

Visitors from the East
Matthew 2:1-23
First Baptist Church, Winston-Salem, NC
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The visit of the wise men to the manger in Bethlehem is one of the most beloved stories associated with the birth of Jesus. It has been celebrated in art, used (and abused) in commercials, and featured in a 2021 movie which was billed as a comedy which I managed to miss so I can't offer a review.

In 1857 an Episcopal minister in Pennsylvania, John Henry Hopkins, Jr., wrote a Christmas carol, the familiar first line of which was, "We three kings of Orient are." Unfortunately, Rev. Hopkins, though he wrote at least 40 hymns, was not a stickler for details. They weren't from the Orient, they weren't kings, and there weren't three of them. Other than that, he nailed it.

It is an exciting story, filled with intrigue and fraught with danger. An evil king is out to find the new-born baby of Mary and Joseph and do away with him. The power of Rome is pitted against a poor young couple, mere teenagers perhaps, who are oblivious to the dangers around them, which adds to the suspense. It is an artfully told tale.

But there is more to the story than we know from Christmas carols and Hallmark cards. Far more.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.'

The translators of the NRSV insist on calling the visitors from the East "wise men." The word in the Greek text is magi, from which we get magician, and it probably referred to astrologers from modern-day Iran. Astrology was not a part of the Jewish tradition from which many of Matthew's readers came. The prophet Isaiah mocked the ancient Babylonians, for whom astrology was a major component of their worldview:

*Let those who study the heavens
stand up and save you,*

*those who gaze at the stars
and at each new moon predict
what shall befall you.*

But Matthew's readers would not have been offended by the fact that in his version of the birth of Jesus the first people to worship "Christ the new-born king" were, by Jewish standards, non-believers, star-gazing pagans.

They would have remembered that the infant Moses was saved by the sun-worshipping daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh. They would have remembered that Ruth, said by one scripture to be the great-grandmother of King David, wasn't a Jew; she was a Moabite. They would have remembered that it was Cyrus, king of Persia, a card-carrying pagan, who freed the Jewish exiles and allowed them to go home and rebuild their towns and cities and lives. And for that the Hebrew scriptures referred to him as a deliverer, a mashiah – a messiah.

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'

In his later years, Herod, who had been a great builder in his early days – he began the massive renovation of the temple in Jerusalem – became mentally unstable, notoriously so, suffering from extreme paranoia accompanied by explosions of brutality. A serious condition in the ruler of the most powerful country in the world, a man who had his finger on the nuclear button, so to speak. Herod had a wife, two sons, his wife's mother and grandmother murdered because he thought they were conspiring against him.

The report of the birth of a baby whose claim to kingship was its birthright must have sent shockwaves through Herod's tortured mind.

When they had heard the king, the (magi) set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

Starry, starry nights fascinated me when I was a boy. Many nights, as I gazed into the heavens trying to imagine the star of Bethlehem, I was

puzzled by a few things. For one thing, the stars in my sky didn't move around the way the star that led the magi did. For another thing, when I tried to get directly under a star, it seemed like I could walk a long way, miles maybe, and still be under it. So, how were the magi able to figure out exactly where the baby was? Third, if the star over Bethlehem could move around and isolate over a single dwelling, how come no one else noticed, just these three kings from Orient are? I wondered about things like that when I was a kid.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gifts fit for a king, which is what the magi expected to find. What they found instead was an ordinary father, an ordinary mother, an ordinary baby, in a barn. Nothing regal at this address.

At this point the irony doubles back in itself. For Matthew wants us to understand that the baby in the manger was indeed destined to be a king, just not the kind of king the magi, or anyone else for that matter, expected or perhaps even wanted. His kingdom would not be of this world, he would later say, but a king nonetheless. So, though the gold, frankincense and myrrh seem out of place in the stable, nothing was too good or too costly to be given to God in gratitude for the gift of the Christ-child.

