

THE KING'S WORSHIPPERS
MATTHEW 2:1-12

We are well familiar with the Christmas stories:

- ✓ the appearance of Gabriel to Zacharias and Elizabeth announcing the arrival of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Christ — and Zacharias' unbelief and silence.
- ✓ the appearance of Gabriel to Mary announcing her pregnancy with the Messiah and her willing submission to the will of God.
- ✓ the appearance of the angel to Joseph announcing Mary's pregnancy and Joseph's willing obedience to follow the God-ordained message to maintain his marriage to Mary.
- ✓ the birth of Jesus in humble circumstances in Bethlehem and the subsequent need to flee to Egypt because of Herod's rage.

Throughout these stories, there are OT quotations, hymns of praise (esp. in Luke), and many revelations of the nature of Christ, so that as Jesus grew Luke tells us that Mary "treasured all these things in her heart."

And while these stories are about Jesus, we also do well to pay attention to the secondary participants in the stories; God includes them in His Word so that we learn through their examples (or non-examples) as well. And the account before us this morning is just such a story. Jesus almost seems secondary, as others take center stage in the account. One commentator said it well when he said about Matthew 2:

"The primary purpose of this chapter is not to portray the King in His infancy and childhood; there is nothing in the chapter which describes Jesus Himself. The leading aim is to indicate the reception given to the Messiah by the world." [Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 47.]

This chapter is about worship and the need to worship Christ and the failure of too many to worship Him.

THE INFANT JESUS WAS ALSO INFINITELY SOVEREIGN KING WHO WAS WORTHY OF ALL WORSHIP.

What does it mean to worship God? I have read several helpful definitions:

- ✓ "Worship is the work of acknowledging the greatness of our covenant Lord...It is something we do...[And it] is honoring someone superior to ourselves." [Frame, *Worship in Spirit and Truth*]
- ✓ "[Worship] is paying attention to God's revelation (both special, the Bible, and general) and responding to it...Worship is revelation and response." [Allen and Borrer, *Worship*]
- ✓ "**Worship is an act of the understanding**, applying itself to the knowledge of the excellency of God, and actual thoughts of his majesty....It is also an act of the will, whereby the soul adores and reverenceth his majesty, is ravished with his amiableness, embraceth his goodness, enters itself into intimate communion with this most lovely object, and pitcheth all his affections upon him." [Charnock, quoted by Packer in *A Quest for Godliness*.]

I might simplify these explanations of worship to say that **worship is simply delighting in God** and doing His will. It is cultivating an internal satisfaction in Him in our hearts that results in transformed lives of obedience. **To worship God** is to delight in Him and to do what He says. That definition will be helpful as we consider several contrasting responses to Jesus in Matthew 2.

In the story of Jesus' early days on earth, observe and consider **three possibilities** for worship:

1. **Herod, who wanted to **BE WORSHIPPED** (vv. 1-3, 7-8)**
 - ✓ The king of Israel who was **CRUEL**
 - ✓ The King of kings who is **GRACIOUS**
2. **The Religionists, who were **APATHETIC** about worship (vv. 4-6)**
3. **The Magi, who **WORSHIPPED** (vv. 1-2, 9-12)**

1. Herod, who wanted to BE WORSHIPPED (vv. 1-3, 7-8)

- In the opening verses of this story there is a subtle interplay and contrast between King Herod (vv. 1, 3) and King Jesus (vv. 2, 6). We are meant to see a difference between these two kings.
- Consider first, the king of Israel who was cruel
 - ✓ **Herod** is mentioned in v. 1 by Matthew as someone the readers would already know.
 - ✓ There were multiple “Herods” (a family dynasty); this is Herod the Great who ruled from 40–4 B.C.
 - ✓ He was wealthy and politically savvy (staying in Rome’s good graces for almost 40 years). During a great famine in 25 B.C. he melted down gold objects in his palace to purchase food for the poor.
 - ✓ He was also extraordinarily evil and cruel.
 - He was not a Jew, but an Idumean; he not only wasn’t in the messianic line of David, but he wasn’t even a Jew — he was a complete usurper of political authority. So he married Mariamne, who was a Jew, to ingratiate the Jews to him, though he did not love her.
 - He was always concerned about a Jew coming to take over his throne (and probably the reason for his “trouble” in v. 3). One example: he was fearful that the High Priest, Aristobulus, was a threat to his throne, so he had Aristobulus drowned. (Aristobulus was his wife’s brother.)
 - Then he had Mariamne killed. And her mother. And two of his sons (fearful of their opposition).
 - Five days before he died he had a third son of his killed.
 - Also shortly before he died, he had some of the most distinguished and important citizens of Jerusalem arrested and imprisoned and ordered that they be executed at the moment he died so that he could ensure that there would be mourning in Jerusalem at his death.
 - And in his greatest cruelty, he had the young children of Bethlehem murdered (2:16-23).
 - ✓ Caesar Augustus of Rome reportedly said he would rather be Herod’s pig (*hus*) than his son (*huios*).
- Contrast cruel king Herod with the King of kings who is gracious
 - ✓ When the magi arrived (v. 2), they immediately asked, “**where is He who has been born King of the Jews?**” The question implies “where is the *legitimate* King of the Jews?”
 - ✓ It’s important to note that the way they ask the question does not mean “where is the one who has been born *to be* King?” — they are asking for the One who *is* King, not who *will be* King.
 - ✓ Herod had to receive that as a direct and immediate threat.
 - ✓ But Jesus affirmed that His Kingdom is a different kind of Kingdom: **jn. 18:36-37**.
 - ✓ He is a King and is Lord and Master of His people, but He is the kind of King who sets people free.
- After Herod discerned where Jesus was born he took an action that revealed his heart (as all actions do).
 - ✓ **He secretly called the magi** (v. 7) — why “secretly?” While Matthew doesn’t tell us, it is clear that Herod has intentionally dismissed the religious leaders and is keeping this conversation from them.

