious that we could not miss our destination. If ever in our lives our long journeys do lead us precisely to the place we have been seeking -- to the place where we see the Christ, may we like them also rejoice, becoming overwhelmed with our joy.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

Extravagant God, you sent magi with generous gifts to visit the baby Jesus and proclaim his reign to all the world. Make our voices heard when we proclaim God’s love to all. We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

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ESV Commentary

Matt. 2:1 Jesus' birth in **Bethlehem of Judea**, about 6 miles (9.7 km) south of Jerusalem, marks him as being from the tribe of Judah and from the city that produced the Davidic kings ([Ruth 1:1, 19](#); [2:4](#); [1 Sam. 17:12, 15](#); see note on Luke 2:4). **Herod the king** (also commonly Herod I or Herod the Great) ruled Israel and Judah 37–4 BC. He was an Idumean, appointed king of the Jews under the authority of Rome. He ruled firmly and at times ruthlessly, murdering his own wife, several sons, and other relatives. He was a master builder who restored the temple in **Jerusalem** and built many theaters, cities, palaces, and fortresses. Herod's building programs included his palace at Jericho, the fortresses of Herodium, Machaerus, Sebaste, and Masada, the harbor and city of Caesarea Maritima (see note on Acts 8:40), and especially the Jerusalem temple (cf. [John 2:14](#)). He also financed structures (including pagan temples) throughout the Roman Empire—e.g., at Antioch (cf. [Acts 11:19](#)), Nicopolis (cf. [Titus 3:12](#)), and Athens (cf. [Acts 17:16](#)). Herod, ravaged by disease, died in his palace at Jericho (see note on Luke 19:1) and was buried at Herodium (Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 6.168–181). Excavations at Herodium since the 1960s have revealed the circular palace-fortress built atop its mountain, as well as the monumental buildings and huge pool below; in 2007 the excavator announced the discovery of Herod's mausoleum and sarcophagus. In earlier times, **wise men** (Gk. *magoi*, plural of *magos*) referred to priests and experts in mysteries in Persia and Babylon (cf. Septuagint of [Dan. 1:20](#); [2:2](#), [10](#), [27](#); etc.), but by this time it applied to a wide range of people whose practices included astrology, dream interpretation, study of sacred writings, the pursuit of wisdom, and magic.

Matt. 2:1–12 Magi Report the Star-sign of the Birth of “the King of the Jews.” As much as two years have passed since the events of [ch. 1](#).

Matthew highlights God's sovereign care in this infancy account of Jesus the King.

Matt. 2:2 we saw his star when it rose. The wise men would likely have been familiar with OT prophecy through interaction with Jews in Babylon, and they may have remembered Balaam's prophecy that "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel" ([Num. 24:17](#)). This was understood by Jews to point to a messianic deliverer (e.g., Dead Sea Scrolls, Damascus Document 7.18–21; Testimonia 9–13). The movement of the star ([Matt. 2:9](#)) suggests that it is not a natural phenomenon (e.g., a comet, supernova, or conjunction of planets) but was supernatural, perhaps a guiding angel that appeared as a star, or perhaps some specially created heavenly phenomenon that had the brightness of a star. **have come to worship him.** The wise men likely traveled with a large number of attendants and guards for the long journey, which would have taken several weeks. For example, if they had come from Babylon by the main trade route of about 800 miles (1,288 km), averaging 20 miles (32 km) per day, the trip would have taken about 40 days.

Matt. 2:3 he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. The arrival of this true King of the Jews presents a threat to Herod the Great's throne and to Israel's corrupt religious and political leadership in Jerusalem (cf. note on 21:10).

Matt. 2:4 The **chief priests** gave oversight to temple activities; **scribes** were the official interpreters of the OT (see note on 8:19). The concept of "King of the Jews" had become associated with **the Christ**, the Messiah.

Matt. 2:5–6 Bethlehem was by no means least among the rulers of Judah, because it would be the birthplace of the future ruler, the Messiah ([Mic. 5:2](#)). The quotation also alludes to a shepherding theme cited at David's coronation as king over Israel ([2 Sam. 5:2](#)).

Matt. 2:9 the star ... went before them. Bethlehem was only 6 miles (9.7 km) from Jerusalem, almost directly south, so this implies very specific, localized guidance from the traveling star, which **came to rest** over the young Jesus' specific location.

Matt. 2:11 The wise men did not arrive at the time of Jesus' birth in a manger, but up to two years later, when Jesus was living in a **house** (see note on v. 16). **worshiped him.** It is doubtful that these quasi-pagan religious men understood Jesus' divine nature, but their

actions were unknowingly appropriate and wonderfully foreshadowed the worship of Jesus by all the Gentile nations (cf. [28:19](#); [Rom. 1:5](#); [Phil. 2:9–11](#); [Rev. 7:9–10](#); [21:24](#)). **gold and frankincense and myrrh**. The number of gifts contributed to the tradition that there were three men, but the actual number is unknown. Frankincense is resin used ceremonially for the only incense permitted on the altar ([Ex. 30:9](#), [34–38](#)). Myrrh is sap used in incense and perfume and as a stimulant tonic. The gifts were likely used providentially to support the family in their flight to Egypt ([Matt. 2:13–15](#)).

Matt. 2:13 flee to Egypt. The Egyptian border lay approximately 90 miles (146 km) from Bethlehem (see map). Jesus and his family would be safe from Herod the Great in Egypt, since it was outside his jurisdiction.

Matt. 2:13–23 OT Prophecies Are Fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah. Matthew explains how Jesus' personal history repeats certain aspects of Israel's national history.

Matt. 2:15 fulfill. The prophet Hosea recounted how God had faithfully brought Israel out of Egypt in the exodus ([Hos. 2:15](#)), which Matthew cites in comparing Israel, God's "son," being rescued and delivered, to Jesus, the One who will be revealed as God's true Son.

Matt. 2:16 all the male children in Bethlehem ... two years old or under. The small village may have had 10 to 30 boys of that age. Herod the Great's earlier query to the wise men about the time of the appearing of the star ([v. 7](#)) gave him an estimated time of birth for his potential challenger.

Matt. 2:17–18 Jeremiah used personification to describe the mothers of Israel (**Rachel**) mourning for their **children** who had been removed from the land and carried off into exile, leaving Israel no longer a nation and considered dead ([Jer. 31:15](#)). Like the exile, the attempt on Jesus' life was intended to wipe out the chosen one of God.