And so we sang:

As they offered gifts most rare/ at the stable plain and bare,
So may we with holy joy/ pure and free from sin's alloy,
All our costliest treasures bring Christ, to you from whom they
spring.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the (magi) left for their own country by another road.

You understand that by returning to "their own country by another road" rather than reporting the whereabouts of the child to Herod as they had been instructed, the magi saved the life of the child and perhaps the lives of his parents as well. But in so doing, they placed their own lives at great risk. Matthew is underscoring the point: the life of the Christ-child was saved by the courageous act of star-gazing pagans.

After the (magi) had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt

They fled their home country – two young parents and their baby -- terrified, leaving behind home, family, friends, and everything familiar and comforting. Leaving behind also terrors in the night and feared violence around every corner.

When they got off the bus, it was the middle of the night, and it was freezing. And he was wearing a T-shirt and a double layer of socks because he didn't have shoes. And no one on the bus knew what city they were in.

But friendly faces met them with blankets and warm clothes and a hot meal.

When he was a stranger, they took him in. When he was hungry, they fed him. When he was thirsty, they gave him drink. When he was naked, they clothed him.

Once again, strangers saved the Saviour.

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

*'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'*

That, to me, is one of the saddest verses in scripture. Jeremiah, the prophet, lived through the destruction of his country. He watched as seemingly endless lines of refugees walked mournfully past, on their way to decades of exile in Babylon. Jeremiah imagined the matriarch of Israel, Rachel, "weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more."

That is the lone verse out of all the verses in scripture that Matthew remembered as he struggled to tell the story of what the church has come to call “the slaughter of the innocents.”

The young mothers of Bethlehem – like the young parents in Uvalde and Sandy Hook -- weeping for their children; they refused to be consoled, because they were no more.

It was that kind of world. A world in which atrocities happened. A world in which superpowers invaded and swallowed up smaller nations. A world in which people sometimes paid for their faith with their lives. A world in which innocent people were sometimes executed by the state. A world in which some plotted insurrection; many, in desperation, placed their hope in the intervention of a cosmic figure who would break through and institute a new era of national unity and prominence; while many more just gave up. It was a world not unlike other worlds, even our own.

It was into that world that the Christ-child came.

An angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ‘Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child’s life are dead.’ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. . . . There he made his home in a town called Nazareth

There in Nazareth of Galilee the child grew and increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and others. There he probably apprenticed with his father. There he studied and came to love scripture. Perhaps it was there that he began to be aware of his special relationship with God, a relationship he offered to those who believed in and followed him, as explained by another Gospel writer:

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Those who loved him in life and loved him in death, those who believed that he was all of God that could be incarnate in human flesh, believed he had not been defeated, not even by death – death on a cross,

execution at the hands of the state. They believed that in a way they did not fully understand and could not clearly articulate that he was alive and that he would return. So, they waited. And wait.

If Jesus comes, when he comes, it is into this world that he must come – this real world, this Bethlehem world, this Sandy Hook and Uvalde world, this fentanyl world, this Russia/Ukraine world, this storming, seething, angry earth world. It is the only world there is, and it needs saving.

If he comes, when he comes, he will not come as a Super Hero, not weak as before, no longer vulnerable, now mighty, vanquishing his foes with his awesome power. That's what they hoped for last time. He will come flesh and blood. Like us. One with us. Possibly one of us.

If he comes, when he comes, maybe this time we will listen, maybe this time we will learn, maybe this time we will open our hearts and our lives to him: “Cast out our sin and enter in – be born in us today.” Or maybe not. Our choice. Our decision. That is the chance he will have to take, the chance God has always been willing to take.

Who knows, he may be among us now, fulfilling the words that were spoken by the poet:

*Christ Climbed Down
from His bare Tree
this year
and softly stole away into
some anonymous Mary's womb again
where in the darkest night
of everybody's anonymous soul
He awaits again
an unimaginable
and impossibly
Immaculate Reconciliation
the very craziest
of Second Comings.*

(together) Even so, come, Lord Jesus.