

“Wise Men Still Seek Him”
Matthew 2:1-11
Mililani Community Church
Pastor Rick Bartosik
December 22, 1996

Every December, my wife Diane wears a little golden pin on her United Airlines uniform. It's a beautiful pin depicting the three Wise Men following the star to Bethlehem. In her work as a flight attendant, people will sometimes comment on the beauty of the pin. She uses those situations as opportunities to be a witness for Christ.

She wore that little pin on her flight to Los Angeles this past week. She came to one seat, where there were two young girls, seven and ten years old. The seven year old said, "That's a pretty pin." Diane responded, "Do you know what the pin means?" They both looked carefully at the three men on camels following a star. . . .and then said, "No." They didn't know what it signified. Then Diane explained, "It's the three Wise Men following the star to Bethlehem to see the baby Jesus." "Do you know that story?" They both said, "No". They had never heard it before.

Over the next few hours as they flew across the Pacific, many people commented on the beautiful pin; but to Diane's amazement, not a single one seemed to understand or at least did not acknowledge that they understood what it symbolized. She came to one lady with a six year old boy. The woman commented, "Oh, what a beautiful pin!" Diane said to her little son, "Do know the story of the Three Wise men following the star to find the baby Jesus?" But the mother interrupted and said, "No, he doesn't . . .and we don't teach him about that." Not only did that little boy not know the story, his mother did not even want him to hear it, and intentionally kept him ignorant of it! She seemed to be offended that Diane would try to tell her son the story.

Throughout the flight, people were attracted to the glitter of the pin---but in every case, the people Diane met were either indifferent to its meaning, or did not understand its meaning, or in one case a mother did not want her little six year old son to even hear the story of the birth of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the coming of the Wise Men.

Diane's experience this past week is a very appropriate introduction to the message this morning---because the main purpose Matthew's account of the coming of the Wise Men is to show us how the Lord Jesus was received by the world when He came. How he was received at his birth, anticipated the reception he would receive by Jews and Gentiles. It also illustrates how people have responded to Jesus Christ throughout history--and how they respond today.

There are three possible responses to Jesus Christ: Some, like King Herod are immediately offended by Him, and filled with open hatred and rejection. Others, like the chief priests and scribes, pay little attention to Jesus. They are indifferent to His claims; and like those religious leaders, they often don't even bother to examine whether His claims might be true. But others like the Wise Men, are led by God's Spirit to seek for Him, and when they find Him they receive him gladly and worship him as their Lord.

BIG IDEA: Let's look this morning then at these three responses to the Lord Jesus Christ, as they are illustrated in our text by Herod, the religious leaders of Israel, and the Wise Men.

In verses one and two Matthew begins the story by telling us about. . .

1. THE COMING OF THE WISE MEN (1-2)

Their arrival in Jerusalem took place several months after the birth of Jesus, perhaps more than a year after his birth. Notice that the family is no longer in a stable. They are living in a house (verse 11).

Many legends have developed around these men. We sing the Christmas carol: "We three kings of orient are," but the Bible does not say they were kings. It only says they were Magi or Wise Men. The Bible also does not say there were three. We don't know how many there were. Only that they presented three gifts. And we don't know that they rode on camels. We have added a lot of things in our traditions that the Bible does not tell us.

Who were the wise men and where did they come from?

Origen, one of the early church Fathers believed the wise men came from Babylon. He had good reason to believe this. We read about the wise men of Babylon in the book of Daniel.

The wise men were among the highest ranking officials in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar. They were the scholars of their time. They were experts in astronomy and astrology. Because of their knowledge in the fields of science, and mathematics, and agriculture, and astronomy their influence grew until they became the most powerful group of advisors to King Nebuchadnezzar.

Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king who destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 586 BC, and took the Jewish nation into captivity. The book of Daniel records how he picked some of the choicest young men from Israel and assigned them to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans. Daniel and his three friends were among these young men. At the end of three years the king gave them an examination and found Daniel and his three friends to be far advanced beyond his own soothsayers and conjurers. So they entered into the king's personal service.

In Daniel chapter 2 Nebuchadnezzar had a dream that troubled him; but apparently he forgot the dream. So he called in the wise men and ordered them to tell him his dream and the interpretation. When they couldn't, he ordered all the wise men of the realm, which included Daniel, to be killed.

