



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

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Lord of All Nations
Matthew 2:1-12

It must have boggled Mary and Joseph's mind.

Here they are in Bethlehem. They've settled down there, at least temporarily, because Matthew says they're in a house. And judging by how he describes the circumstances and timeline, Jesus may have been as much as two years old at this point.

But here they are one evening, sitting in the house, minding their own business, when there's a knock on the door. And who was there?

"Magi"—wise men from the east, probably from the land of Persia, which we know today as Iran, or possibly from the land of Babylonia, which we know as Iraq.

Scholars tell us that they were the religious and intellectual "upper crust" of their nation. Like the tribe of the Levites in Israel, they were probably the priestly caste of ancient Persia. They were considered the wise men of the land. They studied the stars—partly astronomy, partly astrology—as well as the natural sciences and medicine of their day.

Unlike the magi or wise men we read of in the book of Daniel, these magi were good men who did what they did not for their own gain, but to care for their people.

And now they had come from their homeland to Jerusalem—at least a thousand miles—for the express purpose of finding a baby.

Not just any baby, mind you. As they studied the stars, they'd seen a new one appear—an obvious sign in the heavens that a new king had been born. We're not sure how they did it, but somehow they determined that this was the star of the one who was to be that mighty king of the Jews that even the Gentiles were expecting to appear.

So they came to pay Him homage.

And here they were, standing at the door, explaining all this to Joseph and Mary.

More than a legend . . .

Now despite the suggestions of skeptics and even some scholars, this beautiful story is far more than a legend.

You see, about this time, not only were the Jews expecting a Messiah, but *the world* was looking for a mighty king to arise. Even the Roman historians Suetonius and Tacitus noted a widespread belief, especially in the East, that a mighty ruler was to arise from Judea.¹

These magi were careful watchers of the heavens, and apparently shared this expectation. Belief in astrology was common in the ancient world, except among the Jews. So for these scholar-priests who studied the heavens, what they saw in the stars *meant* something.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 1 in The Daily Bible Study Series, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 25-27.

Now there's been a lot of speculation by astronomers and theologians about exactly what they saw. There were a series of astronomical events that took place during the range of time when Jesus would have been born—things that would probably have gone unnoticed by most people, but not by those who studied the night sky, and who knew how to interpret and explain the significance of such phenomena.

So when they saw this occurrence in the night sky that they best described as a star, they took it to be the celestial sign that this long-awaited, expected king of the Jews had been born. They were so moved by it all that they felt *compelled* to find this new king and worship him.

Searching for the King . . .

It was only natural, then, that they came to Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish nation. And King Herod soon heard they were there.

When he learned that the magi were asking about “one who has been born king of the Jews” (2:2),² he was very troubled. He was a suspicious and paranoid old man. During his reign, Herod had killed anyone he even suspected as a rival to his power, including his *wife*, his high priestly *brother-in-law*, and three of *his own sons*. It was so bad that there was a saying that went, “It's better to be Herod's sow than his son!”³

That the magi asked for the “*born* king of the Jews,” as the phrase can be translated literally, was even worse for Herod. You see, he was not even a Jew. He was an Idumean. He wasn't *born* the king of the Jews; he was *appointed* by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C., and in the eyes of the Jewish people was certainly *not* their true king.

So no wonder Matthew tells us that all Jerusalem was troubled with him! They knew him well. They knew the extreme measures he could take.

Troubled by it all, and trying to devise a plan to deal with this new threat, Herod called the chief priests and scribes together to find out where this king—the Christ, the Messiah—was to be born. Can you imagine that? He was plotting to destroy the one he *knew* was the Messiah that the Jews, indeed, the world was expecting! The answer the priests and scribes gave him was from Micah 5:2 –

“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.”

(Matthew 2:6)

The Messiah was to be born in the town of Bethlehem.

With this information in hand, Herod summoned the magi secretly and asked them when the star first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem to find the child, and instructed them to report back to him so he could also come and worship Him. When they went back home another way because God warned them in a dream not to return to Herod, he sent soldiers to kill all the baby boys in the area of Bethlehem who are two years old or younger. This order was well in keeping with his character. It was an attempt to eliminate this new king!

Finally the magi came to Bethlehem and found the child. In some way, the star went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. To say that “they were overjoyed,” as the NIV translates it, doesn't do justice to Matthew's description of their joy. Rather, as the RSV, ESV, and NASB all put it, “they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”!

They entered the house and saw Jesus with His mother Mary. They fell on their faces and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures to present to Him very valuable gifts of gold and frankincense (a sweet-smelling gum or resin) and myrrh (a gum used for perfume, spice, medicine, and embalming).

