

12/31 - "The Journey of the Wise Men"

Matthew 2:1-6

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2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose 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 Messiah was to be born.

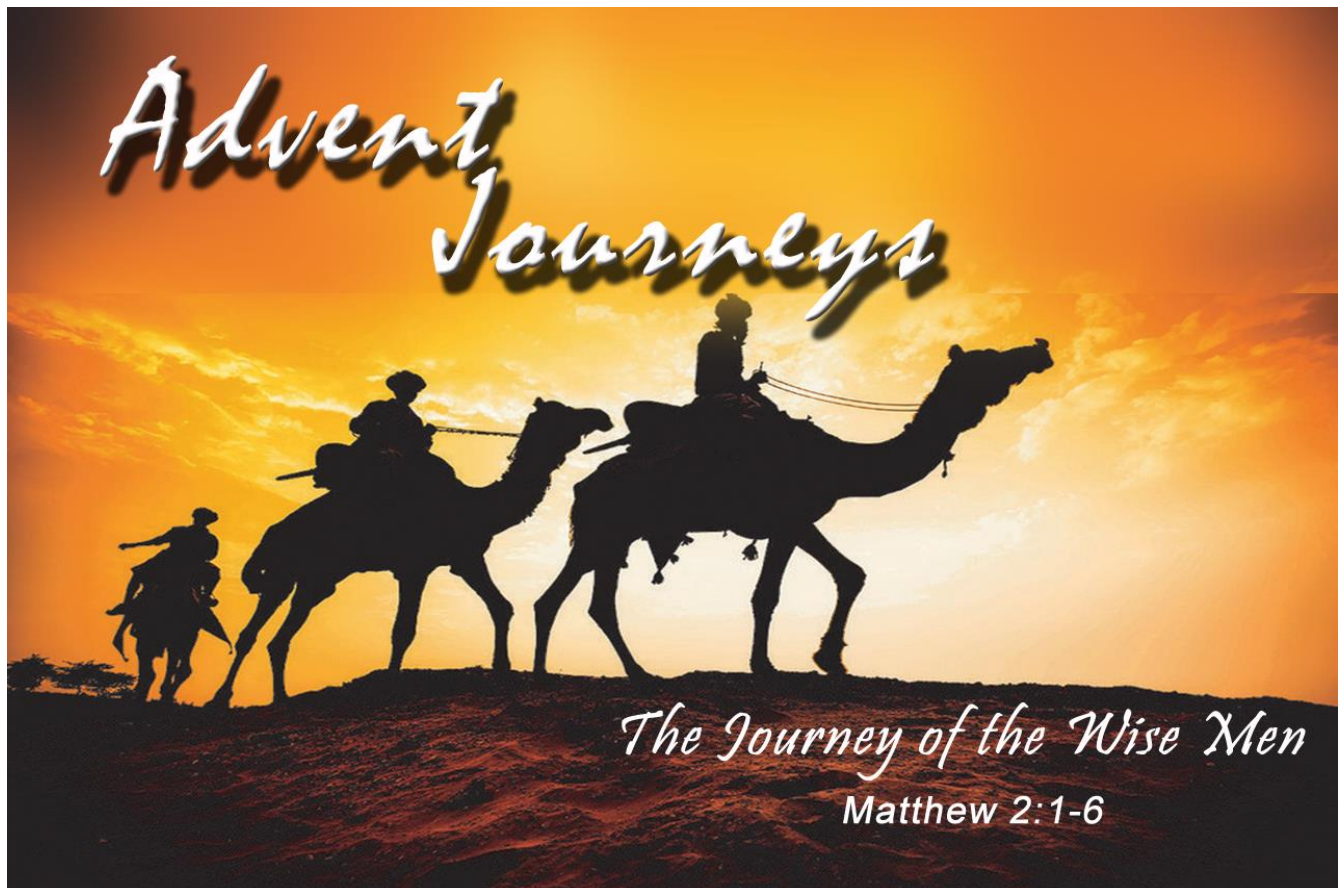
5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

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 shepherd my people Israel.'"