Daniel prayed and God revealed to him the dream and its interpretation. Daniel told it to the King and saved his own life and the lives of all the wise men in Babylon. As a result the king appointed Daniel the ruler over all the wise men (v. 48)

Knowing what we know about the character of Daniel, we can be sure that he took advantage of this opportunity to instruct the wise men about the true God. I'm sure they learned a lot about the OT scriptures--including the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. As a result the wise men of Babylon began expecting this Messiah foretold by Daniel.

When Jesus was born, God revealed to the wise men that the Messiah, the King of the Jews, promised by Daniel had been born. He spoke to them in the language they could understand--a sign in the sky--a star that announced the birth of Christ.

There have been many theories about this star. Some have said it was a comet. Others that it was a conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars. But verse 9 shows that this was not a physical heavenly body at all. It guided the wise men to Bethlehem and stood directly over the house where Jesus and his family lived. It was the Shekinah glory of God--the visual expression of the glory of God in the OT.

In the time of Moses the Shekinah glory of God appeared as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night (Ex 13:21). The same glory shone on the shepherds when they learned of Christ's birth in Luke 2:9. The wise men saw a similar manifestation of God's glory, which appeared to them like a star. So they came to Jerusalem--perhaps a journey of 1000 miles to worship the one who had been born king of the Jews.

These men were foreigners and Gentiles. Since they knew about the birth of the King of the Jews, they must have assumed that everyone in Judea would know about his birth. IMAGINE THEIR SURPRISE when they arrived and began asking "where is he who has been born king of the Jews," and no one seemed to know what they were talking about.

Matthew says (verse 3) that when Herod the king heard it, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him. . . .

2. THE RESPONSE OF HEROD TO NEWS OF CHRIST'S BIRTH (3-8)

The term troubled means "shaken" or "agitated," like a washing machine on the heavy duty cycle. When Herod got upset, all Jerusalem got shook up.

To appreciate this, lets look into Herod's history.

First of all, Herod's title was "king of the Jews" He received this title from the Roman emperor in 40 B.C. Then he was given an army and sent to Palestine to carve out his own kingdom. That was his great driving ambition--to be a king. He finally triumphed after three years of fighting. Herod was not a Jew by race. Actually he was an Edomite. But, in order to make himself more acceptable to the Jews he married a Jewish princess named Mariamne.

Jospehus the Jewish historian pictures Herod as a very capable warrior, orator and diplomat. He was also a great builder. He built theaters, race tracks and other structures to provide entertainment for the people. In 19 BC he began the reconstruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. It was not completed until 64 AD just 6 years before its total destruction in 70 AD. He also built several fortresses. The most famous was Masada. In AD 73 nearly 1000 Jewish defenders committed suicide rather than be captured by the Romans.

Besides being capable, Herod was also crafty and cruel. He knew the Jews thought of him as a foreigner--as a result he was very jealous, suspicious and afraid of his position and power. He was determined to get rid of anyone whom he thought might try to deprive him of his power. He saw his wife's brother, Aristobulus as a threat to his throne, so in 35 BC he had him drowned in a fake swimming accident. Then his wife's grandfather seemed to be a threat. He had him killed in 30 BC. Then he killed his wife in 29 BC., and his mother-in law in 28 BC, along with two of his own sons. Five days before his death, he had a third son executed. Caesar once said it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.

One of the greatest evidences of his insane cruelty was having the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem arrested and put in prison just before his death. He knew that no one would mourn his own death, so he gave orders for them to be executed the moment he died in order to guarantee that there would be mourning in Jerusalem.

He was about 69 years old and in the final year of his life, when the wise men came. What he did in verse 16 is in keeping with all we know about his character. READ v. 16. He slaughtered all the babies in Bethlehem.

No wonder that when Herod was troubled, everyone in Jerusalem was shook up.

VERSE 4: His first response was to gather together all the chief priests and scribes of the people. The chief priests included the high priests and other influential priests. By this time, the chief priests were not godly men. They were the religious leaders of Israel, but they were nothing more than corrupt, religiously oriented politicians. The scribes were the authorities on the Jewish law.

Herod asked these men where the Christ was to be born. Their response is seen in vv 5-6.

3. THE RESPONSE OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS (5-6)

These corrupt religious politicians and theologians told him what he wanted to know. They pulled out their Old Testaments and pointed to Micah 5:2 and announced that Bethlehem was to be the place of the Messiah's birth. Bethlehem is only five miles from Jerusalem.

