

## THE SONG THAT MUST BE SUNG

Matthew 2:1-18

2<sup>nd</sup> in a Two-Part Christmas Set - Topic: Worship

In 1974 KFC launched a big ad campaign for the Christmas season. Christmas isn't the national holiday in Japan that it is here, but being an American company KFC decided to capitalize on the season. They had a simple slogan, "Kurisumasu ni wa kentakki" which meant Kentucky for Christmas. Somehow it caught on and became a national tradition. Even to this day families all over Japan head to the local KFC for a special Christmas Eve meal of fried chicken. Go figure.

In Caracas, Venezuela, somehow it has become a tradition to roller skate to morning mass at the Catholic church on Christmas morning. Many streets have to be closed to traffic so that the skating congregations can get to church safely. Why? Who knows? It just is what it is.

In 1958 television was new. In Sweden there were only 2 channels. One of the channels showed a cartoon special called "Kalle Anka och hans vänner önskar God Jul" which translates to "Donald Duck and his friends wish you a Merry Christmas." Somehow that show became a thing. So that same cartoon is shown on Christmas Day at 3 PM every year. Everything on Christmas is planned around that show. More than 40% of the population tunes in to watch it.

In Ukraine the tradition is to decorate Christmas trees with fake spider webs. Yeah, that's not creepy at all. In Austria Saint Nick has an evil accomplice called Krampus. He supposedly wanders the streets in search of badly behaved children. During the month of December people can expect to see terrifying masked Krampus figures out and about scaring kids and adults with pranks.

There are a lot of strange Christmas traditions around the world. Like watching unbelievably sappy Hallmark movies, for instance. Perhaps it is appropriate to have strange traditions, because the real Christmas story itself has some very strange elements. Today we are going to look at what may be the strangest, certainly the most violent. It is one that is hard to understand, but it has some powerful implications for us. Let's look at Matthew 2:1-18.

## THE MAGI CAME LOOKING FOR THE KING

Verses 1-3 tell us that after Jesus was born in Bethlehem Magi from the east came looking for him. They went to Herod, the local king, and asked where the baby was. This, we are told, "disturbed" Herod and "all Jerusalem" with him." This is familiar stuff to most people in our country. The three "wise men" or "kings" riding on camels are a most familiar image during this season. But who were the Magi? Why are they sometimes called wise men, sometimes kings? Where did they come from and why were they looking for the baby Jesus?

Most of us know something about them. But it is helpful to get a little bit more of their background. The Greek word we see rendered “magi” was actually magoi, which was the plural of magos. It was a Greek word derived from the Persian word magu. Wait, these guys were like Mr. Magoo of cartoon fame? No, that’s just a phonetic similarity. There was no connection. The word had no discoverable meaning other than to refer to this particular group of people. Later it was corrupted and came into English in the form of magic or magician.

This was an ancient group that existed centuries before Christ was born. They were prominent in first the Babylonian, then the Medo-Persian and Parthian empires. They were some of the most educated and intelligent people in their cultures. They studied science, philosophy and religion. Early on they seemed to have little or no theology, but around the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC the Zoroastrian religion became prevalent in Babylon and Persia, and it became the main religion of the magi. Zoroastrians exalted an uncreated, benevolent deity of wisdom they called Ahura Mazda. There are still Zoroastrians today, in fact there are some in our area. That religion had some parallels with Judaism, as evidenced by the idea of an uncreated God, and it also had an emphasis on animal sacrifice like Judaism.

One feature of the magi that was not paralleled in Judaism was that they were heavily into astrology, dream interpretation and other occult practices. Part of the reason for this is that they studied science, and that early in human history, science was thought to include occult ideas. We look down on that as superstition now, and that can cause us to view these men as unsophisticated and superstitious. However, it would probably be wise for us to realize that should this world go on long enough, there will come times when people look back on what we think and see it as absurd and maybe even superstitious. We tend to think that we have reached the zenith of knowledge and all that we think is correct. But I can assure you, that is not the case.

