

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

“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 shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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, frankincense and myrrh. 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)

Most of us have sung the Christmas carol, “We Three Kings.” It was a song written by John Henry Hopkins, Jr. in 1857 to commemorate the visit of the wise men to the baby Jesus. But what you may not realize is there are several inaccuracies in that song if you compare it with what Matthew says in his Gospel.

First, nowhere are we told they were kings. Maybe it was because they could afford to travel a long distance and bring expensive gifts that someone came up with the idea they were royalty, but Matthew never says that. He calls them “Magi.” They were most likely priests of an ancient religion based on superstition, focused mainly on what we call astrology. We get our word “magic” from the Magi.

Not only that, nowhere does it say they were from the Orient like the song says, but Matthew just says they came “from the East,” which most likely points to Persia or Babylon, which is modern-day Iran.

And when they finally got to Bethlehem they didn’t visit Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus in the manger along with the shepherds and barnyard animals. Matthew says they came to a “house.” He doesn’t even use the word “baby” to describe Jesus; he uses a different word: “child.” It’s possible Jesus was as old as two when the Magi visited him.

Finally, nowhere does Matthew say there were three of them. That idea probably came from the fact that three different gifts are mentioned, but we don’t know how many Magi there were. Some scholars suggest they were part of a large entourage with a caravan of camels and servants to carry supplies for the long journey. Notice how they caught everyone’s attention—including Herod’s—when they rode into town.

### **There are Just Two Kings in This Story**

I’m sorry to ruin your enjoyment of that song, but one thing for sure, there are in fact **two** kings in this story; not three kings but two. First, there is King Herod. He was known as “Herod the Great” and he died not long after this in 4 B.C. He was a ruthless and insecure king.

- During his reign, he had the High Priest drowned while bathing because he was afraid of an uprising among the Maccabees.
- He had his brother-in-law killed without a hearing because his wife accused him of impropriety with Herod’s wife.
- He even had three out of four of his own sons killed!
- Just before he died, he had some of the best citizens of Jerusalem put in prison and commanded they be slaughtered the moment he died. Why? Because, as he said, “The people will not weep when I die, and I want weeping, even if it’s over someone else.”

Alfred Edersheim, the great Jewish scholar, sums up Herod’s reign with these words, “So long as he lived, no woman’s honor was safe, no man’s life secure.”

The ironic thing is that, as if to appease his conscience, he also did some good for the Jews. He was a great builder. He built them a temple; he never interfered with the functions of the priesthood.

We don't know if Herod was just a good politician or had some streak of respect for the God of Israel. But there's no doubt he **was** a king.

The other King in this story is of course Jesus. We've already learned in Matthew that Jesus was a descendant of David and the Messiah. Here the Magi ask, "**Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?**" In verse 2 they say, "**we saw his star when it rose.**" These Magi believed falling stars signaled the fall of kings and rising stars the coming of new ones. And the prophecy in verse 6 speaks of a "**ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.**" Make no mistake, Jesus was born to rule; he was born to be King.

So, the song really should just be "We two kings..." There's King Herod and there's King Jesus. The real question this story confronts us with is, Who's the true King? and, Which King would I prefer to submit to? As people of faith, the answer comes easy. I mean, do you want a maniac or do you want the Messiah? Do you want one who would order the massacre of innocent children or One who will open his arms not just to children but the most vulnerable people on the planet? Do you want one who would rule by force and fear or One who would rule by love, compassion and even a willingness to lay his life down? Do you want to be ruled by the big bad wolf or the gentle shepherd?

It reminds of the opening scene to *The Lion King*. Do you remember? It's an amazing and beautiful scene! It starts with a birth—the birth of Simba, son of The Lion King. The long-awaited announcement of Simba's birth is carried throughout the valleys and plateaus of Africa. Tribal drums and African chants herald the cub's arrival. Elephants, gazelles, antelopes, vultures, zebras, giraffes, gulls, even tiny ants journey to receive the newborn king. They climb hills, descend sloping canyons, forge streams, and hike jungle paths. Once all the animals arrive in adoring reverence and praise, the infant cub is presented to the gathered subjects. Rafiki, the monkey elder, lifts the newborn high above his head to symbolize Simba's exalted calling.

But Simba has a rival. His name is Scar. Scar is selfish, insecure and ruthless. As he dangles a tiny mouse by its tail, ready to devour it, his first line has him speaking to this helpless mouse, "Life's not fair, is it?" he moans. "You see, I shall never be King, and you shall never see the light of day." That movie is asking the same question, What kind of King do you want? Who do you want to be ruled by? An insecure, ruthless demagogue, or a Ruler who serves?

So here in this story there aren't three kings but two. There's the King appointed by Rome as King of the Jews, and there's the King appointed by God as the King of kings and Lord of lords. But as it pertains to King Jesus, the story portrays several ways we can respond to him.

