

THE THREE KINGS Matthew 2:1-15

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² 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.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ 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. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “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.”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.”

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

¹³ When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

¹⁴ So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

Over the last three years, I have developed an unfortunate reputation of being opposed to having Wisemen in nativity displays. I did not say it was an inaccurate reputation, just unfortunate. The truth about the birth of Jesus is so marvelous, I hate for the facts to be missed in the midst of the mist of the myths.

- The fact is that Mary was a virgin even though she was pregnant.
- The fact is that Jesus was born in a barn and laid in a hay manger for a bed.

- The fact is that angels announced this birth to shepherds who were on a hillside tending their sheep at night.
- The fact is that this baby was the one true eternal God, Who had taken on human form, entered the womb of a young virgin, was born through the birth canal in the usual human way and then grew up in a working class family in the insignificant state of Israel.

As one of my favorite Christmas songs asks, "Who do you think could believe such a thing; could believe that this story is true? Who do you think could believe such a thing? Well, here's hoping to heaven you do!"

These are the facts and I'm hoping to heaven you believe them.

But there are some things we've been taught that do not come from the Bible and that myth the point.

- The first Christmas wasn't a white Christmas. Bethlehem is in a subtropical climate where there was more apt to be a palm tree than a pine tree in front of the stable where Jesus was born.
- The night wind did not speak to a shepherd boy. An angel spoke to shepherds on the hillside but the Bible does not say the night wind spoke.
- There was no little drummer boy in the stable (*pah-rhum-puh-puhm-puhm*).
- And there were not three oriental kings kneeling at the manger.

Just as the artificial lights and the shiny ornaments can obscure the beauty and symmetry of a lovely tree, so the artificial elements of the Christmas story can blind us to the profound facts of the simple truth that God became a man and lived with us.

Now, having said all of that, I do want to preach about the three kings that are in the Christmas story.

I. **THE WILLING KINGS (the magi)**

These magi who came from the east to worship Jesus are historical figures. But to understand who they were, we need to go back a bit in time. In prehistoric times, there was a race of people who lived in the north of what is now Iran but along the border with Hungary and Mongolia. These people, called the Medes, were likely the ancestors of what are now known as the Kurds.

These Medes were a tribal people who often fought against one another so they were easily dominated by neighbors like Assyria. But in 715 BC, Deioces managed to unite the feuding factions into one force and they conquered the Assyrians and established one of the largest nations of its day.

The ancient historian, Herodotus, lists the six tribes that made up the Medes: the Busae, the Paretaceni, the Struchates, the Arizanti, the Budii, and the Magi.

Over time, the Medes forged an alliance with the Persians and established the Medo-Persian empire, which was the world's great super power in the period before 550 BC. Then, in 553 BC, Cyrus the Great of Persia, decided he was tired of treating the Medes as equals and he subjugated them under the power of Persia.

A part of the truce that some of the Medes arranged was that they would forego any aspirations to power, would surrender their weapons and would devote themselves to scholarship. These Medes, of the tribe of the Magi, became the scholars of their day. They were the Persian priests, doctors and scientists including astronomers and astrologers.

So, technically, they were not kings; they were intellectuals. The tradition that they were kings came from a misapplication of a couple of passages from the Old Testament.

Isaiah 49:7 reads:

⁷ *This is what the LORD says—
the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel—
to him who was despised and abhorred by the nation,
to the servant of rulers:
“Kings will see you and rise up,
princes will see and bow down,
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”*

Some have taken that expression: “Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see you and bow down” to be a reference to the men who came bearing gifts for the young Messiah. But a more careful reading of the text will reveal that this is a prophecy about what will happen after God's Anointed One has been despised and abhorred by the nation...that is, after the crucifixion of the Messiah.

Isaiah 60: prophecies:

¹ *“Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.
² See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you
and his glory appears over you.
³ Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

Truly, after the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, after the thick darkness covered the earth at the time of Jesus' crucifixion and then after the Lord arose, as the prophet said, nations came to his light and even kings were drawn to his light.

So a misunderstanding of these passages led to the conclusion that the Magi were kings when, in fact, they were learned men who were characterized by their willingness.

- They were **willing to believe the incredible**, the thought that a star was heralding the birth of the Messiah.
- Then, several months later, when Jesus was a toddler and living in a house with Mary and Joseph, these wise men were **willing to do the inconvenient** by taking a lengthy, dangerous journey to lay their gifts before the Messiah.
- And they were willing to **worship the incarnate**, that is: God in human form...the infinite who had become an infant and to whom they now came to bow in awe and reverence.

II. THE WORRIED KING (Herod)

King Herod is the true Grinch of the real Christmas story. In many ways Herod was an effective king. He ruled over the Jews for 43 years and was so effective that he was called Herod the Great. During his reign as king, he kept peace in Palestine: the only ruler who ever had. At times, he could be quite generous to those whom he favored.

But Herod was also insanely jealous. He was called a murderous old man (though not to his face!). He earned that moniker because of the way he routinely eliminated any suspected rivals. People did not need to be rivals for Herod to put a contract on them; he just had to suspect that they might be rivals.

Believing they might want to overthrow him and seize his throne, at different times Herod murdered:

- His wife, Mariamne
- His mother, Alexandra
- His sons, Antipater, Alexander, and Aristobulus

With a clever play on words, Caesar Augustus said it is better to be Herod's pig (his Hus) than to be his son (Huious).

At the close of his life, Herod revealed his true self. He retired to Jerusalem at the age of 70 and had the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem arrested on trumped up charges. Herod issued an order that, at his death, all of these distinguished citizens were to be executed. He knew that no one would mourn his passing but he wanted tears when he died.

It makes perfect sense that when Herod learned of a baby who had been born to be king, that he would have all the boys put to death in the region of Bethlehem, who were under the age of two. Historians estimate that some 20 – 30 baby boys would have been killed as Herod tried to maintain his throne.

III. THE WORSHIPPED KING (Jesus)

So there were the willing “kings” and there was a worried king. But there is also another king in this story: the worshipped king. That is the king whose birth had been foretold by the prophets for centuries. That is the king whose coming had been anticipated by the people for generations. That is the king whose reign had been promised by God since the Garden of Eden.

This is the king who was worshipped by the Wisemen and whom wise men still worship.

CONCLUSION:

Please note this:

- The second king, the worried one, heard the news that the Messiah was born but he rejected it. He was only hardened in his heart and more set in his ways because of what he had heard.
- The first “kings” the willing ones, after seeing Jesus, “returned to their country by a different route.” That is, they went home differently because they had seen Jesus.

So what about you? What will be different for you because you’ve seen the king?

- Perhaps you will decide to place your church membership in this church where you’ve been attending, where you’ve been worshipping and where you’ve been growing in Christ.
- Maybe you will decide to follow Jesus’ example and be baptized by immersion as a result of your choice and not as the result of the choice made for you by someone else.
- Maybe you will, for the first time, declare that Jesus is king of your life and that you are going to obey him as his loyal subject: his faithful servant.

Whatever decision you need to make, the invitation is the same: COME.