THE KING WORSHIPPED

Matthew 2:1-12.

Today we will be in Matthew Chapter 2 looking at the familiar Christmas story about the visit of the wise men. The Bible doesn’t tell us where the wise men were from, how many there were or really much about them at all. It only says they were wise men (or magi) from the east, meaning to the east of Judea. However, it is widely held that they were from Persia, to the NE of Babylon, which at that time was known as Parthia. They were high ranking officials and were very interested in astronomy. Their predecessors had been introduced to Yahweh and the O.T. scriptures by Daniel and other Jews who had been in Babylonian and Medo-Persian captivity centuries earlier. These men were a priestly tribe of the Medes and operated as advisors to the kings of Babylon, Persia and Media. There are two things I want you to remember about the wise men before we get started: (1) they were God-fearers who had received a special revelation from God about the birth of the King of the Jews and (2) they were Gentiles.

Show pictures of Bethlehem.

Last year I took a trip to Israel with a group from DTS. The first pic shows modern day Bethlehem. As you can see it sits in a saddle on a ridge. It is only about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. It’s not such a little town any more. But back in Jesus’ day it was a pretty small village. The second pic shows the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. There’s a grotto, a cave underneath this church where it is believed that Jesus was born. It was not uncommon for stables to be cut into the side of the rocky hills, which provided protection from the elements. Sometimes stables were structures, but sometimes they were caves. So this is where tradition holds that Jesus was born and countless pilgrims each year will travel to Bethlehem, line up outside the church and then file in and see the place where Jesus was born. When we were in Bethlehem in mid-May last year I recall that there was an air of excitement by the locals. You see, one week to the day after our visit to Bethlehem, the Pope, Pope Francis was scheduled to come to Bethlehem and lead a mass in this very square. His picture was up on signs all over Bethlehem and Jerusalem. So all the people were excited as they prepared for his visit. The Pope was coming! I thought to myself at the time – what a contrast this is to how the people of Jesus day were about the coming of their own Messiah.

READ Matthew 2:1-2. This group of magi travels from Persia to Jerusalem searching for the king of the Jews. Because these were high ranking officials there was undoubtedly a large entourage and probably even some soldiers escorting them. And they would most likely have been riding on horses. They were bearing expensive gifts and travel in those days was very dangerous. What I want you to understand is that these visitors from the east weren’t just three old guys riding camels like you see on the Christmas cards. They were high ranking officials of a foreign country and they would definitely have stood out. The citizens of Jerusalem would have taken notice of them as they arrived into town.

How did the wise men connect what the Jewish scriptures predicted about the future Messiah King with the star? Well, the Bible doesn’t say, but somehow God showed them. Maybe it had something to do with Numbers 24:17, a messianic prophecy (made by Balaam no less), which said, “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near; a star shall come forth from Jacob; and a scepter shall rise from Israel…” These were Gentile God fearers who came to pay homage due a newborn king. They knew He was a special king. God somehow – we don’t know how – but somehow gave them this insight.

Well, when the wise men got to Jerusalem they begin inquiring with the people there about where this newborn king of the Jews might be located. “We saw his star when it rose…” A most unusual star it must have been. This star which they referred to as “his star” suddenly appeared and then, apparently, it disappeared for a while. There are a whole lot of conjectures about what this star was – a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars; a supernova, a comet, or just a really bright star. I don’t pretend to know for sure but one theory seems to make the most sense and that is that it was the blazing glory of God, the Shekinah glory (similar to the pillar of fire and cloud which guided the children of Israel thru the wilderness). It was a sign given in the sky of Jesus’ first coming similar to what will be given at His second coming. The Bible tells us that at His second coming “the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky…” (Matt 24:30). So perhaps this is a similar sign that God gave to announce His first coming. Somehow these wise men made the connection between this particular “star” that appeared in the sky and the birth of King of the Jews.

By the way these two verses do not tell us that they followed the star from their homeland to Jerusalem. Some have conjectured that, but I believe that they knew logically that the king of the Jews would be in Palestine where the Jewish people lived. So naturally that is where they headed. Their first stop was its capital and largest city, Jerusalem.

READ Matthew 2:3-6. Word travels quickly throughout Jerusalem and soon Herod the king hears about it. And like all good Jews of that day looking for their Messiah King he’s pretty excited isn’t he? NO!! Verse 3 says he was troubled. Why would he be troubled by this news? Well, let’s talk about Herod. This is Herod the Great. He had the title as the king of the Jews but he was not a Jew. He was an Edomite, from the country of Edom, descendants of Esau. For this reason the Jews didn’t like him. He was not in the royal line. Herod was in good with the Romans. They had made him king in 37 B.C. so by this time he has been ruling Palestine for 33 year. Rome liked the job he was doing. He kept the peace in a troublesome region. No uprisings, no revolts. Under Herod the Great Palestine enjoyed peace. Herod also undertook numerous building projects: expanding and rebuilding the Jerusalem temple, building a harbor at Caesarea, several royal palaces, the fortress at Masada, the Antonia Fortress which connected to the temple mount, theaters, temples, gymnasiums amphitheaters and many other building projects throughout the region. But Herod was extremely paranoid. Whenever he thought people were plotting against him he had them killed including several of his own children and wives.