## **Like Herod, We can Respond to King Jesus with Threatened Hostility**

The first way is portrayed by Herod himself. I'll label this "threatened hostility." As we've seen, Herod would go to any length to secure his position and power. So when he learned from the Magi a possible rival to his throne had been born in his land, he panicked, and he took measures to stamp out the threatening baby. Herod is the person who will do anything to maintain control of his own kingdom. There are people like that today.

There are people who are threatened by King Jesus and everything associated with him, both his teachings and his followers, and they respond with hostility. For example, in an essay in *Slate*, Brian Palmer writes about the prevalence of missionary doctors and nurses in Africa and their crucial role in treating those suffering from Ebola. But Palmer expresses "ambivalence," "suspicion," and "visceral discomfort" about the fact that they're motivated to make "long-term commitments to address the health problems of poor Africans," to "risk their lives," and to accept poor compensation (and sometimes none at all) because of their Christian faith.

But why does he consider this a problem? Because he doesn't believe missionaries are capable "of separating their religious work from their medical work," even when they vow not to evangelize their patients. And that, in his view, is unacceptable—apparently because he's an atheist. As he puts it, "It's great these people are doing God's work, but do they have to talk about Him so much?" His distaste for religion leads him to propose a radical corollary to the separation between church and state. Palmer thinks we should uphold a separation of "religion and health care."

Where does that kind of hostility come from? Could it be King Jesus threatens people like him because he insists on ruling over their lives? You see, if you want to rule over your own life, Jesus is threatening! It makes perfect sense. If Jesus is King that means you're not! It means your dethronement; your submission. Isn't this what Jesus meant when he said to his disciples, "**Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it**" (Luke 9:23-24)?

So I'll ask you the same question I asked last week: Have you given up your right to rule? Maybe you have a tough decision to make. The easy way, the path of least resistance, is to go in this direction. But as you read God's word, and as you pray and seek counsel it seems King Jesus is leading you in another direction. Who gets to choose? You or Him?

We may enjoy taking time off to commemorate his birth once a year. We may run to him when we get in trouble. But, as soon as this Jesus insists on being King; as soon as he makes a demand that might threaten our own self-rule; as soon as he starts

nudging his way into our lifestyle, our values, our priorities, our love life, our schedule, our pocketbook, our career advancement or our friendships; as soon as he demands we die to our own agenda for our lives, then we get upset.

### **Like the Religious Leaders, We can Respond to King Jesus with Passive Indifference**

There's a second group who responded differently. Matthew calls them the "chief priests and teachers of the law." They responded with what we might call passive indifference. When the Magi came to Jerusalem they began inquiring as to where the newborn King was, and when Herod heard of it, he turned to the religious leaders and asked where the Messiah was to be born. The amazing thing is they knew! They knew from the Scripture. The prophet Micah said Bethlehem would be his birthplace. So they told Herod and he sent the Magi to Bethlehem. But, do you know what's amazing? The religious leaders didn't do anything about it themselves! They didn't even bother to take the five mile walk down to Bethlehem to see if the rumor was true!

Why didn't they do anything? I believe it had to do with the assumptions of their religion. They expected the Messiah to come on the scene in a much more dramatic way than he in fact did. They expected him to come as a national hero who'd deliver them from Roman oppression and establish himself as a world-wide ruler. The only ones paying attention now were a few strange Gentile Magi from the east. This wasn't the way Messiah was to come on the scene. How could God allow himself to be born into poverty? What they failed to realize was that he **is** a deliverer, and he came to deliver us from a power far greater than Rome—from the grip of sin, death, and the devil. But, they had to humble themselves for that; they had to recognize their own sin and need for forgiveness. But, as religious leaders they were steeped in the pride and self sufficiency of a religion that revolved around their own ability to keep the demands of the law.

You might be someone who's been going to church your entire life. You've settled into a comfortable conformity to the Christian lifestyle, but you've lost a sense of passion in your walk with Christ because you've forgotten why you came to him in the first place. The reality of Jesus being God's lifeboat to rescue you from the grip of sin is only a faint memory in your mind. You go to church and sing the songs but you're never moved. Or perhaps you're caught up in a religious way of thinking where you're constantly measuring your own performance against a prescribed code of behavior. You're trying so hard to live the Christian life you've forgotten that Jesus came because you **can't** live the Christian life! The Son of God came to seek and to save the lost. Those who fail to realize this will respond just like these religious leaders—with passive indifference.

So, like Herod, we can respond to King Jesus with threatened hostility. Or, like the religious leaders we can respond with

passive indifference. These are both bad examples. But in this story we do have the positive example of the Magi.

### **Like the Magi, We can Respond by Worshipping Him**

Of course, no one would have expected Magi to be searching for the Messiah. These guys weren't Jews. They're not part of God's chosen people, not even close! They're thoroughly pagan magicians. The nation Israel condemned such people. There are outsiders and insiders, especially when it comes to religion. The religious leaders were insiders, but these Magi are outsiders. Yet in this story the outsiders are the ones searching for the newborn King. It should be no surprise to us then that this Child grew up to be One who was always getting in trouble the insiders because he was so welcoming of outsiders. Later, Jesus is being criticized for hanging out with the wrong king of people. He responds by saying, "It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick...I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."

