

## **The Wise Men**

Matthew 2:1-21

The Epiphany of Our Lord, January 6, 2018

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

I have watched several Jesus movies. Most of them include an account of His birth. One of them is only about the account of His birth. In some of the movies that I have ever seen portraying the wise men, the wise men seem to know exactly what is going on.

In the movies the wise men already know that Herod is a wicked man. In the movies when the wise men are talking to Herod the music track plays eerie music to let you know that Herod is a wicked man. The wise men talk to Herod as if they can hear the sound track. The actor portraying Herod makes sure that the audience knows that Herod is a wicked man. The actor delivers his lines in such a way that you know that Herod is being duplicitous when he tells the wise men, "Go and search diligently for the child and when you have found Him come and tell me so that I too may go and worship Him." When you watch the scene in the movie, you know that he does not mean that!

In the movies the Wise Men speak judgments on Herod. I have seen Wise Men in the movies tell Mary and Joseph that Herod's days are numbered. I have seen Wise Men in the movies know that they should not go back and tell Herod where Jesus was because Herod was planning to kill Jesus. I have seen movies where it is the Wise Men themselves who decide to go back to their own country by another route and not return to Herod.

I think that the reason the Wise Men get portrayed in the movies this way is because Matthew's Gospel insists on calling them Magi, Wise Men. And if they are Wise Men then they should know exactly what is going on with Herod. They should know the exact political situation with which they are faced. And they should know exactly what to do about it.

That is not how Matthew reports the Wise Men in the Gospel.

The Wise Men have seen the star in the east indicating that a new king has been born for the Jews. They undertake a journey to go and see him. When they arrive in Judea they are not smart enough to know where to go and look for the child. They seem to assume that if a child has been born king of the Jews, then the child will be in the royal court at Jerusalem. Where else would you find a child born king of the Jews? The Wise Men probably assume that the child born king of the Jews is Herod's child. After

all Herod is king of the Jews. If there is a new child born king of the Jews, it should be Herod's child right? So in spite of their wise reputation the Wise Men do not know enough to go to Bethlehem to start with. They go to Herod.

The Wise Men also seem to be ignorant of Herod's reputation and situation. They do not seem to know that no child has been born in Herod's household. They do not seem to know that all of Herod's children have grown up. They do not seem to know that Herod has already put to death two of his own sons for sedition. They do not seem to know the ramifications of walking into Herod's court and asking, "Where is He who has been born king of the Jews. We have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him." They ask that question seeming to expect to get a straight answer from Herod.

Even Jerusalem was smart enough to be troubled along with Herod when the Wise Men come to Jerusalem and make this statement.

Not only do the Wise Men not understand the full implication of what they are telling Herod, they also do not know who ask in order to get an answer to their question.

Herod seems to have all of the answers. First, of all Herod knows who to ask. He summons the chief priests and the scribes. Secondly, Herod knows to ask the chief priest and the scribes about the Christ.

So Herod knows that if a star has appeared in the heavens it is no ordinary king which the Wise Men are seeking. Secondly, Herod knows that it must be a supernatural king. Thirdly, Herod knows that if a child has been born that is supernatural and king of the Jews that the child must be the Christ. So Herod asks the chief priests and the scribes to tell him where the Christ would be born. The Wise Men do not seem to know enough to ask about the birth of the Christ. All they keep talking about is the King of the Jews.

The chief priests and the scribes come together at Herod's summons. They tell him that the prophets had predicted that the Christ would be born in Bethlehem of Judea. Herod knows enough not to question what the Bible predicts about the Christ. He does not question the prophet.

Herod tells the Wise Men about Bethlehem and sends them on their way. Now we know how this turns out. We know that Herod will murder the male children of Bethlehem in an effort to kill the Christ. That means that we know that Herod intends to kill the Christ. That means that we know that when Herod tells the Wise Men, "Go and search diligently for the child and when you have found Him bring word that I too may go and worship Him," that Herod is being duplicitous. Herod is acting like he wants to worship the Christ when in reality he doesn't want to. Herod wants to kill the Christ.

The Wise Men do not seem to pick up on this at all. They go to Bethlehem. They apparently carry out King Herod's command and search diligently for the child. It is only after Herod has told them about Bethlehem that Matthew tells us that the star was guiding them. There was no mention of the star guiding them before. If the star had been guiding them before, would they not have gone to Bethlehem in the first place rather than Jerusalem, unless you assume that the Wise Men were paying a courtesy call to Herod before going to Jerusalem? The Wise Men worship the Christ and present Him with their gifts and then they only go home by another way when God warns them in a dream not to return to Herod. It seems like they would have gone back to Herod and would have disclosed the location of the Christ if God had not warned them in a dream.