My senior year in high I had a class in Physics. Our teacher required that each of us do a presentation to the class relating to Physics. I can’t even remember what I did, or what anyone else did, for that matter, except for one. There was a presentation by one of the smartest guys in our school that I recall because to me it seemed such a strange idea. It had to do with the build up of gases in our atmosphere caused by pollutants and especially the use of carbon fuels. In his presentation he said that many scientists were increasingly concerned that this was going to cause a serious and potentially damaging change in climate around the world. This was the first time I’d ever heard such an idea, but we hear a lot about it now, don’t we? Oh, but I should probably tell you how the scientists feared our climate would change. They believed that the pollution would block sunlight, leading to global *cooling*. They feared it might be so bad it could result in another ice age!

That’s just a reminder that what we think is the latest advancement in science may be refuted or even look silly not so many years down the road. Yes, it was a long time ago, but it’s not like I’m 500 years old, so it wasn’t all that long ago. My point is that the magi were very intelligent men who were trying to understand how the world works. They were likely as smart as the smartest people in our culture today, if not smarter. They were the most respected people in their culture. They were

advisors to kings. They were the people rulers would first consult for wisdom and understanding and advice.

We are all familiar with the song “We Three Kings.” Why did it refer to them as kings? It was because they became politically powerful. The Persian empire would eventually devolve into the Parthian empire. That empire, by the time of Christ, had a ruling group that consisted of 2 houses, somewhat akin to our Congress. The upper house was made up of the Magi. That group had the authority to determine who should be the king of the empire. So in effect though they were kind of like the Senate in our country today, they were kingmakers. They were kings in the sense of being powerful leaders with a great deal of authority.

How did they happen to show up in Palestine looking for a king who had been born? The roots of that go back several centuries before the birth of Jesus. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC there was a prominent magi named Belteshazzar. He was so wise that he was eventually named chief of the magi. You know him by another name. He was ethnically Hebrew, and his Hebrew name was Daniel. Yes, Daniel was one of the magi in his day, and even became their leader. He was not alone. You remember that he had Hebrew friends who were trained along with him. These Jewish magi were highly respected, and it is quite likely that some of their descendants were also magi. They had some influence on the magi, including passing along to them some of the messages from the great Jewish prophets, including Daniel, about a powerful king would some day be born in Israel, a king that would rule over the entire world.

We know that there was a heightened expectation in Israel around the time of the birth of Jesus that Messiah would come soon. Interestingly, history gives us a few hints that at that time there was a broader sense that a king of great influence would soon arise. The Roman historian Suetonius reported that there was a general belief around that time that a great leader would soon be born. For the magi, it was much more specific. They not only were aware of the prophecies that a king who was a descendant of David, Israel’s greatest king, would be born in Israel, but also had a good idea of the timing of this king’s arrival. They likely knew about Daniel’s prophecy that gave a time line for the coming of Messiah that is recorded in Daniel 9. Because the Parthians were partial to Israel and somewhat allied with them, they thought an Israeli king who would dominate the world scene was a good thing.

So the magi were probably looking for some indication that this coming king had been born. They told Herod, “We saw his star when it rose.” As astrologers and astronomers they studied the heavens. At that time they were anticipating some sign that would tell them the promised king had been born. They saw some star in the sky. What was that star? There have been lots of theories about it being some astronomical phenomenon or maybe a particular alignment of stars or planets. But in the end we don’t know. My suspicion is it was some sort of unusual, maybe even supernatural, phenomenon. If that’s true it was probably not something as obvious as the blazing Christmas star often depicted on Christmas cards. That would have been noted in other historical records. Maybe it was something only people who studied the stars continually would have noticed. The idea that it was an astrological alignment of stars and planets seems unlikely given that verse 9 says the star

stopped over the place where the child was. Whatever the case, these men were studying the heavens looking for an indication that Messiah had been born. When they saw it, they packed up and headed for Israel.

