

Matthew 2:1-6

1, In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel'" (NRSV).

Today is a message about a story that we all love. The birth of Jesus is told by both Luke and Matthew. Luke has the angel, shepherds, and the beautiful manger scene. Today we will cover Matthew's story which has the wise men and King Herod. The actual story takes place later. Matthew is clear, the presentation of the gifts occurs at a house after Jesus was born. Both Matthew and Luke give the specific detail that the location is Bethlehem. The reason they do this is to proclaim the fulfillment of prophecy. However, the two gospels have different social settings. In Luke the scene is one of poverty with the manger and shepherds. In Matthew the scene is one of royalty with a king, chief priests, and wealthy foreigners.

Matthew has a specific portrayal of Jesus that focuses on the identity of Jesus as the Christ and the Messiah as a descendant of David. Matthew portrays this is the fulfillment of prophecy of God's promise to Israel. Matthew also portrays Jesus as the Savior. Matthew quotes Scripture to validate his point that this is the one that fulfills prophecy. For Matthew and the other gospel writers this is the Son of God.

The Scripture reveals some very interesting information about sharply contrasting reactions to Jesus. The wise men from the east reveal that it is Gentiles that go looking for Jesus. This is a new development in the Bible. Throughout all of Bible the heroes have always been Jewish. Having wise men from outside of Israel is a sharp contrast to traditional Bible stories. The wise men have transformed over the centuries into kings that are clothed in lavish royal robes. The hymn "We Three Kings" is very popular for Epiphany but it conflicts with theological doctrine. Perhaps they evolved into kings because they came looking for the king of the Jews. Notice that they are not looking for the king of Israel. These are Gentiles. So, they go looking for the king of the Jews. The picture that Matthew paints favors the Gentiles. The first people to go looking for Jesus are Gentiles. This is a sharp contrast to anything the people of God have had up until now. The God of Israel has been reserved for the Jews.

King Herod and the religious leaders are a direct contrast to the wise men. The wise men went to Bethlehem to pay their respects; to pay homage, bring gifts, and worship the true king. We do not know how many wise men there were. We assume it to be three because there are three gifts. Though they are classified as wise they did not know the nature of King Herod. He was a strict Roman loyalist. History records confirm that he was paranoid, ruthless, and cruel. He was threatened by the action of the wise men. His interest in the child is deceitful - a stark contrast to the wise men. He attempts to kill Jesus but ends up murdering several innocent children. King Herod does not know the scriptures. The chief priests and scribes know that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem - beloved king David's hometown. This has been written by the prophet. This shows Jesus is the promised king in the lineage of David. The chief priests and scribes do not go looking for Jesus. This indicates hypocrisy. They should be excited but they

fail to respond. They knew the scriptures but did not go to Bethlehem. It is ironic how they know the Law but are indifferent.

The star that attracts them is not just any star. It is his star, a special divine sign that points to Jesus. The star is a light in the night sky that proclaims the Lord's advent. It is mysterious. It is not like a real star. It does not follow the celestial pattern of the rotation of the earth. It moves as a guide that leads them to the precise location of house. Then it stood still and marked the designated spot where they could find Jesus

In the birth of Jesus Matthew introduces us to an ironic contrast that favors Gentiles. Throughout the Gospel of Matthew the leaders of Israel are indifferent and react with hostility to Jesus. The Gentiles, sinners, and outcasts respond with faith and devotion. It is the response of the Gentile wise men that is the example to follow. They are overwhelmed with joy. This is our response today. Christmas traditions vary but of all our holidays Christmas is our biggest celebration.