

There Is a New King

Matthew 2:1-12

by Rev. Michael G. Lilienthal

Dear witnesses of Christ,

Today marks the last stage in the Christmas story. What we normally celebrate as Christmas Day, the birthday of our Lord, December 25th, is the Christmas that was celebrated by Mary and Joseph and some Jewish shepherds when the day was announced to them by the angels: "Today in the town of David, a Savior was born for you. He is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). But nine months before, which we celebrate on March 25th, the Annunciation when Gabriel told Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy - the Son of God" (Luke 1:35, ESV), that was Mary's Christmas. Today, January 6th, the Day of the Epiphany, when the magi came to visit the newborn king of the Jews, this is the world's Christmas, for this is the day that the Christ Child was recognized by not just his mother, not just Jews, but by Gentiles.

Hear the Holy Gospel for Epiphany, recorded by the evangelist St. Matthew in the second chapter of his Gospel, beginning with the first verse.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, when Herod was king, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, 'Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him. He gathered together all the people's chief priests and experts in the law. He asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, because this was written through the prophet:

You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are certainly not least among the rulers of Judah:
because out of you will come a ruler, who will shepherd my people, Israel.'

Then Herod secretly summoned the Wise Men and found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report to me, so that I may also go and worship him.'

After listening to the king, they went on their way. Then the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stood still over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with overwhelming joy. After they went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Since they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

The miracle here is greater than a star in the sky, and it is greater than a warning in a dream. The great miracle here is that **there is a new King** of the Jews, who is both God and man, and he is recognized by pagans. The miracle is also involved in this: this greatest of all kings **is a foolish-looking King**, and **he is revealed to and worshiped by pagan fools**.

I. He Is a Foolish-Looking King

The Gospel of Matthew is intimately concerned with the "kingdom." Go ahead and read through it on your own and trace how often the kingdom is explained and the King shows up. In this particular portion at the beginning of his second chapter, the story has become *A Tale of Two Kings*. (No, not three, although the wise men have historically been portrayed as kings.) Notice how provocatively Matthew phrases this

story: “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, *when Herod was king*, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, ‘Where is he who has been born *King of the Jews?*’” Two kings of the Jews are mentioned here: Herod, and the newborn King.

Tension builds in this story, because when these magi come asking about the *King of the Jews*, there is already a king of the Jews, Herod the Great, so-called. Already before the events of this narrative, Herod is well-known for how he rules: “he governs by fear, deceit and murder.”¹ Notice the reaction when Herod hears about these magi asking about the “King of the Jews”: “When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him.” While the reactions of king and country were the same, it was not for the same reason: Herod feared for his power, that there would come someone to contest his rulership. He was envious and paranoid and power-hungry. That this is his reaction cannot be doubted, for from history we know that he had several of his sons, his wife, and other family members killed because he was afraid they might take the kingdom from him, and we know, too, from the end of this story, that in his rage, Herod “sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under” (Matt. 2:16, ESV).

Contrast this with him “who has been born King of the Jews,” whom the magi were seeking, who was born in a stable in Bethlehem, “wrapped...in swaddling cloths and laid...in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7, ESV): he “is unknown, weak, in need of protection,”² untended by any, unwelcome in the

¹ Gibbs 122.

² Ibid.

homes of Joseph's relatives, known only to shepherds, livestock, his Mother, and his Guardian Joseph. Therefore, "On the surface of this narrative, the powerful Herod seems to be in charge,"³ but in this, God intervenes.

The first king, the powerful king, the cruel king seeks craftily the newborn King's life. "Go and search carefully for the child," he told the magi, and you can almost hear the venom of a serpent dripping from his lips. "When you find him, report to me, so that I may also go and worship him." Imagine you're hearing this account for the very first time. Are you on the edge of your seat? The cruel king may gain the victory!

I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that the hand of Satan was behind this, that he was the closest friend to King Herod, at his elbow and advising him always, whispering in the king's ear: "This infant will seek to overthrow you, to defeat you and place his foot on your head in victory. This must not be allowed." But the insecurities were not Herod's own. They were also Satan's personal fears, for he must have had ringing in his ears that Word of God by which he had been condemned:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel. (Gen. 3:15)

The baby to be born of a woman, that snake knew, would be his undoing. This is why Paul Gerhardt wrote in one of his great Christmas hymns:

Immanuel,
Thy birth doth quell

³ Ibid.

The pow'r of hell and Satan's bold deceiving.⁴

Examine one further difference between these two kings: Mad King Herod had all these babies killed, probably at the behest of that same serpent who has hated babies ever since hearing that first promise of a Messiah, but failed to kill the other King. Gracious King Jesus, who escaped from the slaughter of these innocents, later willingly laid down his own life on the cross, the tool for executing criminals, not kings, in the midst of declaring, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36, ESV), so that the one who seeks the lives of that King's little ones would be crushed. Notice, and marvel, how this Jesus was born in apparent defeat, and later died in apparent defeat, but in both his birth and his death, this foolish-looking King came out the victor.