I am pretty sure the magi brought their wives along with them on this journey to see the new king. I know their wives aren't specifically mentioned, but notice when they got to Israel the magi stopped and asked for directions. Do guys do that unless urged to do so by their wives who are tired of wandering around lost? I don't think so. To get directions they went to the local king, who was named Herod. Herod was the ruler of the Jews, but he wasn't actually ethnically Jewish himself. His father was an Edomite. Though Herod claimed to have converted to Judaism, his lifestyle gave no evidence whatsoever that he adhered to much, if any, of that faith. He was the king of the Jews not because he was an heir to that title or because the Jewish people chose him as their king, but because the Roman rulers declared him to be king. He was not popular with the Jewish people because this half Jew had been forced on them by their Roman overlords, and because Herod himself was a terrible person. The latter part of his life he became irrationally and violently awful. And these events took place in that period near the end of his life. The people tolerated him only because they had to. They feared the Romans. When the magi showed up asking about a king who had been born, both Herod and the entire city were disturbed.

It's not too hard to understand why Herod was upset by this news. He knew that the people despised and resented him and he also knew that the only thing that propped him up was Roman power. A new true Jewish king would be very bad news for him because he feared it might result in an uprising against him. But the whole city was also disturbed. Why? We think of 3 magi coming to Israel. There were probably more than 3. There probably were a lot more. They would have traveled with servants and attendants, and there certainly would have been a cavalry company providing security for them because they were important political leaders. So they would have showed up as a large caravan including armed soldiers and some very powerful people.

There was a political component to the concern. While we typically think of Rome as a monolithic superpower, that's not completely accurate. They surely were the preeminent superpower of the first century, but they didn't rule everything. In fact, the Parthian empire, home of the magi, was a rival to Rome in that region. In 55 BC a Roman army attempting to conquer and pacify much of that region, a force of around 50,000 soldiers, encountered an opposing force of Parthians in the battle of Carrhae, which was in what is now Turkey. The Parthian force only numbered around 10,000. It was actually intended to be a scouting force, effecting a recon in force and possibly a sort of delaying action. But the Parthian commander felt after his initial skirmishes that he could take the Romans. A full on battle ensued. Amazingly, even though outnumbered 5 to 1, the Parthians, using superior weapons and tactics, defeated the Romans. They killed somewhere between 20 and 30 thousand and captured 10,000, while suffering relatively light casualties themselves. They decimated the Roman force, causing it to turn back and handing the Romans one of their worst and most humiliating defeats in their history to that time. Later, in 40 BC, the Parthians invaded and took control of Jerusalem for a time, installing their own man, Antigonus, as king. The Romans later took back control of Jerusalem, but Parthia was still out there and still a potential threat to Roman rule.

You can understand why a large Parthian caravan of powerful leaders and an armed force would have stirred up considerable concern among the populace. What did this mean? Was this the precursor to some larger invasion? They were asking about a Jewish child that had been born as the true Jewish king. Were the magi there to establish some sort of alliance with this king, one that might challenge Roman authority in the region? It's not too hard to understand why the arrival of the magi stirred up a lot of discussion.

### THE MAGI WORSHIPED THE KING

Herod, not surprising, had no idea about a king that was promised to Israel. He consulted the experts, the priests and teachers of the law, about where this Messiah was supposed to be born. They quoted Micah 5:2 to him which said a ruler who would shepherd God's people would come out of Bethlehem in the land of Judah. Herod then had a private meeting with the magi. He told them to look for the child in Bethlehem, and after they had found him to come give him the exact location, because he wanted to pay homage to him too.

They headed to Bethlehem, and once again, whatever the star was, it showed up. Somehow it indicated the location of the baby. In our manger scene there are animals and shepherds and wise men. That is probably not accurate. The magi certainly did not show up to see the baby the night he was born. The shepherds did, for they were sent there by the angels. But the magi traveled at least weeks, maybe months to get to the child. Then they had to consult with Herod, who consulted with the experts. By this time the baby would surely not still be in a stable lying in a manger. He was likely several months old, and may have been more than a year old when the magi arrived.

When they found the baby they did what they had come there to do. Verse 11 says they bowed down and worshiped him. This is fairly amazing to me. These powerful men were bowing down before a baby and worshiping him. How much did they know about his true identity? I am pretty sure they didn't have anything close to the complete picture. But they did understand that this child was more than just another human being. They knew that heaven's power was involved in his arrival. They knew that this child was worthy of worship, for God was directly involved in bringing that child into the world in some way.

