

Feast of the Epiphany – January 5, 2020, Year A

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-12

“Follow in Grateful Obedience”

In today's Holy Gospel from Matthew chapter 2 there is a group of men, who God put something on their heart, and who are described as “Wise men.” These men are often called Wise Men, Magi, or Three Kings – as we sang about this morning. Matthew 2:1 says *“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “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.”*” It was apparently quite sometime after the birth of Christ these “wise men” entered Jerusalem – while following the star.

The term Magi which has been converted into “Wise Men and Kings” comes from the Greek μάγος “*magos*” or a *Magian, an astrologer from the east, a magician*; a class or kind of wise men specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural sciences. It is the King James Version which refers to the Magi as “*Wise Men*” most likely to reduce the thought of a magician or follower of the occult that could be drawn from the word “magic.”

Many times we hear these men referred to as “The Three Wise Men.” You know we actually have no evidence to support this idea. We do know that there were 3 wonderful gifts that were offered - but there could have been any number of wise men – no one really knows for sure! There are some who believe that the “Wise Men” were a group of astronomers from the Mesopotamia area. Their names don't appear anywhere in the Scriptures, but religious tradition names them as Melchior, a Persian scholar; Caspar, a scholar from India; and Balthazar – an Arabian scholar. It was the custom for visiting dignitaries to see the King of the region, and so they paid a visit to King Herod and asked for information about another King – ‘*The King of the Jews.*’ That really must have insulted Herod deeply, because he had been appointed as king of the Jewish people by the Romans as King of the Jews, and here are people from another area – seeking another king over his domain. Ouch!

When these men greeted Jesus, they did not find “*the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.*” In the Gospel, Jesus is referred to as “*the child.*” “*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.*” (Matthew 2:9) These men from the East were led miraculously to the very place where the young Jesus was. “*On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.*” (Matthew 2:11) It is clear that they did not go to the stable – but to a house – to see a child – not a baby. This probably throws your Christmas cards out of whack - and the vision that we all see – following the star and going to the stable, - but I would rather follow Scripture. That is my star.

There is also evidence as to how much time had passed from Jesus' birth, which is in Herod's attempt to destroy the boy. Herod had all male children, in Bethlehem, who were under 2 years old slaughtered. Matthew 2:16-18 clearly states “*When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem*

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and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more." (Rachel was a wife of Jacob – and her tomb can be found in Bethlehem.)

What we have here is a crazed, and brutal King who is bent on destroying all of these youngsters. *"When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "* Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. *He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "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."* (Matthew 2:3-8) What a lie, and what outright deceit – he did not want to go and worship the King – but instead he wanted to annihilate Him and get Him out of the way! You see, there can't be two kings for the same people. He was king of the Jews and he was not going to let anyone else take that from him.

Don't get me wrong – there was a lot of historical good that Herod did in expanding the unfinished Temple, more than doubling the Temple Mount area, building the fortress at Masada and the Herodium, right near Bethlehem, as well as other palaces, but this was a real maniacal madman! He wanted to know where the King was born as foretold in God's Word - Micah 5:2 *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times. "* How can a baby be from "ancient time?" Only God can do that – only God can BE that! Isn't it interesting that the Jewish leaders knew the prophecies but never wanted to go and see for themselves? They stayed right in their little cushy area in the Temple, and they didn't want to go out, but instead we have a group of Gentiles who were willing to cross a desert, to follow a star, to offer gifts, to offer worship to someone foretold – but who they never knew! After meeting with the scribes and Chief Priests, Herod sent these visitors from the east and their entourage to Bethlehem to search thoroughly for the child. Herod pretends that he wants to worship the King of the Jews as well. What a charade!

And so the "Wise men" go to visit the Savior: *"After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."* - (Matthew 2:9-12)

Feast of the Epiphany – January 5, 2020, Year A

God leads these men with a star - directly to where Jesus is. They fell down before Him and offered Him - gold, incense and myrrh. After a time of worship, God warns these men of Herod's true plan to destroy the Christ child, and the family - he wanted to annihilate them, and so the magi depart another way – and the family fled to Egypt as they were shown in a dream. God was trying to show these men something special and they were blessed to see the Savior firsthand – and know that the world needs a savior! Today God is doing the very same thing. Like these people, God wants people to see His Son for who He is ...the Savior of the world! God opened their eyes and then He opened their hearts! These men fell down when they saw Jesus and they worshipped Him.

There is no denying, there are many people today who see God at work all around them and actually know that it is God who is working, but they are indifferent and they just don't care, or they could be so wrapped up in themselves that they are missing it. There are people who really do believe that Jesus is the Savior and the ONLY way to heaven... but they refuse to open their hearts – because it would totally change their lifestyles. Then there are those that completely deny that Jesus is the only way to God. How absolutely tragic it is that people cannot open their hearts to understand who Jesus Christ is – and what He brings to them, personally! We need to pray for those who do not think Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, or those who think that Jesus is something other than Savior, Son and the Christ – the Messiah. We need pray for their hearts to be opened, and transformed; that the Holy Spirit will reveal Himself to them and change their hearts and their lives forever.

Today, we heard about, and sang about these men from the east – who came and humbly met the long-foretold King - bringing to Him gifts. All three were expensive gifts that they gave to this young King, willingly, humbly, and gratefully as an act of faith! Not only that – before they met Jesus – they set out on a journey that may have lasted two years, obediently following a light in the sky – unsure of exactly where they were going or what was lying in front of them. They followed God's direction and relied on Him to show them the way.

For each one of us – we are on a similar journey. We must rely on God! We need to be following God's direction; just trusting in God! Like these wise men and Mary and Joseph, we must, as a church, listen to the direction that God has given us. We are called to follow him! Jesus told us in John 15:16, *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last.”* We have been called, chosen to follow God's direction in our lives -in grateful obedience.