Special Music: "He is the Gift"

Shawna Belt Edwards

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FZ4JA3YZCj0>



MELCHIOR

The old sage rubbed his hands gently above the burning candle as he let his cold fingers receive warmth from the burning wick. The chill of the night pulled at him to return to his chambers for a warm blanket and some rest, but he wanted to finish the work that he had on his writing table, or at least get to a stopping point. Tomes, scrolls, and parchments surrounded where he worked, both on the table and on the chairs around it, with others on the floor. The single large candle on the candle stand was the only source of light in the room, and as the flame danced to the breeze from the open window, shadows frolicked and played in the light. It might have been distracting if not for his focus on completing his work.

Being an astrologer by trade, a wise man, a counselor in the king's court, meant long nights sorting through sundry texts and prophecies, cross referencing them in order to determine what was to come next from what had been foretold. His fingers were stiff from his constant grip on the quill in the chilled air. If he had been in his rooms, he could have closed the windows, but up in the research tower where he was working there was no way to close off the breeze. A fire burned in the fireplace but did little to warm the room.

The scratch of the quill across the parchment was the only sound other than the hourly call from the watch tower. He made his own ink from lampblack and glue, and he was starting to run low which meant he would need to set aside time from his studies in order to make more.

It was difficult to read by candlelight, but he had done so for many years and had gotten used to it. However, as he had aged, he had also noticed that reading by candlelight was becoming more difficult as his eyesight began to fail. He wasn't sure how he would be able to continue his work when he was no longer able to see and be of use to his king.

Dip. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. Dip. Scratch. Scratch. His writing added a rhythm to an otherwise quiet evening. His robes were dirty and needed to be cleaned. He had not had time to give them to the washer woman. He would need to make time. They had begun to itch.

Dip. Scratch. Scratch. Scratch. Pause. Suddenly there seemed to be more light coming into the room from the window. How strange. The moon had not yet risen this evening. But yes, there was a gentle light streaming in from the unshuttered window. The old mage rested his quill, rose from his seat, and moved to the opening to better see what might be causing the light. Unfortunately, his view out the window was not conducive to viewing the light's source. He moved from the window to the staircase that opened out onto the roof. Carefully he climbed, praying that the object would still be there when he reached a better vantage point.

Opening the door, he stepped out onto the roof. He had often come here to view the stars; sometimes to aid in his studies and sometimes just to observe the wonder and majesty of the night sky. He looked toward the East, the direction he knew the light to be coming from and saw it. A star. A brilliant star. One not on his astrological maps. Perhaps a new star. By far it was the most brilliant light in

the heavens. It radiated blue-white luminescence in all directions around it. The star was so very different than the other stars of the night. The tail was long, descending almost to the earth itself. And yes, it was in the direction of Jerusalem. What could that mean? Something nudged his mind and tickled his thoughts, but he couldn't quite latch onto it. He needed to check something in his texts.

Not wanting to leave the parapet, he forced himself back downstairs to the reference room. He began moving books, scrolls, and parchments around looking for an old Hebrew reference. Yes. There it is! The ancient Hebrew text known as Numbers. Oh, how he wished his eyesight were better as he moved the text closer to the candle. He read intently through the tome looking for an obscure reference that plagued him.

The sage remembered his training and studies and thought about what the star could mean. Yes. The rising of such a star meant the birth of a new king.

Ah, here it is:

**“I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,
the skulls of all the people of Sheth.
Edom will be conquered;
Seir, his enemy, will be conquered,
but Israel will grow strong.**

**A ruler will come out of Jacob
and destroy the survivors of the city.”**

But wait! Moab, Sheth, and Edom have already been destroyed! What could the prophecy mean? And why now? What king is being born at this moment? Where? Why?

The sage forced himself to calm his confusion and think. Micah. The Hebrew prophet Micah! Micah had something to say about this.

The king’s counselor pushed more scrolls around, threw open texts, shuffled through more parchment, and eventually found the text for the Hebrew prophet Micah. Now, where was the reference? I know it’s here! Where is it? Here. Here. I have it.

**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 shepherd my people Israel.**

That has to be it! “I must be to Jerusalem to see for myself!” he shouted out loud.

A guard came pounding on the door. “Counselor! Counselor!” Are you in need? Open the door! I’ve come to check on you!”

The sage hurried to the door the best he could and opened it. “Yes! Yes! I am alright. But quick! I need two messengers. Be quick about it!”

