

Faithful Seekers of the King

Winter Quarter: Faith in Action

Unit 1: The Early Church Proclaims Faith in Christ

Sunday school lesson for the week of December 24, 2017

By Helen and Rev. Sam Rogers

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 2:1-12

Enrichment scripture: Isaiah 49: 1-7

Today is Christmas Eve. We move from Acts to Matthew to pay attention to a familiar story of the beginnings of the Church built around faith in Christ. Matthew's version of the birth of Jesus is different from Luke's, and there is no birth story in Mark. John's Prologue presents not the where and how of Jesus' entry into the world, but the *Why*, and, more importantly, the *Who*! So let's revisit Matthew's familiar account.

After the genealogy, Matthew introduces his account of the birth of Jesus with emphasis on the pregnancy of Mary and Joseph's faith in accepting the word of the angel. As always, Matthew grounds his gospel in the Hebrew Scriptures by showing this event is a continuation of God's eternal plan, not plan B! (See Matthew 1:18-25)

In the scripture for today, we are introduced to Gentile visitors from the East. These visitors are on a quest. They are searching for "the one who has been born king of the Jews." What better place to begin that quest than questioning the reigning king in his capitol Jerusalem? The king is Herod the Great, and their question disturbs him greatly. Herod has been king since 47 BC with support from Rome. He is not even Jewish!

We know a great deal about Herod. He did lots of building, including a major expansion and renovation of the Temple in Jerusalem; the seaport at Caesarea by the Sea; and palaces in every part of the country, including Masada, the mountain-top fortress by the Dead Sea. Our good friend in Israel, who guided all six of our trips to Israel, said, "Herod had an edifice complex!"

In his old age he became mentally ill with paranoia, seeing enemies and threats everywhere, including his own family. He murdered several of them—including his wife, mother and two sons—to eliminate his perceived threat to the security of his power.

No wonder the question of the Magi was disturbing to Herod—"and all Jerusalem with him." When Herod got angry, watch out! He immediately convened the experts in the religious

community to tell him where the Messiah was to be born. They have the answer from the prophet Micah—Bethlehem!

His next devious step is to have a secret meeting with the Magi to determine a timeline of the birth. Timing here is crucial for the wrath he will execute on all male children 2 years old and younger. (See Matthew 2:16) He sends them to Bethlehem, just a few miles south of Jerusalem, with instructions to report back to him “so he can also worship the newborn king!”

The role of the star is an intriguing part of Matthew’s account, since astrology is seen in the scriptures in a most negative light! Yet here the star is the guide for these men to come to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem!

Looking past scientific explanations, let’s explore other possible reasons Matthew may have used the star in his account. Remember, Matthew wrote his gospel to a primarily Jewish audience. For that readership, references to scriptural precedents would be important.

Abraham was promised his descendants would be a “blessing to all nations,” and Isaiah had written about the Messiah being a “light to the Gentiles.” The Magi (we don’t know how many, just there were three gifts!) were indeed Gentiles (non-Jews), and they followed the “light.” They rejoiced, not in seeing the child, but by arriving at their destination led by the “light.”

Matthew now gives us information about the passage of time. Our nativity sets, plays, and performances compress all of the events in Matthew and Luke into one setting—the manger. Matthew tells us these visitors from the East went into a *house*. Mary and Joseph had moved into better accommodations. Perhaps, the exodus of all those who had come for the census made space available. Or, human compassion for a family with an infant had made someone take the time and trouble to make a guest room available.

As we are writing, more than 100 guests from a retirement community on St. Simons Island fleeing Irma have been housed at the retirement community where we live. Many beds and rooms were made available for more than a week. In times of need, compassion is indeed generated!

The response of these men is most illuminating—they worshipped! We forget our primary attitude toward God should be to worship. Awe, gratitude, joy, love, humility, and much more pull us to our knees in worship. The form is not important, but the act of worship is the single most important function of a Christian. And worship involves giving! The three gifts of the Magi are why we assume there were three men. The significance of each gift in terms of cost and

treasure is sometimes lost in the pageantry of the nativity. Each was a precious import from the Orient. Certainly, they were not a part of the Jewish economy.

Gold needs no explanation, but the other two do. Frankincense was an aromatic substance that was heated to become a smoke-born perfume. In both Catholic and Episcopal traditions of worship it is still used today. Myrrh is even more intriguing. This expensive aromatic was used primarily in the entombing of the dead.

The lines of the hymn “We Three Kings” give us the clue: “Gold I bring to crown him a king;” “Frankincense to offer have I, incense owns a deity nigh;” “Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume breathes a life of gathering gloom, sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying, sealed in the stone-cold tomb.” The three gifts encompass the birth, life, death, and resurrection of this infant they had traveled so far to see.

The account concludes with the divine knowledge given the Magi not to report back to Herod. “They returned to their country by another route.” (NIV) Perhaps this should be the conclusion to our lesson and to our quest for meaning in this bewildering and sinful world. We are different because of Christmas. God’s gift in the incarnation of Jesus gives us the choice of ways of living different from the norms of the world. We turn around (repent) and take a different route. What a blessing! What a choice! “Wise men still follow Him.”

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