Jesus is still reaching out to those who for one reason or another feel on the outside. I've talked to men and women over the years who tell me they don't feel comfortable in church. When I ask them why they say something like, "You know, I've done some terrible things. I'm really ashamed. And all those people there seem to look so good. I just don't feel like I belong."

But Jesus came to cleanse us and make us belong. The Magi remind us God still reveals himself to the most unexpected people. Don't count anyone out! Don't count yourself out. You may be here today and you're not sure you belong here. You don't think of yourself as religious. You've done things you're ashamed of. Maybe you drink or smoke too much, or maybe you use the wrong kind of language. I want you to know you can join the Magi and run to Bethlehem and find the Child we call Jesus.

Notice a number of things they did. Notice **they searched**. They saw a rising star that signaled to them a new King was born to the Jews. The Bible condemns astrology, yet God was willing to use even their study of the stars to reveal himself. You just can't put God in a box. He'll always break your rules. He'll go to great lengths to reveal himself. He'll stoop to what we can understand. Let me put it this way: There's only one way to God and that's through His Son, Jesus. But how many ways are there to Jesus? The fact is, God uses all kinds of people and circumstances and all kinds of hints and glints to lead people to his Son. Some of those might even be offensive to you.

It's also quite possible these Magi knew of Israel's hope for a Messiah. The people of Israel were scattered throughout Persia after the Babylonian exile. No doubt the exiles had spoken of a coming King. So when these Magi saw the star they dropped everything and started searching, eventually ending up in Jerusalem. Almost two years of searching probably passed before they got to Herod. I'm impressed with the diligence and the patience demonstrated in their search. Some of you are seekers.

You may not have discovered the true King yet. Take a lesson from the Magi: be patient and keep seeking. Ask questions. Listen. Pray. Read the Bible. This King can be found; but for some the finding comes only after a long and careful search.

And when you do find him there will be joy! It says when the star led them to Bethlehem where the Child was they **“were overjoyed.”** I guess if I was looking for something for two years and finally found it I’d be overjoyed too! Joy is the appropriate response to finding Jesus. This is a joy that comes not from outward circumstances but from knowing the reality of who Jesus is and what he’s done for you. These men had to suspect they were in danger from Herod, but they still had great joy. How about you? Regardless of what’s going on in your life, do you know the joy of having found King Jesus?

But the most important thing they did was this: **“they bowed down and worshipped him.”** Think about that. Grown men, astrologers and foreigners in a nondescript house, in an insignificant village, bow down as one would do before a king or divine being. And they offer that to Jesus. At first they may not have recognized the significance of what they were doing. In those days, it was customary to worship kings. But, we see here a hint they began to recognize the true identity of this Child; that he’s God in the flesh, worthy of worship. These Magi sensed this was more than an ordinary King. Could these Magi be the first Gentile believers in Christ? Might their eyes have been opened to the reality of who Jesus is? Is that why they worshipped him?

And, as part of their worship, notice what else they did: **they gave.** Matthew says, **“They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.”** The Jewish scriptures declared that, when the Messiah arrived, he would be the recipient of gifts from foreign nations (Ps. 72:10–11,15; Isa. 60:5–6). Matthew reminds us that history is being fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus as King. Gold and frankincense were normal gifts for a King. Gold was a symbol of royalty; frankincense was an expensive fragrance. Some say it symbolized deity since it was used in the Temple. But, myrrh is a bit unusual. Myrrh was a substance used in embalming the dead. The gift of myrrh seems to

foreshadow Jesus’ crucifixion and death. Without even knowing it, God was speaking of the child’s destiny through their choice of gifts. He’d one day grow up and suffer for their sins. He’d give his life for them.

But there’s one more thing. **They listened.** They were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod. God does protect his people. They listened to that warning and changed their course in going home. There may be a double meaning in this. Not only did they change their course in a geographical sense, perhaps they also changed it in a spiritual sense. We can imagine the whole course of their lives was changed by this encounter with Jesus! That’s what this King will do to those who come to know him; he’ll change the whole trajectory of your life. You had a pathway you were on, but he puts you on a new path.

So take a lesson from the Magi. Instead of responding with threatened hostility or religious indifference, search for this King diligently, and when you find him rejoice in him exceedingly and bow down to worship him. Isn’t that why we come here on Sunday mornings? We come seeking the King, we come to worship the King, and we come to give our gifts to the King.

And do you know what’s great about this story? Before the Magi ever sought this King, he was seeking them. Before we ever seek him, he seeks us. Jesus said, **“..the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost”** (Luke 19:10). Do you remember what Jesus said to another seeker—the Samaritan woman at the well? Just like the Magi she was an outsider, she was lost, but she had this thirst for something more. Jesus said to her, **“An hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers”** (John 4:23). If you’re seeking a true King to worship, you’re responding to One who’s seeking you, and you know you’ve found him when you find this Child.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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Catalog No. 1434–3FC