

**+ Matthew 2:1-12 + Celebrate Christ the Savior of Our World! +
+ Festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord + 3 January 2016 +**

Today's Gospel lesson is full of mystery, isn't it? As you read the inspired account of the visit of the Magi, you're left with a lot of questions. Who were the Magi? Where did they come from besides **"from the east"**? How many of them were there? When did they visit Jesus? Why didn't the chief priests and teachers of the Law eagerly go to Bethlehem with them?

When there are so many questions, we're tempted to make assumptions—and many assumptions have been made about this account. Many assume that the Magi were kings who came from the Far East like in the carol **"We Three Kings of Orient Are."** The truth is we don't have a specific answer. Based on the Persian roots of the Greek word for Magi, they were probably members of a group of priests, scholars, astronomers, astrologers, even magicians who came from Persia over 600 miles to the east—basically from here to Chicago—faraway, but not quite halfway around the world.

Since they brought three gifts to the Christ Child, it's often assumed that there were three of them. They've even been given names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, but to be honest, Scripture gives us no indication how many there were. Looking at most modern nativity scenes, you might be tempted to think they visited Jesus "in the stable at Bethlehem on Christmas." Yet we really don't know since Scripture doesn't tell us specifically, although it seems to be after Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day and presented to the Lord on the 40th day. We are told that the wise men came **"to the house"** where Mary and Joseph and Jesus were living in Bethlehem. In the verses after our text, we're also told that Herod had the little boys two-years-old and under put to death around Bethlehem based on when the Magi had first seen the star.

Scripture really doesn't reveal much information about the Magi—and plenty of assumptions have been made over the years. So what can we know? What can we be certain about as we celebrate their visit? What can we be sure about as we celebrate Christ the Savior of our world?

While we can't be sure about the exact time in his life when it happened, we can know those who played a part in this account. There was one who was deeply hostile. There were those who were indifferent, and there were those who were wise. It all started **"after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod..."** At that time **"Magi from the east came to Jerusalem..."** While we don't know much about them personally, we do know that they had traveled across hundreds of miles to worship the **"king of the Jews."** They had come to Jerusalem expecting to see the capital city bustling with excitement at the birth of a new king. Instead they found darkness and fear and hostility and indifference.

They came asking, **"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."** That news didn't get people excited. You see, Herod the Great ruled all of Judea. He was one of the great builders of his time building palaces and fortresses and a major renovation and expansion of the temple in Jerusalem. He was also a ruthless man known for having his wife and sons and other relatives put to death because he thought they threatened his power. When he was dying, he had the most esteemed citizens in Jerusalem arrested and ordered to be put to death at the moment he died so there would actually be mourning in Jerusalem rather than rejoicing. Of course, he didn't take too kindly to getting news of foreigners looking for the **"king of the Jews"** when he himself held that title. We're told, **"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."**

He knew about the prophecies of the coming Messiah—a King from David's line who would rule wisely and justly, who would shepherd the people. So he summoned **"all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law"** to find out where the Messiah would be born. Then in a secret conference behind closed doors, Herod traded his information for what the Magi could tell him, pretending to be a faith-filled follower of the Christ. He advised them to go to Bethlehem **"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."** Really he intended to wipe out this supposed infant threat to his throne—and wasn't afraid to later wipe out other little boys in Bethlehem to preserve it.

So you have the hostile king, but you also have a group of people who should've known better. Yet we find them indifferent to the Savior who had come. Now if King Herod knew about the prophecies, what about the chief priests and teachers of the law? Well, they were disturbed along with the rest of Jerusalem fearful of what the murderous king would do.

When King Herod called, they came. When King Herod asked for the prophecy of the Child's birthplace, they gave it from the prophecy of Micah chapter and verse. They knew their Old Testaments, which clearly

indicated that a Savior was going to be born soon and nearby, but how did they react to the Magi? They did nothing. They didn't ask to ride along with the Magi. They didn't check Bethlehem for themselves—only six miles away! They didn't even look up into the sky. They just kept their heads down and went back to work, back to studying, back to their indifference, and ignored the Savior who had come. They preferred to not lose the safety and security of what they had. They certainly didn't want to fall under Herod's wrath. That was more important to them. So they chose to avoid their Savior.

