

Which King Shall We Follow?
Matthew 2:1-12

I. Introduction— Light display in Seattle’s neighborhood (creche, shepherd, and three wise men across the street!)

The new calendar went up on the wall last weekend, and flipping the page to a new year was again a refreshing and renewing experience. I don’t know how you feel about it, looking back. But 2021 carried a lot of heavy burdens, and there are black marks on many squares: certainly nationally, if not personally. Over the years, I have found the first day of the New Year to be a spiritually-renewing day. Regardless of how the football games turn out, turning the calendar to January 1 is a reminder of the new life that is ahead of us under the name “2022.”

People view “new life” in different ways, especially this year. There are the adventurers who fling themselves into experiences and experiments with life, through personal re-invention or through new relationships or renewed travel postponed because of the pandemic . . . Then there are those who long for “the good old days” —like pre-Covid “normal” —when we didn’t have to learn a new app on a newfangled phone in order to use the television. Right?

There is always danger in one’s life of stopping the clock, and that’s why we need January 1 every year. We are tempted to settle for the *status quo*, to declare, “This life is enough, and comfortable enough, and I will not budge from it.” It is a temptation to prefer not to learn anything new, not to get up-to-date with technological advances, not to engage in an ever-changing culture with the steadfast claims of the gospel.

Periodically it is good to take stock of the direction we are going individually, and the New Year is a convenient time to do that. For the Christian, that means asking if our lives are aligned with Jesus Christ’s purposes or if we have unwittingly chosen a different king to follow in the last twelve months. As a preface to that spiritual checkup, let’s take a look at the text for this morning.

II. The setting: the characters and the scene

Matt. 2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’”

Matt. 2:7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “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.” ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star

that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

A. A new king was on the way! Clues:

- Angel appeared to Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth . . .
- Keen sense of expectation among God's people
Gal. 4: "In the fullness of time, God sent his Son . . .")
- A new star appears → The Magi recognized something new

B. Some unusual characters appear early in Matthew's gospel: outsiders we know as "the Magi" show a remarkable curiosity and willingness to have their lives redirected. They were

- They were **Gentiles**. They came looking for the King of the Jews, so they were not Jewish.
- They were **wealthy**, based on the gifts they brought. They were people of means
- They were also **professionals** who, apparently, made their livelihood by watching stars. At that time in history, professional stargazers probably wed two different disciplines: astronomy—observation of the behavior of stars, scientifically—and astrology—gleaning a message from the placement and movement of stars.

It's interesting that Matthew, writing to a Jewish audience, would bring into the story heroes who were directly disobeying the Word of God. The Old Testament is adamantly opposed to the use of astrology or seeking guidance in any "magical" way (cf. Deuteronomy 17:3; 18:10-12). I find that fact one of the first interesting ironies of this story.

So, the "wise men" are outsiders to the manger scene, which we gazed upon so intently in the last few weeks. Because they were not Jews, they didn't know the story or what the world was to expect.

III. But amazingly, the outsiders become insiders merely by pursuing truth to its source. In doing so, they managed to avoid some traps:

- they did not interpret the signs according to their own insights. They investigated with an open mind.
- they did not to bow to a lesser "king," namely Herod, nor did they assume he was trustworthy
- they did not allow themselves to be used by a lesser king for his own goals
- And then, once wowed by the True King, they didn't travel the familiar route toward home (through Jerusalem), and risk bringing danger to the baby and his parents before his divine mission could be carried out.

IV. Since the Magi were so successful at finding the True King, perhaps we can learn from them. How can *we* be sure we are following the True King and not some imposter? What did they do?

They observed the star. They saw something so remarkable in the sky and from it took such import that they literally moved themselves across many hundreds of miles to the place where that star rested. They recognized that a very important event elsewhere was happening, something they had to investigate for themselves.

They observed, perhaps, the convergence of Saturn and Jupiter. Or perhaps it was a supernova. Who knows? It falls into the category of “**natural revelation**” because through Creation God was revealing his presence. I have no problem if scientists discover exactly what that star-happening was. The fact is that God created a supernatural moment, using natural substance, natural things around us, to point the direction. Natural revelation is God’s glory manifest worldwide all the time by God’s gracious hand to indicate there is a Creator behind the creation (cf. Romans 1:19-20). That’s what natural revelation does. It’s not specific to Jesus yet, but it is something that perks up the ears and lights the eyes to start looking for the Creator behind the creation. It is the reason why the Wise Men began their journey. But following the star won’t take them to the end of the journey without other information.