- ✓ He does not want anyone to know of his interest in Jesus — the populace is already **troubled** enough about how Herod is going to respond to this threat to his throne (v. 3). If he was agitated, they were agitated — concerned about how his anger would result in their suffering.
- ✓ He is concerned about **the exact time the star appeared** — while he doesn't ask the question, he wants to know the timing of Jesus' birth; he wants to know Jesus' age (so he could kill Him, v. 16).
- ✓ He doesn't want to arouse suspicion so he lies and says he wants to **worship Christ** (v. 8).
- ✓ But remember what we said about worship: it's delight and doing — it's heart and action (internal and outward desire for Christ).
- ✓ Herod has no desire for Christ and he has no desire for Christ to be his King. He wants to eradicate Christ, do away with Christ, kill Christ. This is just like “the long war against God” — in order to replace God, people will take *anything* else as an object of desire and worship.
- ✓ And the heart of this unwillingness to worship is epitomized by Herod: he doesn't want to worship Christ; he wants to be worshipped (by others, and Christ). This is where false worship always leads.
- ✓ So that's one response to the coming of Christ — I reject Him and His authority in my life because I want to be the authority and I want to be worshipped. (This is generally where even our battles with sin as believers originate — we don't want to give in to His kingly authority in our lives.)

2. The Religionists, who were **APATHETIC about worship** (vv. 4-6)

- In the face of this political and religious threat, Herod called the religious leaders of Israel:
 - ✓ **Chief Priests** were Sadducees; this group would include the current High Priest and any other men who had served in that role in the past and perhaps other “leading” priests.
 - ✓ **Scribes** were Pharisees and not just “copyists” of the Law, but the legal experts in the Law. They were the interpreters and lawyers.
 - ✓ What's notable is that the Pharisees and Sadducees were not on speaking terms with one another, but that worked to Herod's favor this time: they were unlikely to collude together against Herod. He would get the correct answer to his question; they wouldn't work together to trick him.
- Both groups (he may have seen them separately; Matthew's account allows for that possibility) affirm that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, as prophesied in **Micah 5:2**.
 - ✓ The quotation of Micah given by the leaders differs slightly from Micah 5:2 — “But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah...” They seem to say the opposite — **by no means least...** Actually, Micah is probably using the phrase “too little...” ironically — given what the Messiah who comes from Bethlehem does, Bethlehem is *not small*, which is exactly what the leaders acknowledge. It is another example of God using little things for great purposes.
 - ✓ It is also notable that Herod had one of his palaces in Bethlehem, so he would feel especially threatened by this prediction — “Oh, oh, I'm in trouble now...”

- ✓ This passage was not only well known to the leaders, but also to the people (Jn. 7:42).
- ✓ I mention that because there was later interest and curiosity in Jesus being from Bethlehem; but at the actual arrival of Jesus, there is no interest from the people — especially the leaders.
- The arrival of the Messiah was met by a collective and unified massive yawn of the leaders.
 - ✓ They just were unconcerned and uninterested in Jesus. They were indifferent to the Messiah.
 - ✓ Herod asks them where the Messiah would be born and they had to make the connection to the arrival of the magi and the account of this King because all Jerusalem was talking about it (v. 3).
 - ✓ They simply didn't care. They asked nothing more from Herod. They made no attempts to contact the magi for more information, and they made no attempt to follow the magi and go to Jesus.
 - ✓ They knew the Scriptures about the Messiah, but they were apathetic, indifferent, and unconcerned about worshipping the Messiah. Not dissimilarly from Herod, they were not interested in submitting to (and worshipping) the Messiah. They didn't want His authority in their lives.
 - ✓ We should not miss what happens to these men — they don't always stay apathetic about Jesus. Eventually they become His greatest enemies and the human reason for His crucifixion (12:24; 26:59). And this was always the way Israel treated the prophets (23:37).
 - ✓ Apathy about Jesus invariably does not stay neutral; it must either turn to love of Christ or hatred of Christ, but it will rarely stay indifferent about Christ (and indifference is actually hatred).