The appropriate response was to worship. But how do you worship a baby? We have a baby in our family. You might think that he is worshiped when you see how his mom and dad and his grandparents serve him. His every wish is catered to. If he is hungry, he is fed. If he is unhappy because his diaper needs to be changed, it is quickly changed. If he needs somebody to hold him, that baby is held. The weird thing is he knows whether the person holding him is sitting or standing up. He wants the person to be standing up. So they stand up. That baby is served and loved. He is loved more than he has the ability to know. Wesley is loved and served, but he is not worshiped. No one bows down to him, acknowledging that he is worthy of praise and that he is above all of us humans below him.

The magi worshiped Jesus by acknowledging that he was in some way divine, and worthy of honor, love and service. They honored him by their presence. They made a long journey that was not trivial, all to give him honor. They brought him gifts that were exceedingly valuable, and this too was a statement of his great worth. They went to a lot of trouble to go there and honor that child.

A number of years ago one of Laurie's best friends, a friend of many years, had a significant birthday. She lives in Chicago. Laurie traveled to Chicago by herself to celebrate her friend's birthday. She didn't go because she had a big desire to see Chicago. She certainly didn't go to have the thrill of a 4 hour plane ride each way. She had no personal agenda in mind other than to honor her friend. She wanted her friend to feel loved. And she did. She knew Laurie had to take time out of a busy and demanding life to be there. And she knew that the only reason Laurie was there was to express love to her. To honor her.

The magi were kind of like that. They had no agenda other than honoring, worshiping that baby. They gained no power, achieved no political goal, received no personal advantage. They simply honored the baby that was a king.

#### HEROD TRIED TO ELIMINATE THE KING

That brings us to the other end of the spectrum. The magi came for a noble cause. There was nothing noble about Herod. Herod is a bit controversial in history because he did some impressive things, including building a new temple. But as a human being, he was a disaster. He killed his own family members, including his wife and 3 sons, in order to protect himself and his position as king. At one point most of the nobles of Israel were opposed to Herod, so he arrested 45 of them, executed them all and took over their lands and wealth.

Herod believed the arrival of a child who had a legitimate claim to the throne of Israel was a clear and present danger to him. He envisioned the people, who mostly despised him, rallying behind the new child king, not as much because they wanted him as because it was an excuse to get rid of Herod. One of the serious problems for despots and dictators throughout history has been that they don't end well. They are usually assassinated or killed by their own subjects. Herod saw a threat to his position as a threat to his life, and with good reason.

His clever plot to have the magi lead him to the baby so he could then kill him was foiled when the magi were warned in a dream that they should not tell Herod anything. I suspect it was no surprise to them that Herod could not be trusted. So instead of returning to Jerusalem, they went directly home.

When Herod learned that he had been outmaneuvered by the magi he went ballistic. In his rage he determined that the child would not be allowed to live. He ordered that every boy in Bethlehem under the age of 2 be murdered. It is appalling that this order was carried out. What kind of people would obey an order to slaughter innocent children? Somehow Herod had a goon squad of men who did not have even a drop of humanity left in them and they carried out his horrific order. Fortunately, God was way ahead of Herod. Not only did he warn the magi, he warned Joseph and told him to get out of town fast. So he packed up his family and headed for Egypt.

Can you imagine the horror of that day? We don't know how many kids were killed. One scholar I read estimated it to be in the range of 50, but we don't really know. One would have been too many. We can be sure from the order to kill "all the boys" that there were more than 2 or 3. It's a pretty safe bet that some parents died that day too, since they surely would have tried to protect their children. The grief in that city must have been overwhelming. The quote from Jeremiah 31:15 would have been an understatement. "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

Last week we saw that Satan was depicted in Revelation 12 as poised to destroy the promised child. This was his first attempt to stop God's invasion of this world and block his rescue of the human race. Working through Herod he tried to kill the infant Messiah and put an end to his work before he ever could get started.

Having a child die is a truly horrifying experience. But those poor people had added to that awful grief utter rage and anger. Their children didn't die as a result of some "act of God," a random tragedy of nature. They were slaughtered. They were needlessly destroyed by a monster masquerading as a human being. I have no doubt the entire town was filled with hatred for Herod.