What kinds of input get you moving in a new direction? It’s an interesting question: what are we looking for and where do we get direction? Are our “reliable sources” based in fact, based on truth, or are they based on assumptions? Or on prejudice? We’re all guided by something. Is it a mere star or is it something else?

The star guides the Magi to Jerusalem. You notice that it is not the star that gets them all the way to Bethlehem. **The star merely gets the Magi to the neighborhood**, to the general neck of the woods of this amazing historical event. Jerusalem is five miles north of Bethlehem. So they’re in the neighborhood, and they go and give their greetings to King Herod. They ask, “Okay. We’re trying to figure out what this star means. And we’re wondering if you’re expecting the birth of a king?” which, of course, heightens Herod’s paranoia to the nth degree because *he’s* the king, and he’s going to stay the king, as long as possible, no matter how many people he has to kill to stay on the throne. Herod was ruthless.

But they’re asking this innocent question, and Herod, not knowing the answer, calls in the professional Scripture readers and students, the “chief priests and teachers of the Law,” and asks them, “What are these Magi talking about? I want to know so that I also can go and worship this new king.” Ha, Ha, ha.

That general, natural revelation—the star—now has pointed them specifically to **Scripture and scriptural revelation**. What do they do? They go to the prophecy of Micah in which the birthplace of the new King is pinpointed, Bethlehem, and the one who would rise out of Bethlehem to give leadership to the nation (cf. Micah 5:2).

So the answer is Bethlehem. And the Magi, who have come a long way, so far, say, “All right. We’re almost there. Let’s go.” And they hightail it down five miles, just *five miles* from Jerusalem, to Bethlehem where they find Jesus. Isn’t that ironic? The Magi, the outsiders, are the ones who, when *they* read the Bible and see the star, put two and two together and hurry to Bethlehem to find the Savior. Meanwhile, neither Herod nor the religious professionals of

Jerusalem move a foot in that direction. They're the ones who supposedly knew the Word, and they just sat there with an appalling lack of curiosity.

It's important to note that natural revelation by itself does not bring us to Christ. Observing snow-capped mountains or experiencing the roar of ocean waves or catching a meteor shower does not, in and of itself, bring us to Christ. Golfing on Sunday morning does not bring us to Christ, but the beauty of the hills and the sparkling morning sky may point us in the right direction. Natural revelation elicits a curiosity that draws us to the more detailed, refined map. We find Christ in the Holy Scriptures! And that's how the Magi found him also.

It was the Word which refined the search of the Magi to find now the Savior. We have the star, we have the Scripture, and now we have **the Savior himself**. Salvation is revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Upon greeting the babe, their immediate response was to bow and worship because they recognized who he was and what he came to do. This is a stunning moment: outsiders, coming to this moment of truth without decades of study of the Holy Book, meet Jesus and recognize salvation is to be found in him.

They realized this was just not an ordinary birth. This was not a potential king. This is the king who deserves even *our* non-Jewish worship. This is the one. This one is so valuable, this one is so important for the world, we can't let Herod know his whereabouts. We can't reveal that secret just yet because this one must be protected to accomplish the work God has sent him to do.

And so the last verse of the Scripture says, "They went home by another route." You don't need to go through Jerusalem to get back East. You can go another way. And they took it. They left in secret. This time, they were guided by an angel, a spokesperson for God, saying, "The child will be in danger if Herod knows he is here. Go another way home." And they did.

V. The Lessons

- A. God is still providing signs that point us to the True King, and Jesus is indeed worthy of our worship
- B. There are still "kings" who want our attention and our allegiance. We must not follow them at the expense of faithfulness to Jesus Christ.

Now more than ever we need the gift of discernment, so that we will not inadvertently follow a lesser king or a diluted gospel or an attractive ideology or the evil one in a cloak of light.

Which King shall we follow? The King of kings and Lord of Lords!

- C. No matter what is clamoring for our allegiance or our attention, we can rest in the knowledge that God remains steadfast in his character and nature. He is not a moving target. He can be found. We can trust him and follow his lead. And

Stay alert! Stay open to God's leading! Stay in the Word! Stay faithful!