With all of this ignorance how can we call the Wise Men wise? If even Herod knows what is going on more than they do, how can we deem them wise?

It is too bad that our congregation does not observe Epiphany every year, but waits until January 6 hits a Sunday to observe it. The reason that I say that has to do with why Epiphany is celebrated at all the way that it is celebrated in the West. In the Western Church Epiphany celebrates the revelation of the Christ to the Gentiles. The Wise Men are the first Gentiles to see the Christ. The shepherds at Christmas were Jews. The vast majority of Christians today are Gentiles and so it is important to us to see these Gentiles come to Jesus even while He is still a child and worship Him.

The reason that the Wise Men are wise is because they know what to do with the King of the Jews. They do not try to kill Him like Herod did and the chief priests and the scribes will later actually do. They worship Him. That is what a Gentile does with the King of the Jews.

One might be tempted to ignore a king of the Jews. After all we are not Jews. We are Gentiles. Why should we care about a king of the Jews? Don't we have our own politics to worry about? Furthermore why should we care about a king? Don't we have a constitutional republic in which to live? Furthermore why should we care about a king of the Jews who lived so long ago? What does ancient history have to do with us?

The Wise Men are wise because they do not ignore the king of the Jews. They are Gentiles. They are from the east. They are from outside of the boarder of the Roman Empire. They have no political affiliation with Rome or Judea whatsoever other than trade and perhaps a vague fear that Rome might expand their empire. And yet they come. They leave their homes on a long and expensive trip with one goal in mind to worship the King of the Jews.

The wise men not only know that they are to worship the King of the Jews. They also know how to worship the King of the Jews. When Matthew records that the Wise Men offered Him gifts the word that Matthew uses for offer is the same word used to describe how Israel offers sacrifices of sin offerings, and burnt offerings, and guilt offerings in the temple. This is the Word for sacrifice.

Yet the Wise Men are wise enough to know that they are not Israel by birth. God had not given to them the sacrificial system by which to atone for their sins before God. So they don't offer Him a bull or a goat.

And the Wise Men also seem to understand that even if it were their vocation to offer Him a bull or a goat, His coming makes those things inappropriate. Since He is the one who is come to make the ultimate sacrifice to take away the worlds' sin, then He is the Lamb of God. To offer the Lamb of God a lamb for atonement would be inappropriate. The Wise Men indicate by their gifts of frankincense and myrrh that they understand that He is the great chief priest come to make the sacrifice that takes away the world's sin. After all frankincense and myrrh were part of the offerings that Israel made at the temple through their priests. That being the case the offering of blood for atonement is no longer necessary especially while worshipping the one who will shed His blood to fulfill the Old Testament sacrifices. So the Wise Men truly are wise. They know that they are supposed to worship the King of the Jews. And they know how they are supposed to worship the King of the Jews.

Herod may understand politics in his shrewdness, but the Wise Men understand the real political situation. They may be duped by Herod, but they are not duped by the Lord.

And how do the Wise Men worship the King of the Jews? They open their treasures and offer Him gifts. They give Him their gold. That is to say that they give Him their money. The King of the Jews is properly worshipped by the Gentiles when the Gentiles give Him their money for His use for whatever He wants to do with it. The King of the Jews is properly worshipped when other treasures are given to Him besides money. In the case of the Wise Men it was frankincense and myrrh. These are not second hand gifts. These are gifts that they grew or purchased at great expense to themselves. Thus they are not offering Him used frankincense or used myrrh that they were going to throw out anyway or give to someone else. They give Him frankincense and myrrh from their treasures.

And so the difference between the shrewd Herod and the Wise Men is evident.

I have observed a thing in Christian congregations that I find dismaying. God has given some of you the gift of shrewdness. You are shrewd in business and politics.

And it is good to be shrewd in such things. After all was it bad when Herod consulted with the chief priests and the scribes? Was it bad when He got His answer from the prophets? Was it bad that He knew to inquire about the Christ? No. Those things are not bad. They are a result of Herod's shrewdness. And yet in spite of his shrewdness, he missed the most important thing: the worship of the Christ!

And there are those Christians who are not shrewd when it comes to the world of finance and politics. Some Christians are deliberately naïve. I am not talking about them. I am talking about those Christians who are ignorant of the ways of the world because they do not have the time to pay attention to such things. They are too busy seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

And the dismaying thing is when those Christians who are shrewd in the matters of politics and business despise those Christians who are interested in God and in His righteous Kingdom. That is an unfortunate thing in the Church. And it is not unfortunate because one group of Christian despising another is bad, even though it is. No, it is dismaying because the King of the Jews who was crucified for our atonement and forgiveness will come again in glory. When He comes again in glory, He will come to judge the living and the dead. And it is on that day when He will reveal finally who was truly foolish and who was truly wise.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.