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

³ Quoted by Dr. Malcolm Tolbert, my seminary New Testament professor.

After they worshiped Him, they went home.

Telling about the King . . .

It's amazing, isn't it! These wise men came from afar to find the born king of the Jews. But it wasn't out of curiosity, or even respect to one who would become a head of state. They came *to worship Him!* They were looking to Him as the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams of all the nations for a Redeemer who would arise from the Jews! *The magi's worship of the Christ child showed that He was Lord of all nations!*

Later this week (this Wednesday, January 6, to be exact), Christians throughout the world will celebrate Epiphany. "Epiphany" comes from the Greek word *epiphainein*, which means "to show." It's the celebration of Jesus' being revealed to the Gentiles in the person of the magi. It's the celebration of what this text so beautifully shows us—that *from the beginning God has revealed His Son as the Lord of all nations!*

Do we really believe that? Oh yes, I know we do with our minds.

But do we really believe it in our heart of hearts? Do we believe it to the point that it moves us to share the good news with people *of all nations*, near and far, that Jesus is Lord and that He sets us free from sin? Do we really believe it in a way that makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of people in the world around us?

If we'll hear it, this story of the visit of the magi to the Christ child has a lot to say to us.

First, it tells us that *we have a solemn responsibility to be witnesses of God's grace to the world around us*, to "make disciples of all the nations" right here. The Great Commission Matthew closes his Gospel with is foreshadowed in this story.

We don't have to go far to find people from many different nations in our area. Everywhere we look around us, right here in Sanford and Lee County, especially right here in Jonesboro Heights, we see a rainbow of red, white, black, brown, and yellow! People from all over the world now make their home in Lee County! We *must* share the good news of Jesus with the nations near us day by day, bearing our witness in deed and word "as we go," wherever we find ourselves. But we also need to do it in intentional ways as a congregation by developing and implementing creative strategies to reach out to the community right around us.

Second, it tells us that *we must be witnesses to the nations far from us*. I'm grateful for our church's financial support of missions. But with the needs of the world so great, how can we not do more financially? And as important as our giving is, how can we not pray? And could it be that God wants us to give ourselves and our sons and daughters as laborers for the harvest? Opportunities for volunteer, short-term, and career missions abound. The need is tremendous.

Have you ever seriously considered the possibility that God may be calling *you* into some kind of mission work? Young people, have you stopped to consider whether God might be calling you to missions or to some kind of vocational ministry? Have you ever seriously prayed about it?

Finally, this story tells us that *we have the responsibility and privilege to go beyond the barriers the world establishes to accept and fellowship and commune with one another in Christ, no matter the nationality or race*. I am so grateful for how God has worked in our beloved Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church in this area through the years. I truly believe that anyone from anywhere is welcome to worship God in this place, and that any genuine believer in Christ is welcome to become a part of this congregation. This kind of openness shows what God intends in Christ, that He has created one new humanity in Him with all the barriers and dividing walls broken down!

It's how Matthew begins his Gospel—the genealogy of Jesus that includes women of Gentile descent at key points, then a sign to His own people as He is born of the Virgin Mary, followed by the visit of the Gentile magi who worship Him as the born king of the Jews.

It's how Matthew ends his Gospel—the crucified, risen Messiah Jesus, who has been rejected by His own people and executed by the Romans, says to His worshiping disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. As you go, therefore, make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you all the days, even to the end of the age.⁴

I saw it wonderfully displayed nearly ten years ago at the First Baptist Church of Fairmont, North Carolina, where I was pastor. It was our Christmas party for the folks in our church who were involved in our Hispanic Ministry. Our English-as-a-Second-Language teachers and the other workers, the Hispanic lay minister who led the Bible study and worship time in Spanish after the ESL lessons each week, his family, a few Hispanic students, a local Muslim family of Arab descent, and my family and I were there.

After supper, Edgar (the lay minister) broke out his guitar. We sang *Feliz Navidad*, and a few Christmas carols. Then he sang some Spanish worship songs. He was trying to get some other folks to do something, and finally asked his 9-year-old daughter, Priscilla, to read a little book about Mary and the baby Jesus. She asked if she and her two friends, Amanda and Fayda, also 9, could read it together, taking turns.

There they stood, three little girls—one Hispanic, one Caucasian, one Arab—reading a book about the baby Jesus, whose birth the angels declared to be good news of great joy for *all* people—indeed, for *all nations!*

Will we tell them?

†MEG

⁴ Matthew 28:18b-20, my translation.