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.” [Lewis, *Mere Christianity*.]

3. The Magi, who WORSHIPPED (vv. 1-2, 9-12)

- The *magi* were not magicians or sorcerers; they were advisors and “wise men” who likely also were astronomers; they were high-ranking officials in their government (Dan. 2:13, 48).
 - ✓ Because Daniel was associated with these men when in captivity in Babylon, it is *possible* that he taught them about Israel’s Messiah and when they saw the *star* they made the connection to Messiah. There was something about the star that made it *His star* — they were certain of the connection.

- ✓ There have been many attempts to figure out what was going on in the heavens to determine exactly what star this was. We just don't know. In fact, in vv. 9-10, it seems clear that it wasn't a "star" since a star can't lead to a specific house; that star was some other kind of light, so perhaps this was as well — perhaps the shekinah of God, the outshining of His glory. We don't know, but that seems logical.
 - ✓ It is also unclear from what country they came — Matthew only says **from the East**. We don't know.
 - ✓ We also don't know how many magi there were, but there almost certainly weren't three, but a caravan since **all Jerusalem**, v. 3, was aware of their presence.
 - ✓ What is important about the magi is not what they did, their country of origin, or how many there were. What is important is why they went to Jerusalem: **we...have come to worship...**
 - ✓ Notice that they saw the star, made their evaluation ("Messiah") and then traveled to Jerusalem.
 - ✓ There was no hesitation in these Gentile politicians; they were convinced about the advent of the Jewish Messiah. There is a contrast between the magi and Herod/religious leaders and I am convinced that is the very purpose of Matthew including this in his account — he wants us to see the difference between genuine worship and apathetic knowledge and hostile hatred of Christ.
- These men not only desired to worship, but they did worship:
 - ✓ **They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy** (v. 10) — "their joy knew no bounds." [Vos] And that joy was over an infant born to a poor couple! This is fundamental to worship — joy and delight in the One who is worshipped. There is no genuine worship if there is no genuine joy in Christ.
 - ✓ And notice the contrast in these verses — "They had just had an audience with Herod, a monarch who was a regular associate of Augustus (Octavian) Caesar and a friend of Cleopatra and Antony. Yet, there had been no indication of such exultation in his presence. Certainly they had information about this child that excited their hearts. And even in the humble surroundings of a carpenter's home in lowly Bethlehem, their joy was not diminished." [Glasscock]
 - ✓ They came into the house and **saw the child...and they fell...and worshipped Him** — Notice that they saw Jesus *and* Mary, but they worshipped only **Him**. Christ alone was the object of their humility and submission.
 - ✓ They evidenced their worship through the giving of **gifts** — there has been much speculation about the meaning of the gifts. It is enough to simply say they were expressions of delight in the One they worshipped. Because they worshipped, they gave gifts (their delight turned to doing).
 - ✓ Beyond that, all we can accurately say is the gifts were extravagant, worthy of a King, and generous enough to provide for the family financially for the trip to Egypt.
 - Notice one more thing about these men — Herod has asked them to return to him (v. 8); **God** overrode that with special revelation to them in a **dream not to return to Herod** — and they didn't hesitate to believe and obey (which is worship — remember, obedience to God's revealed will is basic to worship).

- Here is the remarkable part of this story: the gospel of Matthew is the revelation of Israel's Messiah (King) to Israel — and the first people to worship the King in this account are...Gentiles! And the last word in this gospel is a declaration that the gospel of the King is for the nations (28:18-20).
 - ✓ Israel's promises are for sharing with the world, and the Messiah above all came to do that.
 - ✓ Herod, "king" of Israel, is afraid of and hates this "new" King.
 - ✓ Israel and her religious leaders are apathetic about her King.
 - ✓ Gentile wise men responded to the revelation of God with faith and worship.
 - They delight in the King. They were willing to travel for weeks or months to see him for a day. And they were willing to give great treasures to an infant child.
 - They obey the King. They prostrated themselves before Him in humility and they immediately obeyed God when given a command (v. 12).
 - This is the essence of genuine worship and serves as a good model for us as we end this Christmas season and enter a new year.
 - ... Am I intentionally working to feed my delight in Christ? Am I happy in Jesus? (which is a separate question from "do I obey?") Is He my treasure (Mt. 13:44; Jn. 21:15-17)?
 - ... Because I delight in Him, do I obey Him? Does He have my heart and my obedience?

CONCLUSION: I mentioned earlier a commentator who I thought summarized the chapter well. When I first read from him I omitted his last sentence; hear what he says:

"The primary purpose of this chapter is not to portray the King in His infancy and childhood; there is nothing in the chapter which describes Jesus Himself. The leading aim is to indicate the reception given to the Messiah by the world. *The Jews are apathetic and Gentiles worship Him.*" [Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 47; my emphasis.]

The King has come. Come and worship the King.

BENEDICTION: Luke 2:29-32 (Simeon's prayer)