You have the hostile, the indifferent, and then there's the wise. Now based on their learning and scholarship in a wide variety of areas, we could rightly call the Magi "wise men," but they were wise for a far better reason. They somehow knew that the new star in the heavens proclaimed the birth of a new king of the Jews. Yet they knew he was no ordinary king. His birth brought them across hundreds of miles through dangerous territory, while bearing gifts fit for a king—expensive gold, fragrant incense used in worship, and sweet-smelling myrrh used as perfume or for preparing the dead for burial.

To say they were overjoyed to see the star over the Christ Child's home would be an understatement. A literal translation of Matthew's description would be "They rejoiced with great joy exceedingly." Unlike Herod, they were filled with joy. Unlike the chief priests, they eagerly rushed to the Savior's home eagerly following the star that actually guided them to the right house. **"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him."** They presented him with their precious gifts, but from where did their holy wisdom come?

Somehow, somewhere along the way, someone known only to God shared the good news of Christ our Savior with them. Now these were the last people Mary and Joseph expected to visit their little home in Bethlehem. After all, the Magi were strangers from a strange land wearing strange clothes and speaking a strange language, but the Magi knew whom they were worshiping. They were **"wise for salvation"** through the light of Scripture. They knew that they were worshiping the long-promised King of kings—God himself. They were also wise to listen to the Lord when he warned them in a dream not to go back to King Herod, but to take a different route home. With their arrival the Lord fulfilled his promise through Isaiah, **"Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light..."** (Isaiah 60:1-3a) Christ revealed himself to be the Savior of our world.

How often don't you and I fail to recognize what they saw? Do you ever find yourself acting more like Herod—certainly not as ruthless, but just as self-centered? By nature, we're all hostile to God. You want to go your own way and do your own thing and no one is going to tell you if it's right or wrong. Your sinful nature wants you to defy God in every way, but like Herod's rage, it's all pointless, worthless before God.

Maybe you act more like the chief priests and teachers of the Law. You'd rather continue in your indifference yawning at the preaching of God's Word more interested in what you have planned later today, resigning yourself to a long service because we're celebrating the Lord's Supper, ignoring the daily importance of recalling your Baptism and spending time with Jesus in his Word. Maybe indifference has led you to keep your mouth shut when the Lord provided an opportunity to share his Light with another sin-blinded soul. Spiritual indifference is as bad as hostility!

Yet there is one other person in this mysterious account, One who came even for the hostile and the indifferent, One who came to make us **"wise for salvation"**. (2 Timothy 3:15) The Babe of Bethlehem is born to live and die even for the hostile and the indifferent. The Apostle Paul puts it beautifully in Romans 5(8), **"God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** Even though we have been hostile or indifferent to him, he still loves us and gave his life for us. In fact, he came to give his life for the whole world!

You see, the good news of the Savior that someone shared with you brought life to your dead heart, brought light to your darkness. As he revealed to the Magi, Jesus came to shine in the hearts of people from every nation and culture. Through Christ our Savior, each of us was declared not guilty in God's sight. Through the waters of Holy Baptism and the proclamation of the good news of your Savior, the Holy Spirit worked faith in Christ in your heart. Now when the Lord looks at you, he doesn't see gender or race or social status or family line, but a beloved son or daughter.

So what will you do with that good news about Christ your Savior? There's no time to be hostile or indifferent about it. You've seen what Christ has done in your life. So take that Light of the Gospel, the glorious good news of Christ Jesus revealed in human flesh, and share it. Point the people you love and live with and work

with and go to school with and have fun with, point them to Jesus, your Savior. In our world that seems to be getting darker and more hostile and more indifferent every day, let your light shine so many others may worship Christ as the Savior of our world! Amen.