## IMPLICATIONS

### THE SPIRITUAL WAR HAS VICTIMS

We saw last week that the birth of Jesus was a time when the spiritual war broke into the physical realm. Herod, as Satan's tool, carries out Satan's work. And Satan's work is to destroy. Herod operated by Satan's philosophy, which is that self should be the center of all things. And when one operates by that philosophy there is no limit to the horror that one will commit.

We should always remember that when the spiritual war breaks into this physical world, people get hurt. The spiritual war is not some pretend, mythological thing. It can break into this physical world we experience and when it does the effects are often terrible. Even innocent people are harmed, because Satan's goal is to inflict pain and to kill.

At times we all have difficulty when we hear about some horrific tragedy striking godly people. Last week I mentioned the story of J. W. Tucker who went to Africa as a missionary and was killed for his efforts. We wonder why God didn't protect him. I recall the story of Karen Watson, a missionary who went to Iraq. Her story caught my attention in part because she was from my home town, Bakersfield. She and three others were giving out relief supplies in Mosul in northern Iraq, when insurgents drove by and opened fire with automatic weapons. She and two others were killed. We read about Chinese authorities currently being more aggressive in persecuting churches and imprisoning Christians.

Why is this happening? These things happen because at times the spiritual war breaks into this world, and when it does, people get hurt, and sometimes killed. When some insane person opens fire

at a school, a theater, a restaurant, a church; some of their victims will be followers of Jesus. Things like that happen because there's a war on, and sometimes that war in the spiritual realm breaks out in physical ways in the physical realm.

Sometimes it will resemble Job's life, where the spiritual war broke out in the physical world and he suffered loss of loved ones, loss of wealth, loss of health. When the spiritual war breaks into this world, people get hurt. We need to know that and not be surprised when it happens. We need to know it because sometimes we will be the people.

## WE MUST TRUST GOD

Not one of those parents who lost a child at the hands of Herod's thugs likely ever had any idea what was really going on. All they knew was that Herod was unspeakably evil. They never knew that what was at stake was God's plan to rescue the entire human race. They surely did not know that this was the spiritual war in the physical world. They did not know that God was doing something immense and incredibly good, and Satan, in all his hatred and violence, was doing everything he could to stop it from happening.

We likewise cannot see the big picture. We don't know why things happen the way they do. We are like Job, who also suffered horribly and never really knew why. But he trusted. He said, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord."

We need to remember the magnificent but sometimes weird majesty of God. God chose Israel to be his people. He also said that his people should have nothing to do with the occult. And yet, when his Messiah enters the world, who comes to welcome him and worship him? Did God's people en masse come and welcome their king, their long awaited and hoped for Messiah? Absolutely not. Did the spiritual leaders of the nation come to praise him? No way. They knew where he was to be born, and after the Magi came they knew he had arrived. What did they do? Nothing. Apparently they shrugged their shoulders and went on with life.

Who came to worship the king, the centerpiece of God's plan, really of all of history? There were a few shepherds. People of zero importance in this world. And then God brought people from a foreign nation, men who were not part of his chosen people, people to whom Messiah had not been promised. That's amazing enough, but even more amazing is he brought people who actually practiced things God had specifically forbidden his people to do! To top it all off, he actually used their forbidden activity to lead them to the child!

What are we to think of this? God's ways are not our ways. They are higher than our ways. We would never have done things this way. God could have seen to it that anyone he wanted came to worship Messiah. But he used foreign people who majored in things he said were wrong! All of this is in line with the whole nativity narrative, where nearly every part of it was completely unexpected. None of it was the way we would think of doing things. Almighty God as an infant? A baby born to a virgin? A baby born in a stable? None of it makes sense from the human perspective. But it was



God working in his mysterious way. All of it reminds us that in the confusion of this world the one thing that can serve as an anchor is the unchanging character of God.

#### WHAT MATTERS IS THAT JESUS IS GLORIFIED

This brings me to the most difficult question this awful episode raises for me. Consider the question, what would have happened if the Magi had not known anything about the birth of Messiah? What if they had never come to Jerusalem and Bethlehem? Jesus still would have been born. He still would have grown up and would have had his ministry. There was one thing that would have been different. Herod would never have had a clue that Messiah had been born. So the children of Bethlehem would not have been killed!