The guard hurried in search of two messengers and the mage went to his writing table and scribbled out two messages. One for each of his friends, Balthasar and Casper. They simply said “Have you seen it? In the East? Come quick. We must be off to Jerusalem. We must see this for ourselves. Bring treasure for this new king.”

Just as he finished writing the notes, the messengers arrived. Excitedly, he spoke to them in a loud voice, “Leave now and deliver these messages with the utmost urgency.” The messengers nodded and hurried off to deliver the messages to the kingdoms where Casper and Balthasar served the courts of their own kings. The sage returned to his writing desk to start planning for the journey, but he could not concentrate. Instead, he arose, grabbed a blanket, and climbed back up to the roof.

For the rest of the night, he sat on the roof and stared at this new object in the heavens, his mind heavy with the implications of events soon to take place. He is come, and I must make preparations to journey and worship this new king. I see change ahead. This new king will turn the world upside down and I will be there to witness it.

Throughout the Bible we read about men who were part of this or that king's court. We have Daniel serving as a wise man for Belshazzar and Xerxes. Joseph serving Pharaoh. Nehemiah was in service to the court of Artaxerxes. Mordecai, the cousin of Esther, ended up serving as a wise man in the court of Xerxes. Jehoshaphat sought the counsel of Elisha. The counsel of any wise men was considered invaluable to kings around the world.

Wisemen were involved in all kinds of different sciences, including but not limited to the paranormal. They studied ancient texts, interpreted dreams, searched for evidence and substantiation of prophecy. They often offered prophecy themselves as well.

It was also an extremely dangerous job. If you were relatively good at your profession, and the king profited from your advice, you were often rewarded with a higher position and additional wealth. However, if the counsel you gave led to a loss for the king, you might be imprisoned, banished, or killed on the spot. Being summoned by a king to provide counsel must have given the sages of the time an adrenaline rush knowing what was at stake. They lived a good life as long as their wisdom had value for the king.

The Bible does not tell us who the Wisemen are. It does not give us their names. It doesn't even tell us how many there were. It is tradition and several Greek texts written around 500 AD with a few references to eastern books and scrolls that provide us with this information. Some of those eastern texts say that there were twelve Magi. I only bring this up to say that where our Biblical references and traditions merge leaves us a bit fuzzy with the details.

What we do know is that the wise men who brought gifts to the new-born king weren't slackers. These men would have been respected by the chief rulers of their day. They had no problem getting an audience with Herod when they arrived in Jerusalem. These men would have been counted among the greatest thinkers of their time, much like our greatest scientists and influencers today. They would have been known wherever they went. And when they spoke, it was with confidence and authority.

Herod doesn't question their quest. But I imagine that he was a bit confused to know that these great seekers of wisdom had entered his kingdom looking for a baby born who would be the greatest king the world had ever known. And all of his own counselors, sages, and astrologers had somehow missed it. They attest to knowing about the prophecy, but the event had just seemed to miss getting their attention. Like most kings, Herod was not one who enjoyed surprises and this one had blind-sided him.

Even worse, it had occurred over a year before. I'm sure they were embarrassed that they had missed this event, and I imagine that Herod was probably considering some personnel changes. Here was this group of well-reknown scholars bringing information that he was totally unaware of, and they brought treasure, not for him, but for a baby who was going to displace him. Since he obviously couldn't trust his own advisors, he would just let these smart guys from far away do the work that his own counselors should have done in the first place. He would let them find the baby. And when they had gone back to wherever they came from, he would take care of the problem himself. He did ask

these wise men to let him know when and where they found the child so that he could go worship the child himself. Herod treated everyone around him like a pawn in a chess game, including the baby Jesus.

These wise men had no problem finding the Christ child. They went to Bethlehem and presented themselves at the door of the house where Joseph and Mary were living. They brought gold, incense, and spices, things that would become very important to Joseph and Mary in the days ahead. We need to realize that it wasn't about the gifts as much as it was about the acknowledgement and worship for the new king. We know through the events in the Bible that this all occurred between one and two years after the time Jesus was born, because as soon as the Wise Men had experienced this moment with the Christ Child, they had a dream that told them not to return to Herod, but take a different route home. Which they did. At which point, an angel appeared to Joseph and told him to take his family to Egypt and stay there until things were safe at home.

