

Christmas 2 C/Epiphany Sunday  
Matthew 2:1-12  
January 2, 2022

*“For ALL The People”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup>asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup>and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup>‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”*

*<sup>9</sup>When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup>When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. <sup>11</sup>On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

If you joined us on Christmas Eve, you heard the story of Jesus' birth in a Bethlehem stable and frightened shepherds, visited by a shining company of the heavenly host, making pilgrimage to the stable to bear witness to the special birth. If you joined us last Sunday, you heard of Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus at the Jerusalem Temple. Up to this point, however, noticeably absent from our Christmas celebrations are the Wise Ones, the magi of Matthew's gospel, the three kings of later tradition—Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. It's a good thing you joined us today! After all, what's a Nativity scene without the three kings? And what's a Christmas pageant without the Wise Ones?

Up to this point in our celebration of Christmas, we've heard Luke's perspective on the special birth. Today, though, we listen for Matthew's. Perhaps the most defining feature of Matthew's story is the inclusion of a special star, magi, and the conflict with King Herod. The magi or wise ones described in Matthew's gospel are understood to be astrologers from the East—more likely Zoroastrian priests than kings. More important than who they might have been or even if they actually existed, is what they represent for Matthew. Matthew, like Luke, believed that Jesus' birth was indeed good news of great joy for *all* the people. For these authors, Jesus' birth wasn't good news for Israel alone, but for the world. When was the last time you heard something that was actually good news for *all* the people—for the world?

From the beginning, Matthew sets the stage for this global good news in his genealogy of Jesus. Unlike Luke who only names Mary, Matthew names four additional significant women in his genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. In addition to having certain “marital abnormalities,” as scholars Borg and Crossan describe them, these women were all presumed to be Gentiles, that is, they were not Jewish. In weaving Jesus' family tree, Matthew was already setting the stage for the global significance of Jesus' birth, not just for Israel, but for the world. This is the literary function of the magi as well.

For months, presumably, the magi had been following a star that they say arose at the time of Jesus' birth. Matthew tells us that they made it as far as Jerusalem before they stopped to ask King Herod for directions. Though seemingly cooperative, just beneath the surface King Herod seethed. The Gentile magi had described a newborn child as "king of the Jews." This was a title that belonged to Herod alone. Any child with claims to the throne would be a threat to his power as Herod ruled as the Rome-appointed king of the Jews. These wise ones' intent to pay homage to a child and not to Herod himself was a further assault to his dignity. After consulting with his own council, Herod revealed that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, a tiny village just nine miles away.

Matthew tells us that the magi continued on their journey until the star they had observed at its rising stopped over the place where the child was. For Matthew, the star "does not make a statement about an [actual] astronomical phenomenon, but a statement about Jesus: his birth is the coming of the light that draws wise men of the Gentiles to its radiance."<sup>1</sup> The birth of Jesus, and the star that heralds it, are good news for the world.

Both Matthew and Luke believed that Jesus represented the next step in the fulfillment of God's dream for a transformed earth, not just for a liberated Israel. This was good news of a global significance! When was the last time you heard something that was actually good news for *all* the people—for the world?

The good news of Jesus' birth for the authors of our Christmas stories was not the conversion of the world to a Christianity that didn't yet exist. It was the realization of God's dream for a world of peace through justice, equity and mutuality, right relationship with neighbor and with the earth. This is the very message that Jesus preached and taught, healed to reveal, and died to bear witness to. And "we who have seen the star and heard the angels sing are called to participate in the new birth and new world proclaimed by these stories."<sup>2</sup> Christmas, for these authors, was just the

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<sup>1</sup> Borg and Crossan, *The First Christmas*, New York: HarperOne, 2007. pg. 92.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 242.

starting point because it was not just good news for the magi, or for the shepherds, or for Israel—it is good news of great joy for *all* the people. Christmas is just the starting point for us too. As we begin a new year—a year imbued with hope for better days ahead, a year pregnant with unprecedented medical and economic challenges—I invite you to consider how you participate in the new birth and new world proclaimed by these stories. Will you reach out in care to a lonely neighbor or isolated senior? Will you commit yourself to serving local folks with needs in some new capacity? Will you dedicate an amount or percentage of your resources to an organization committed to expanding justice to all Americans? Will you get involved in local government or volunteer to work with at-risk kids? Will you use your voice to contact state and federal officials about issues that affect all those who call this nation theirs? Ask yourself, “How will I personally participate in the new birth and new world proclaimed by these stories?”

Christmas really is just the starting point. May we participate in bringing good news of great joy to *all* the people of our world. Amen.