You would have thought that they would have rushed to Bethlehem on the slightest rumor. But they seemed to be totally indifferent. The wise men had traveled 1000 miles on much less knowledge. But these men wouldn't even go five miles.

Application: There are some people who have tremendous head knowledge about the Bible and the Lord Jesus Christ. They may even be so-called Bible scholars. But they are the enemies of Christ. We can have a lot of head knowledge but knowledge alone does not save us. We have to experience the grace of God in our hearts. As I often told the men in chapel at the State Prison, a lot of people miss heaven by just 18 inches.

Finally we see the response of the Wise men. . . .

4. THE RESPONSE OF THE WISE MEN (9-12)

I want you to notice several things about the wise men:

Their diligence in seeking Christ. Think of the trouble it must have cost them to leave their homes and travel to the place where Jesus was born. No limousines, no Holiday inns, no MacDonald hamburger stands along the way. And there were dangers. But none of these things moved them. They had set their hearts on seeking the one born king of the Jews. They did not rest until they had found him. What has seeking after Christ cost us? What diligence have we shown in following Him?

The discouragement they faced when they got to their destination. They probably thought the whole city would be jubilant about his birth. But they walked the streets only to meet no one who knew anything about Him. Quite a contrast between what they had seen in the East and what they found in Jerusalem. They must have been perplexed over the effect of their question: No one knew about this king. No one seemed to want him.

It got them upset to have someone talking about him so openly. All this anticipates the words in John 1:9-12: *"The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God."*

Their discovery of the king. They didn't find him in a palace. They found him among the poorest people in a nation that had lost its freedom. This is the king whose coming was announced by a star? Is this all? Jesus disappoints ----- as well as fulfills ----the expectations of men. But they were not disappointed. They bowed down and worshipped him. They prostrated themselves before Him and offered their treasure to him: Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. GOLD--suggests royalty. An appropriate gift for a KING. FRANKINCENSE--100 times in the OT always associated with an offering made to GOD.

MYRRH--perfume used in preparing dead bodies for burial--Used in John 19 in the preparation of Christ's body. Appropriate for one who came to die as a sacrifice for our sins. Origen said, *"the Magi brought gold, as to a King---Myrrh as to one who was mortal---and incense as to one who was God."*

The wise men were willing to search diligently for Jesus. When they found him they were willing to prostrate themselves before Him and give their treasure to Him.

CONCLUSION

So here we have seen three typical responses that people have made throughout history to the Lord Jesus Christ: Some, like Herod, are immediately offended by Christ and filled with open hatred. They want nothing to do with him except to attack him and attack his word and if possible destroy it. Others, like the chief priests and scribes, pay little attention to Jesus Christ. They are indifferent. They don't bother to investigate his claims. What they do know they don't accept or obey. Eventually they join the first group. Because indifference to Christ is simply hatred concealed and rejection delayed. Others, like the wise men from the East accept the Lord when he comes to them. They may have little of his light, but they know it is his light. They believe and obey.

Notice the final words of this passage: "They returned to their country by another route." The KJV says, "they departed another way." These words imply something which we can apply to our own lives. If you have truly met Jesus Christ. If you have truly seen and worshipped him as the wise men did. Then, from that time on your route will be different. Have you had the experience of the wise men? Or are you still going along the same old way?

Pascal once said, there is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man that only God can fill. Some people look for success or money or a relationship with another person they can't seem to find---to fill that God-shaped vacuum. Eventually we have to learn that no one and nothing can fill that vacuum except God himself. St. Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself O God and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

Any other way is a dead end that leads only to judgement. Romans 3:16-17 says, "**Ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.**" Matthew 7:13-14: "**Wide is the gate and broad the way that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.**"

There is only one way to life. Jesus said, "**I am the way, the truth and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me.**" All other ways only end in disappointment and ruin. C. S. Lewis said: "*Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in.*"

Every single one of us has an appointment made for us by God himself. That appointment is our appointment to meet Jesus Christ. Because the appointment was made by God himself, that appointment is inescapable. As someone once said, Jesus Christ stands at the end of life's road for everyone without exception. And He stands there as your Savior or your Judge. The prophet Amos wrote (Amos 4:12), "**Prepare to meet your God.**" I want to close with the awesome admonition of Psalm 2:10-12: "**Be wise O Kings, take warning O judges of the earth. Do homage to the Son.....for his wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him.**" Have you taken refuge in Jesus? Have you trusted in Him as your Savior from sin?