

**DREAMS OF CHRISTMAS:
(2) DREAMS OF A DANGEROUS KING**

Matthew 2:12

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SCRIPTURE

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.'" {7} Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. {8} 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." {9} When they had heard the king, they 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. {10} When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. {11} 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. {12} And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road (Matthew 2:1-12 NRSV).

MESSAGE

Perhaps you have heard this humorous but gender-based parody of the Visitation of the Magi:

Question: Do you know what would have happened if it had been Three Wise Women instead of Three Wise Men who came to see the Christ Child?

Answer: They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and, brought practical gifts!

But the historical account is even more astonishing than the parody if we realize that these people should not have been there in the first place. For these were outsiders with lives that were different and homes that were distant. Herod had not invited them. The Romans had not invited them. The religious leaders had not invited them. Not even Mary and Joseph had asked them to come. But God had invited them and God continues to invite so-called “outsiders” to himself even to this day.

But let us go back to the beginning of the story. Matthew gives us the account of how philosopher priests from Persia came to Bethlehem to see the Christ Child. These philosopher priests are incorrectly called Kings, often referred to as Wise Men, but are more accurately identified as Magi.

The Magi were scholars and liked to learn new things. In Persia there were large communities of exiled Jews. The Magi had no doubt studied the learning of the Jews who lived among them. They had read their sacred writings. From these writings they would have learned of the promise and hope of a Messiah, a Savior King from the line of David, a king who would rule the whole world in righteousness.

In an age of monarchs who held life and death power over their subjects, in an age when kings ruled with arbitrary cruelty, the idea of a righteous king who was a shepherd of his people and not a butcher was unimaginably wonderful. The Magi seized this hope and believed in it for themselves. To them, this beautiful and wholly unique star shining in the west over Jerusalem could signify only one thing; the king of promise, the righteous, shepherd-king had been born. So they set out, traveling hundreds of miles to the west, to find him.

How many Magi went on the journey? From the number of gifts, many people assume there were three. The earliest tradition says there were twelve. But we really do not know. Nor do we know their names, even though folklore tells us they were called Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar. There are even stories about what became of them. But no one really knows.

And what was the Star of Bethlehem? Some say it was Halley’s comet. Others say it was a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. Still others a super nova. I am afraid that for the most part we are left with only speculation. But as remarkable as the star was, it pales in comparison to how remarkable, no, how shocking it would have been to the religious mindset of Jesus’ day that God had chosen to reveal himself to these Magi who were Gentiles, that is non-Jews. But this is precisely what Isaiah had predicted.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the

peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn (Isaiah 60:1-3 NRSV).

And this is the essence of the story of the Magi: God's love is not limited to one group or nationality.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 NIV).

Some years ago, I and my family had the opportunity to go through Mark Twain's Cave in Hannibal, Missouri. The lights were kept off in the cave except when there was a tour. The tour guide controlled the lights. But in our tour, those of us at the back of the group (and we were at the very back) never got to see anything because the guide would turn off the lights before we got there! It was very disconcerting. It was as if the tour guide had forgotten that the purpose of the light was so that others besides himself could see and enjoy the cave.

A similar thing has happened to many American churches. We have received the light of God but we have forgotten that the purpose of this light is so that others in addition to ourselves can know and enjoy God. Jesus said:

"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16 NRSV).

We may wonder at the naivete, of the Magi whom we call "Wise." No sooner do they arrive in Jerusalem than they start asking, "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?" Did they think this would not attract the reigning king's attention? Perhaps you picture them going straight to King Herod's palace asking for directions. But that is doubtful. One did not get in to see a high government official without a special invitation. In the east there was the quaint custom of the Persian king killing anyone who came into his presence uninvited. So probably the Magi just started asking anyone they met, thinking that if the locals were Jews they would know all about the new king's birth and be filled with joy just as they were.

What a surprise they were in for! A new king, even if he was the Messiah, was not welcome by many. The Sadducees would not welcome him. They were hand-in-glove collaborators with Herod and the Romans and were rich and powerful because of the relationship. The Pharisees generally would not be pleased. They controlled every detail of religious life down to the number of kernels of grain you could move on the Sabbath

without breaking the law. They would not want to give up their influence.

And it almost goes without saying that Herod would not be pleased. He had already killed his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, uncle and countless others he thought might threaten his throne. He even arranged ahead of time for several citizens to be killed on the day he died in order to ensure there would be someone who would weep at his passing. What an understatement when Matthew says that Herod, upon hearing the news of a new king's birth, "was disturbed, (and) all Jerusalem with him."

But Herod loses no time. He calls together the chief priests and teachers of the law. These were probably members of the Sanhedrin, the religious ruling council. It would be equivalent to a powerful body like the College of Cardinals. From them he learns what the Old Testament prophecies had to say about the birthplace of the Christ or Messiah. They tell him, "In Bethlehem of Judea."

Herod, with spies everywhere, hearing of the Magi and their search, invites them to the palace. He pretends he is delighted to hear about the new king. He wants to know all about the star. He sends the Magi off to Bethlehem saying, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

Call them naive or even gullible; the Magi seem to actually believe Herod and intend to return to him. But in a dream, the second of five dreams in Matthew's nativity, the Magi learn that Herod is a danger to the Christ Child; they are not to return to him with news of where the child lives. They are to go home a different way.

But first, they go to Bethlehem, a little village seven miles south of Jerusalem. The special star stops over the house where the child lives. Filled with joy, they go inside, they see the child and his mother. Then they present their gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Some suggest that the gold was presented to the infant King in token of his royalty; the frankincense in token of his divinity; and the myrrh, of his sufferings but that is reading more into the text than is actually here. The point is that the gifts were of great value. In addition, the term that is translated as "presented him" in this passage is always used elsewhere in the Bible to mean bring an offering to God. Beyond doubt, therefore, we are to understand that the presentation of these gifts was an act of worship.

We do well to remember that Jesus Christ is Lord. We can never meet Jesus on equal terms. Now there are many things in life that we consider to be important. But we must not regard Jesus as just one among the many. Rather, he is THE One and only King of

kings and Lord of lords to whom we owe our complete and final allegiance.

It is ironic that a dream of terrorism warned the Magi to leave Bethlehem and it is the threat of terrorism that keeps many people from visiting Bethlehem today. But there is, of course, a difference. Today's threat of terrorism is against the traveler or any bystander who happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. The threat of terrorism then was quite specific; it was against the Savior.

No one likes a bad dream. But thank God for the one the Magi had. They not only followed a star that led them to the Savior, they heeded the dream, not returning to Herod. And because of that, you and I have a Savior, one who would grow up to take our place on Calvary's cross, dying for our sins, and rising again that all who believe in him might have forgiveness and eternal life.