Verse 3 tells us that Herod “was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” The citizens of Jerusalem had every reason to be troubled. They knew if Herod was upset then they were going to suffer. Just to drive home the kind of man Herod was there is a story about him as he is nearing death. He knew he was about to die and he said, “Nobody will mourn when I die, so collect all the finest people in the land of Israel, all the finest people out in the city of Jerusalem. Get them all together and the moment I die, kill them all so that they’ll be mourning in the city when I die.” He was quite literally a madman.

So, Herod feels threatened by this newborn King of the Jews. Should he have been? Yes. After all he knew as did all the Jews that he was not the rightful king and if they got wind that there was this one who was the rightful king, then he might be overthrown by the people, be out of a job or even killed. He can’t have that! So he inquires of the Jewish religious leaders where the Christ, the Messiah was to be born. He knew enough to attach the term King of the Jews with the Jewish Messiah. So the religious leaders told him that according to Micah 5:2 He would be born in Bethlehem and they quoted it here for him. That last phrase, “who will shepherd my people Israel” is not actually in Micah 5:2 but is a paraphrase of the verses that immediately follow which tell what the Messiah will do.

Then Herod summons the wise men to the royal palace for a private meeting. READ Matthew 2:7-8. Of course Herod has evil intentions doesn’t he? He doesn’t want to worship this newborn king. He wants to kill Him! He feels threatened by Him. But the wise men don’t know this at this point and they set off on the last leg of their journey to Bethlehem.

[Matt 2:16 indicates that the star had first appeared to the wise men two years prior – well before the actual birth of Jesus]

READ Matthew 2:9-10. The star the wise men had seen back in their homeland suddenly reappears. They recognize it as the same star and they are overjoyed to see it. Now the star shows them where the King of the Jews is located. This is why some commentaries don’t believe it is an ordinary star because it comes to rest above a particular place. So it had to be a unique kind of light that God specifically placed there for this purpose. It is interesting that King Herod tells the wise men to “go and search diligently for the child” but God intervenes and they don’t have to do that. Instead God shows them exactly where the Child is.

READ Matthew 2:11. Notice they went into a house and not into a stable or a cave. So some time has passed since Jesus’ birth. Mary and Joseph are now living in a house. The wise men see the CHILD with Mary His mother and they worship HIM. With all due respect to my Catholic friends they do not worship Mary. They worship Jesus. He is the focal point of their worship and He should be the focal point of our worship as well.

Notice the gifts…

Gold. This is gift for a king. In 1 Kings 10 we read about all the gold that King Solomon had. In Psalm 21 David has been established by God as king and has a crown of gold on his head.

Myrrh. This is gift for a mortal man. It is a sweet smelling perfume. It was commonly used in the burial of the dead.

Frankincense. This is a gift to God. In the O.T., Exodus 30 frankincense was used as a key ingredient in the incense that was offered up to God on the altar of incense. It was to be used for God, not for the people.

So the gifts are significant in that they represent Christ as King (the King of the Jews here in Matt 2 and the King of Kings in Revelation 19:16), as God (He is called God in John 1:1. 1:18 and the Son of God in John 20:31); and as Son of Man (a term Jesus used for Himself 29 times in Matthew’s gospel alone). Jesus is both God and man, divine and human and He is the rightful King, worthy of worship.

To wrap things up, in our lesson today we saw one of three reactions that people can have toward Jesus Christ. There are those like the wise men who seek after Him as Lord and Master, as their King. And when they find Him they acknowledge Him and worship Him. Then there are those like Herod who are intolerant, antagonistic and resist Christ. They are enemies of God who openly reject Him. Finally there are those like the Jewish religious leaders and the nation of Israel as a whole – and this is the vast majority of people today as well – who are indifferent toward Him. Despite all the signs that God showed them

The fulfilled prophecies, the star, the testimonies of the shepherds, the angels, the wise men, Mary, John the Baptist, Simeon and Anna – for the most part Jesus’ own people rejected Him. John 1:11 says, “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.” Some outright rejected Him. Most just ignored him.

“Pagans who had nothing to guide them but smatterings of O.T prophesies, nothing to guide them but their own science mingled with its funny superstitions. And yet they are the true seekers of God. And when the sign came, with all of their misgivings and lacks in knowledge, they were enthusiastically embarking on a journey to seek a king they had a long time waited for. But the Jewish hierarchy with the Pentateuch in their hand, studying it every day, reading its prophecies, ruled by a bitter and evil man named Herod, were totally indifferent to what was happening five miles away.”

If Jesus is not already your King, this Christmas make Him your King. If he is, then worship and adore Him like He deserves.