

January 2, 2022
Matthew 2:1-12

Second Sunday of Christmas
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Good News for *All* People”

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.”

Red Bank is one of the nicest communities in New Jersey. Located along the banks of the Navesink River in the northern part of the Jersey Shore, Red Bank hosts many fine shops and restaurants and is a popular destination for people throughout the state. Red Bank also includes one of the most unique restaurants in any town; the Soul Kitchen enjoys one of the finest ratings for its food and ambiance, but what truly distinguishes it from any other eatery in that community is that everyone is welcome to dine in the restaurant regardless of their ability to pay. It is quite common to have some of the most prominent citizens of Red Bank dining next to people of limited financial means; at the top of the menu, patrons are welcome to “pay what you can.” Those who are able are known for their generosity so that people who could not otherwise afford such fine dining might also enjoy a meal and feel welcome in that establishment. Many other restaurant owners scoffed when the owners announced this policy, but their motto has remained the same from the day of their opening: “We wanted to open a place where all are welcome.”

On the night of Jesus’ birth, the angel announced to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem that *“I bring you good news of great joy for all the people.”* The inclusivity of this announcement of the birth of the one who is *“a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord”* (Luke 2:10-11) with the arrival of the *“wise men from the East [who] came to Jerusalem, asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?’”* (Matthew 2:1-2). The Wise Men are among the most beloved yet most mysterious characters in the Christmas story. Matthew’s introduction is very vague; there is no specific number of wise men who visit Jesus (the tradition of three wise men comes from the three gifts they will present later in the story), nor does he identify them by name (tradition has named them Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar). They are also identified as *Magi*, a priestly class of Persian or Babylonian experts in the occult, such as astrology or the interpretation of dreams; this priestly class gained an international reputation for astrology, which was at that time highly regarded as a science. Their misidentification as kings (as in *“we three kings from orient are”*) may be based on Old Testament passages that recount kings bringing gifts to the royal Davidic son (*“May all kings fall down before him, all nations give him service”* –

Psalm 72:11), including gifts of gold and frankincense (*“They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.”* – Isaiah 60:6). While much about the Magi remains a mystery, what we do know about them is that they are Gentiles, persons outside of the nation of Israel, persons who come to Jerusalem without any special revelation from the Torah. As outsiders represented by the shepherds were the first to hear the good news of the birth of the Christ child, the Magi who come seeking the *“child who has been born king of the Jews”* represent those who are outside of the people of Israel but who are now among those for whom the message of the birth of Jesus is good [news](#):

- “God reaches beyond shepherds at the bottom of the barrel to Wise Ones at the top. God reaches beyond people scared witless by God’s glory to those who observe the glorious star at its rising, and methodically, persistently, and sincerely follow it to a king. All along the way, God directs them, first by a star, then via a verse in Micah, and finally in their dreams.” – Craig A. Satterlee.

The Magi’s inquiry about the “king of the Jews” is both a reminder that Jesus is the royal heir of the Davidic promises and an anticipation of his ministry, proclaiming the kingdom of God and especially the passion story in which he will be crucified as the “king of the Jews” (*“Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, ‘This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.’”* – Matthew 27:37).

Pagan beliefs associated the birth of a new ruler with astral phenomena, and a broad stream of Jewish tradition related the hope of the messiah to a star mentioned in the oracle of Balaam: *“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near – a star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the borderlands of Moab, and the territory of all the Shethites.”* (Numbers 24:17). As experts in the interpretation of stars, the Magi had *“observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage”* (2:2). While many have speculated on some natural phenomena that might explain this star, *“Matthew is telling us that God is providing a supernatural guide to lead the magi to Christ, just as he provided Israel with an angel to lead them through the desert.”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri).

Among the people of Jerusalem who hear of the arrival of these visitors from the East was Herod the Great, who upon hearing the Magi’s inquiry *“was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him”* (2:3). Herod the Great was an Idumean who, back by Rome, had established himself as king by military conquest of his “own” people. The populace, who wanted a king with Jewish blood who was not beholden to the

Romans, resented his rule. While Herod was responsible for building many impressive buildings, included the Temple in Jerusalem, he was notorious for his ruthlessness, putting even members of his own family to death. When Herod hears of the birth of a child who the Magi identify as “king of the Jews,” he is troubled because the birth of a legitimate king would threaten his illegitimate hold on power. *“Herod represents the resistance of this world to the divine kingship represented by Jesus.”* (Richard B. Hays). Herod calls together the leaders of the Jewish people and inquires of them where the Messiah was to be born. The leaders respond by quoting the prophet Micah, who identified Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah: *“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.”* (Micah 5:2). This ruler will *“shepherd my people Israel,”* an echo of God’s words to David at the beginning of his reign (*“It is you who shall be shepherd to my people Israel, you who shall be ruler over Israel.”* – 2 Samuel 5:2). Upon hearing this, Herod directs the Magi to *“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”* (2:8). Of course, Herod has no intention of paying homage to this child; as we will soon learn, his intentions are far more sinister.

The Magi continue to be obedient, following both the star and Scripture to Bethlehem. The star that led them to Jerusalem now guides them to the exact house in Bethlehem, *“until it stopped over the place where the child was”* (2:9). When the star stops over the house in which the Holy Family is residing, *“they were overwhelmed with joy,”* knowing that their long journey has ended, and they have at last found the place to which the star had been leading them. Upon entering the house, they see the child with Mary his mother; *“and they knelt down and paid him homage.”* (2:11). The Magi do not simply kneel before the Christ child; they prostrated themselves on their faces and did him homage. In Matthew, prostration and giving homage were associated with divine worship; in his temptation of Jesus in the wilderness, the devil offers our Lord *“all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.’”* (4:8-9). *“The Gentile Magi, therefore, offer Christ the worship that Herod, the chief priests, and the scribes failed to offer.”* (Mitch and Sri).