II. He Is Revealed to and Worshiped by Fools

And when this infant King was sought by his true worshipers, no one seemed glad over him. In fact, as we saw, Herod and all Jerusalem were "*alarmed.*" But the unbelief of others did not deter the devoted, and they sought out the one who could truly save them, despite the opinions of men. What does Scripture say: "Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, 'Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'" Then, learning from the chief priests and experts in the law where the Christ-Child was to be born, "they went on their way.... After they went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their

⁴ Paul Gerhardt, "O Jesu Christ, dein Kripplein ist," translation *The Lutheran Hymnal* (St. Louis, 1941), *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1996), #161:3.

treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” There is something quite marvelous in this account that we would be wise not to overlook. These magi, when they came into the court of the currently ruling king, apparently showed no more than the most basic homage. But when they found the Christ-Child, the newborn, infant King, “they bowed down and worshipped him,” they “offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” Which one of these kings do you think really *wanted* such gifts? Which one do you think would bring more terror on their heads for *not* showing such reverence? These so-called “Wise Men” were, in the eyes of the world, not behaving very wisely.

In fact, just as little as these foreigners were kings, so little were they “Wise Men.” This, again, comes from tradition. The Greek word is *μαγοί*, which has nothing to do with wisdom. Instead, as we transliterate it into “magi,” it has a closer relationship to another English word: “magic.” Understand this: The magi were not Wise Men in the sense we might think: they were learned, true, but not in any field that is allied with truth and piety; no, instead, their learning was allied with dark things, things connected to supernatural powers that are opposed to the one true God! *Μαγοί* are astrologers, diviners, sorcerers – or, at the very least, superstitious pagans.

Think of how Matthew’s original hearers would have understood the word *μαγοί*. Probably it would have conjured, not very wise and learned men, but heathens, idolaters, enemy Gentiles who were not of the people of God. So

[w]hen Matthew writes, ‘Look, *Magi from the east* appeared in Jerusalem and said, “Where is the King of the Jews who has been born?”’ the only conclusion that his readers/hearers

may draw is not that 'the magi [are] [sic] wise men whose learning leads them to Christ but [that they are] [sic] ignorant people to whom God reveals the Christ.'⁵

Compare the story of these magi, these Foolish Men, to what Jesus himself said in a public prayer: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Matt. 11:25, 26, ESV). Compare all this also to what St. Paul said: "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.... For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards.... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise" (1 Cor. 1:20, 21, 26, 27, ESV).

And now, look again at the account in Matthew's Gospel:

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You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are
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⁵ Gibbs 127.

to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report to me, so that I may also go and worship him.'

After listening to the king, they went on their way. Then the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stood still over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with overwhelming joy. After they went into the house and saw the child with Mary, his mother, they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Since they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

We know, of course, that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). Therefore, if these magi truly did go and worship Jesus, we should look for the hand of God guiding them in this account. And of course, we find him! "Then the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them": that was the hand of God; and "they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod," which was also the hand of God. These pagan Gentiles had not found their way to the King of the Jews by their own abilities. God himself showed them the way.

And do you see where else God speaks in this account? This is the most embarrassing thing, because it comes directly through his Word, speaking "through the prophet: 'You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,'" etc. All the chief priests and experts in the law, who themselves had God speaking to them, his Word open in front of them, and the current King of the Jews, all of these great wise and powerful men missed it, and meanwhile, the fools of the pagans and Gentiles received the Word with faith. This is "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Cor. 1:29, ESV). Even

for those who had the Word of God, lest they seem to think that they themselves have wisdom, this great humiliation is brought forth. You've heard, "Wise Men Still Seek Him"? The truth is, wise men have *never* sought him; *no* men have ever sought him except to destroy him, as King Herod did, because *all* men are preoccupied with themselves: "Lack of interest, the fear of change and upset in life, is the natural attitude of blind sinful man."⁶ Only those to whom God *reveals* him receive him.

And this is what the Feast of Epiphany is all about. Like a bright star in the sky, like a vision in a dream, in the Word of God's Scriptures, and in the incarnate Word in the manger, the Word hanging on the cross, God has revealed to us, illuminated to us, our salvation. An epiphany is an "Aha!" moment. Our "Aha!" is in the declaration of the Word, because "how are [we] to believe in him of whom [we] have never heard?" (Rom. 10:14, ESV). But we have heard of him, because what St. John said of his Gospel is true of all Scripture: "these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31, ESV). Dear witnesses of Christ, you have seen him, and you still worship him. Do not squander the gift that has been given to you, but like those Foolish Men, when you are given the epiphany of your Lord, "rejoice...with overwhelming joy"!

Amen.

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⁶ Fred H. Lindemann, *The Sermon and the Propers*, volume I (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 155.

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