Given what the coming of the Magi resulted in, why would God involve them? Why not leave them out and save the children's lives and spare their parents from an ocean of unbearable grief? If God could send angels to shepherds and tell them where to go to find a baby so they could worship him, why not tell a few others and leave it at that?

Here's the answer: I don't know. Paul wrote in Romans 11:34, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" Well, actually, I've been his counselor on numerous occasions when I've tried to explain to him how things ought to go. Oddly, he pretty consistently ignores my counsel. ...Frustrating... But you and I both know the answer to Paul's question is "no one." We don't know why God does things the way he does. We've just seen that.

But there is one thing that is apparent in this incident. It was that Jesus Christ must be glorified. Israel wasn't going to glorify him. So God went to an extreme to see to it that early in his life Jesus was honored. I think God wanted him to be honored by all nations, so he had people come from a Gentile nation to worship him as well as the Jewish shepherds. I think there's even a hint of the grace that Jesus would bring, for God used people to honor him who by the law were guilty before God. They practiced things he forbade, and yet God chose them anyway!

My guess, and that's all it is, is that God knew that if Jewish people would welcome and honor Messiah they would do so because they thought he was going to make their lives on this earth better. They thought he meant power and wealth for them, so their honoring him would have been for all the wrong reasons. But the magi had nothing earthly to gain from worshiping the Messiah. They honored him purely because he was divine and due honor and glory.

This suggests to me that glorifying Jesus Christ is so important it must be done even at the risk of terrible harm to people. The risk is inevitable because Satan will violently oppose any attempt to glorify Christ. This is how crucially important honoring Jesus Christ is. That is because failure to honor Christ inevitably introduces the possibility of a tragedy that is more far reaching and awful than even the horror perpetrated by Herod in Bethlehem. Romans 1:21 tells us that failing to honor God was the root, the first step, in all of the misery and tragedy of the human condition. When Adam and Eve failed to honor God as God and tried to take his place, they caused more grief, death, pain and loss than we will ever be able to measure.

So the implication is this: *whenever I choose my will or my desires over honoring and glorifying Christ in my own life, I am bringing about a catastrophe at a level that I cannot imagine.* That choice creates ripples that radiate out into the world causing hurt and loss to a degree that could only be measured by the atrocity in Bethlehem, or worse.

Before his death writer David Foster Wallace gave a famous graduation speech. In it he said to the graduates, “In the day to day trenches of adult life there is actually no such thing as atheism...Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship...Pretty much anything you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough... Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly, and when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally plant you...Worship power and you will feel weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to keep the fear at bay. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, and you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out.”

He’s right. You are going to worship something. To worship anything other than true good, the source of all that is good, is to invite destruction. The presence of the magi at the home of Jesus, and the high cost of their visit, says the most important thing you can do as the driving force of everything in your life is to glorify Jesus Christ. To bow before him, to honor him, express love to him, to give gifts to him. Honoring him should direct every single thing we do or say.

The movie *Walk The Line* starring Joaquin Phoenix, told the story of music legend Johnny Cash. Early in the movie there is a scene where Cash and two band members are auditioning for a record contract before studio executive Sam Phillips. They are performing a common gospel tune without much emotion. Phillips stops them and asks if they had anything else. He said he could not sell gospel music like that. Cash asks, “Was it the gospel or the way I sing it?” Phillips said “Both.” Cash objects, “You didn’t let us bring it home.” Phillips then says to him, in some disbelief, “Bring it home? All right. Let’s bring it home. If you was hit by a truck and you were lying out in that gutter dying, and you had time to sing one song, one song people would remember before you’re dirt, one song that would let God know what you felt about your time here on earth, one song that would sum you up, you telling me that’s the song you’d sing?...Or would you sing something different? Something real, something you felt? Because I’m telling you right now, that’s the kind of song people want to hear. That’s the kind of song that truly saves people.”

What is the song you would sing? What song would sum you up? What song would be the motivation and the passion behind everything you do? I think this incident tells us if you want to truly live, and if you want to bring life to others, that song needs to be a song of praise to Jesus.