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the Magi offer represent luxurious gifts fit for a king. They recall the Gentile queen of Sheba bringing spices and a large amount of gold for King Solomon (*“She came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones; and when she came to Solomon, she told him all that was on her mind.”* – 1 Kings 10:2). While it

is easy to understand the appropriateness of the gift of gold to a king, both frankincense and myrrh were considered valuable gifts worthy of being presented to royalty. They both come from the fragrant resin of trees, and both had long been used as perfumes and in the making of incense for worship (*“Let my prayer be counted as incense before you, and the lifting up of my hands as an evening sacrifice”* – Psalm 141:2). Myrrh has some very distinctive properties; it has long been used for its medicinal qualities as an antiseptic or analgesic agent. According to Mark, Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh at his crucifixion (Mark 15:23). In the ancient world, myrrh was also a common agent used for embalming the dead; according to the Fourth Gospel, it was used at Jesus’ burial (*“Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews.”* – John 19:39-40). While it may seem strange to bring such a gift to a newborn child, the gift of myrrh is seen by many as foreshadowing what is to come in the life of Jesus:

- “Myrrh is a bittersweet gift, but it is a fitting gift for King Jesus born into the world of King Herod, for an infant king born into a world where evil tyrants plot the death of innocents. It is a fitting gift for this humble king who will be put to death as a threat against the empire. It is a fitting gift for the shepherd-king who came to lay down his life for the sheep ... This infant king is born to die, and it is for our sake. At the same time, the healing properties of myrrh remind us that in Jesus’ death and victory over the grave, there is healing for all our ills.” – Elizabeth Johnson.

The final act of the Magi is one of defiance of King Herod’s command that they bring him word once they have found where the child born king of the Jews is residing: *“And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.”* (2:12). As Balak, the king of Moab, had sought to use the pagan seer Balaam to destroy Israel, Herod had sought to use the Gentile Magi to destroy the Christ child. And just as Balaam failed to cooperate with the king’s plan, uttering blessings instead of curses (*“Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you.”* – Numbers 24:9), so the Magi fail to assist Herod in his plot to destroy Jesus, paying the child homage instead of reporting his location to Herod. Balaam prophesied about a star heralding the coming of a great king to Israel; the Magi see that star and come to worship the newborn king. *“Thus the Magi stand as ‘successors to Balaam’ in the sense that they pay homage to the king that Balaam foretold long ago.”* (Mitch and Sri).

- “No, they would not be going back through Jerusalem, they said. All three of them had had a dream that said steer clear of Jerusalem, as if they needed to be told. If anyone in Jerusalem knew anything at all they would be here instead of there. Besides, none of their old maps worked anymore. They would find a new way home.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

We never hear of the Magi again, but we know that they left Bethlehem as changed persons. They had rejoiced when they came into the presence of the child they had journeyed to find, and their act of homage shows how they knew that the child of Mary was not only the king of the Jews but the king of all people, including themselves. They returned home by another way knowing that home would forever be changed, that even when they returned to their homeland and their familiar surroundings all would be new because they had seen the child who would be worshiped by future generations as *“a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”* (Luke 2:32). We do not know if they shared their experience with others in their home country, but they were the first of many people from all nations who knew that the child born in the manger in Bethlehem was born to be *“good news of great joy for all the people,”* the universal message that *“God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”*

- “The key point is this: the wise men from the east are a new beginning. They represent the journeying of humanity toward Christ. They initiate a procession that continues throughout history. Not only do they represent the people who have found the way to Christ: they represent the inner aspiration of the human spirit, the dynamism of religions and human reason toward him.” – Pope Benedict XVI.

While the sight of people from different communities and socioeconomic backgrounds dining together at the Soul Kitchen at first seemed strange, it soon became a familiar sight to the people of Red Bank, a natural means of welcoming all people to share a table and a meal. The sight of the Magi at the side of the child born to be our Lord and Saviour may also appear strange; it must have been uncommon for visitors from the East to arrive in the Jewish community of Bethlehem, much less to enter a Jewish home and prostrate themselves at the feet of a child. Yet their presence among the Holy Family and in the Christmas story is a necessary part of the message of the birth of the Christ child, for the coming of the Lord is the fulfillment of God’s promises to God’s people as well as *“good news of great joy for all people.”* It is the message that the Epiphany of Our Lord is God’s revelation for the whole world:

- “The Magi are Gentiles in the extreme, characters who could not be more remote from the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem in heritage and worldview. Even at the very beginning of Jesus’ life, then, we see the dividing walls between races and cultures breaking down. Even here, at the beginning of the Gospel, the mission to all nations, which will close the Gospel (28:19), is anticipated.”
– Hays.

As the Soul Kitchen is a place where all are welcome, so is the Church of Jesus Christ that proclaims the good news of the birth of the Saviour a place where all are welcome to come and behold him, a place where all are welcome to join the Magi in worshipping the one who is born as Lord of all, where all are welcome to sit at the table with the one who gave of himself so that all of us may know that we are all children of God, singing with one voice in worship and praise of the child born as *“king of kings salvation brings, let loving hearts enthrone him ... joy, joy for Christ is born, the babe, the son of Mary!”* Amen.