Just when we think that Herod couldn't do worse than he already had, he orders all the boys in Bethlehem that were two years old or younger to be killed in an effort to save his own throne. Little did he realize that he would die soon after this proclamation. It isn't until after Herod's death later the same year that Joseph returns with his family, not to Bethlehem, but to Nazareth where Mary and Joseph's journey began when she was pregnant and about to deliver.

It is at times like these that calendars are not our friend. Various calendars and ways of determining dates have changed and been modified for ages and they don't always line up with each other. Trying to determine an accurate

timeline can make one's head spin. Jesus was born under the Julian calendar which was established in 46 BC and based on a 10-month cycle. It was revised several times before the Gregorian calendar was instituted in 1592. Most scholars now agree that Herod died in 4 BC, which really messes with our Christmas story time-line since we commonly accept that the birth of Jesus marks the change in the direction of the calendar. The order from Herod is documented in both the Bible and the history books. So, I'm not really sure the details of the date of Jesus' birth matter much. I am perfectly willing to let the calendar scholars deal with the inconsistencies as long as the chronology is accepted.

Our focus when we look at these wise men and their journey should be that when they saw the sign in the sky, they dropped everything else to come worship the new king. And they brought with them the means to help Joseph get his family out of Bethlehem in advance of the events that Herod was putting in motion.

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

The Wise Men had to travel over 900 miles to get to Jerusalem and they didn't start their journey until after the Christ Child was born. Even pushing hard, Jesus would have been a small child by the time they arrived.

All over the world, people chase certain events. Some travel a long distance to see a total eclipse of the sun. Others to see the eruption of a volcano or ice sheets shifting in the Arctic and Antarctic. Then there are those who want to experience the Northern Lights or the Sargasso Straits. There are those that travel to Jerusalem or Mecca for Holy days. There is a driving force among human souls to seek out certain events or visit the historical sites for those events. The Wise Men had the opportunity to experience this wondrous event of the arrival of Jesus Christ, even if they were not fully aware of what that truly meant. They were not traveling to see the birth of the Son of God, but to experience the ultimate worship experience of a new great king. The star that they followed brought an element of the supernatural, the spiritual, a connection with something or someone greater than them. They weren't Jews awaiting the Messiah. They were astrologers, prophets, scholars, and wise counselors. And although the journey was considered part of their jobs, a career-defining moment if you will, their joy at being part of this extraordinary event must have brought them great personal joy and satisfaction. Witnessing the unfolding of prophecy is something they lived for. It was like taking a deep breath into their souls. And while their curiosity was satisfied, they experienced something far more. Even if they didn't realize it at the time, they knelt in the presence of the Son of God, the King of Kings.

So, what has all of this to do with us? Most of us are not considered great scholars. We don't serve in the court of a king. We don't necessarily have the wealth that these wise men had to bring as a gifts to Jesus.

But every human is born with a curiosity of how to connect with a greater power. There is a desire, even if we try to quash it, to seek out our Creator, even if we don't know who or what that means. There's a place in our hearts and souls that we want to fill, but often can't figure out how. So, we go searching for answers, thinking those answers are found in material things, or sometimes emotions. The problem is that we believe that we know what we are looking for and put conditions on the search. We seek from an earthly perspective without necessarily understanding that the matter is actually spiritual. We think that searching for spiritual answers is foolish, a waste of our time, not something worth considering. So, when we do find what we have been looking for, we have a tendency to set it aside because what we found doesn't look like what we are searching for. Remember, the wisemen went looking for a new king, a warrior and what they found was a baby named Jesus. God had become flesh, but that is not what they expected.

And with that knowledge in hand, we need to ask ourselves, are we looking for something physical to satisfy that emptiness in our lives? Or are we looking for something that transcends the physical, something spiritual to fill the emptiness in our hearts?

Jesus came to give of himself to fill that hole in our soul, to satisfy that curiosity that drives us to look for answers concerning our Creator. And we don't have to travel to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, or Mecca to find those answers. Jesus is in our presence waiting for us to ask him the questions and to help us step into the presence of our Creator. Are we Wise enough to do that?

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God bless you all,

AMEN

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