

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 01/02/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

The Epiphany of the Lord

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, January 2nd

Matthew 2:1-12

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Two Kingdoms Two Choices

Today's Gospel lection is for the Epiphany of the Lord which falls on January 6th. The Epiphany is sometimes celebrated on the Sunday prior. The word "epiphany" (from the Greek *epiphaneia* or *theophaneia*) means "appearance" or "manifestation" of God. Epiphany is when we celebrate the revelation of God's promise to the entire world marked by the magi who came from the East to worship the Christ child. This event symbolizes the covenant of grace being extended to all who believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Christian tradition the magi have been called "wise men" (the description still used in some translations) and "kings" after Isaiah 60:3 ("*And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.*"). Yet there are only two kings in this text: Jesus and Herod. The contrast between them, and thus the contrast between the worldly kingdom and the Heavenly Kingdom, could not be greater. While we read about the star that guided the magi, we also see the light of God's self-revelation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth dawning in a world of darkness. As we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord, we are reminded that we too have been led to the feet of Jesus and that we are called to be witnesses of God's true light to the world.

Matthew 2:1-12 Commentary

While only a short episode in the overall Gospel narrative, our story this week has captured the imagination of Christians through the ages and much tradition has emerged that is not supported by biblical history. As an example, Western Church tradition decided there were three magi and gave them names: Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. In the Eastern tradition there were twelve. While there is much written about who exactly the magi were, if we focus upon only what was revealed in Scripture, we see God's providence at work bringing these distinguished Gentile foreigners from the east.

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

From these two verses we know Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great (37 B.C. to 4 B.C.). We know the magi came specifically to worship *he who has been born king of the Jews*. The word translated as "worship" is *proskunein*. This word is used for both worshipping a deity and for paying homage to a human king. In the Gospel of Matthew, however, *proskunein* is used exclusively referring to the type of worship shown to

God. We are left with a clear message: Jesus was far more than a future human king. The magi must have considered Jesus to be divine in order to worship Him.

³ *When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.*

Herod was an Edomite and a Roman appointee. He had much to fear from a rival from the Davidic line. Herod was a paranoid tyrant and absolutely ruthless. He would do anything to hold onto power and his relationship with Rome. Herod killed so many family members that Augustus commented that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son (since Jews do not eat pork)! Later in the narrative we see Herod thought nothing of having all the male children in Bethlehem, two years old or younger, killed in an attempt to remove the new king of the Jews (Matthew 2:16-18).

Not surprisingly, when the magi show up asking about a potential rival, Herod is perturbed and all the leadership in Jerusalem with him. Herod assembles his religious scholars to search the Scriptures to determine where this king was born.

⁵ *They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:*

⁶ *"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

The chief priests and the scribes cite the prophecy of Micah (5:2), a contemporary of Isaiah living 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem (c. 742-687 B.C.), who identifies Bethlehem as the location. While not immediately obvious to us, the hills around Bethlehem were home to the thousands of lambs used as ritual sacrifices in the temple for the sins of Israel. The significance of the Lamb of God being born among the sacrificial lambs is a connection that cannot be missed. This is underscored further in Luke's birth narrative which includes the angels appearing to the shepherds watching their flocks by night and then the shepherds visiting (watching over) Jesus (Luke 2:8-20). Jesus would also be the Good Shepherd over the people of Israel (John 10).

⁷ *Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.*

One hopes the magi were wise enough to suspect Herod was up to no good, but this is dealt with in v.12. Since Bethlehem was only six miles from Jerusalem the implications are the star would have provided very specific localized guidance. This is another indication of God being the prime mover in this story.

¹⁰ *When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.*

The narrative reveals the divine involvement in bringing the magi to this moment and it records their joy and how they fell down and worshipped (see earlier reference to *proskunein*). This is a foreshadowing of the worship of Jesus by all the Gentiles (Revelation 7:9-10; 21:24). The magi offered valuable items that were standard gifts to honor a king or deity in the ancient world. Gold was offered as a precious metal, frankincense as a perfume or

incense, and myrrh as anointing oil. An example of gold and frankincense used in this way is seen in Isaiah 60:6 when describing the future glory of Israel *“They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praises of the Lord.”* It was the number of these gifts that led to the tradition of the three magi in the Western Church.

¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

This is another clear example of God’s providence in this narrative.

Reflections

Much time has elapsed since these events occurred and we try and convince ourselves how so much has changed. Yet our world has its own Herods, some perhaps worse than the original. Christ’s Kingdom was inaugurated at His birth but will not be fully consummated until the end of history. Where are we in this story? Do we relate more to the magi or the scribes and chief priests?

When faced with news from the magi that caused a stir in all of Jerusalem, the chief priests and scribes identified the location of the likely birth of the Messiah as only 8 miles away from them. Yet how many of them made a visit to Bethlehem to check things out for themselves? The magi, on the other hand, had journeyed halfway around the known world. In many ways, this event is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ ministry. He would be rejected by Jewish religious leaders while many Gentiles respond in faith.

Like the magi, it was through divine providence that Christ has been revealed in our lives. We too have been led on a long and winding journey by the Holy Spirit who brings us to feet of Christ to worship Him with our time, treasure, and talent. The magi return by a new route. Nothing is the same after an encounter with Christ. Our arrival at the feet of Christ is a new beginning. There is no going back. Our journey continues as we constantly move from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Our journey involves us carrying on the work of Christ in this world as His messengers and agents of hope, peace, joy, and love. Just like the magi, we must be careful that we are not unknowingly working in the service of political tyrants and that our ideologies, whether on the political left or the political right, do not become our idolatries.



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