

**Matthew 2:1-12** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, when Herod was king, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. They asked, <sup>2</sup>“Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup>He gathered together all the people’s chief priests and experts in the law. He asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup>They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, because this was written through the prophet: <sup>6</sup>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.” <sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly summoned the Wise Men and found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>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.” <sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they rejoiced with overwhelming joy. <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>Since they had been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

I’m guessing that everyone is familiar with the song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” in which the author’s true love gives them and increasingly large number of increasingly insane gifts. The twelve days of Christmas used to be a time of big celebrations in Christianity. The days were counted from Christmas Day through the fifth of January. In modern American Christianity, Christmas itself remains a big celebration, but not the rest of the days.

All of this is leading up to January 6—the festival of the Epiphany of our Lord. The word “Epiphany” means “revealed.” Some of our hymns use the word “manifest” as a synonym. If 2024 had not been a leap year, the sixth would have fallen on a Sunday. Rather than wait until 2030 which will be the next time it falls on a Sunday, I thought we should celebrate it now, especially since we have a service on the sixth too.

The Epiphany of our Lord has sometimes been called the Gentile Christmas. In all three lessons for today we see how people who were not Jewish were led to know the true God. God didn’t send the Savior for one group of people in one country. He send him for the whole world—that includes you and me. Jesus Is for Everyone—for those who believe in him and for those who reject him—but God leads everyone to him.

We don’t know a whole lot about the Wise Men who are sometimes also called the Magi. Some Christmas traditions make things worse. Think of the song “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” That title is 33% correct. They were from the orient, from the east, but they weren’t kings and we don’t know how many of them there were. People assume three because of the three gifts, but all we know is that there was more than one.

Most nativity scenes contain the Wise Men, often with crowns on their heads. Once again, they weren’t kings and they did not visit Jesus at the stable where he was born. He could have been as old as two by this time. So when we set up our nativity scenes when the kids were little we would put the Wise Men at the other side of the room. We also don’t know exactly where they were from other than the east. It seems most likely that they were from Babylon since God’s people had been there for 70 years.

Think of people like the Prophet Daniel. Chapter 2 of his book tells us, **“King Nebuchadnezzar... promoted Daniel to a high position and gave him many valuable gifts. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and chief prefect over all the wise men of Babylon.”** Daniel served during Nebuchadnezzar’s reign and the kinds that followed. He trusted in the LORD and that showed in his life.

That just shows what the impact that one faithful person can have. Even though this event happened over 500 years after Daniel’s time, the people there were still waiting eagerly for the Savior. So even though God used the Babylonians as a way to punish his people for their sin, he also used their captivity to bring the good news of his plan of salvation to people who might not have had any other way of knowing about him. These Wise Men seemed more eager for the Savior’s birth than his own people were.

One of my favorite Christmas readings come from John 1. He isn’t talking about Christmas directly but more the impact that Christmas would have on the world. John writes, **“He came to what was his own, yet his own people did not accept him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who did receive him, to those who believe in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. <sup>13</sup>They were born, not of blood, or of the desire of the flesh, or of a husband’s will, but born of God.”**

John writes something very similar in his first epistle, **“See the kind of love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are!”** Think about that. God sent his one and

only Son with one mission in mind—that he could make people his children. We weren't born that way. Children aren't born in God's image. They are born in their parents' image. They inherit their sin.

Jesus came here to change all that. He was the only one who could. He is the only one who could actually live like a true child of God. Every moment of every day of his life was perfect obedience to his Father. He is the only one who could die to make us children of God. Only the death of the innocent Son of God would be a price sufficient to pay our debt to God. Through Baptism he adopted us into his family.

So now we are children of God. People today are looking for a sense of belonging, of being a part of something bigger than themselves. That's especially true when their own family or their own plans have failed them so miserably. What could be better than belonging to the family of God? What could be bigger than being called a child of God? The Epiphany reminds us that this good news is for you personally.

Jesus Is for Everyone—for those who believe in him and for those who reject him.

In this text we meet King Herod the Great. He was an Idumean which meant that he wasn't a full-blood Jew, but he was raised as one. Some of the Israelites felt that it was better to be ruled by someone who was at least partially Jewish instead of by the Romans directly. He was a fascinating man. If you are looking for some interesting history, read up about him. He could be incredibly generous. He personally paid for lavish improvements to the Temple. He could also be incredibly violent.

The Wise Men first came to Jerusalem. That makes sense. If you are looking for a newborn King, why not start in the capital city? They asked Herod, **“Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”** <sup>3</sup>**When King Herod heard this, he was alarmed, and all Jerusalem with him.** Jerusalem was alarmed because if Herod felt his throne was in danger, then blood was going to flow.

But look at what God is doing! He didn't send angels to announce Jesus' birth to Herod, but he did send the Wise Men. Even though Herod was going to plot to have the young Jesus murdered, God still wanted him to be saved. He sent Jesus to be his Savior too. From what we know from history it seems like Herod never became a believer, but God reached out to him anyway.

It's interesting that Herod knew enough about the Old Testament to connect the Wise Men's message to the promise of the Savior. So he turned to the chief priests and experts in the law to find out what God had said about it. They immediately quoted from Micah 5:2, **“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.”** They quoted freely, but accurately.

So this begs the question: why didn't they do something about it? If there was even a rumor that God had kept his promise of a Savior, wouldn't that at least demand an investigation? Why didn't they go with the Wise Men? God was fulfilling this very promise right under their noses, but they didn't do anything about it. Even though they should have been the first to recognize him, they became his most vocal opponents. They unwittingly fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies by plotting to murder him.

Now Jesus had the almighty power to blast them into oblivion, but he didn't do that. Instead throughout his ministry we see him talking to them. He even went over to one of their homes to eat. When one of the experts in the law talked to him just days before his crucifixion, Jesus told him, **“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”** Even though he knew that they wouldn't listen, he kept reaching out to them anyway.

It has been said that we are living in a post-Christian society. In some ways I agree with that. Throughout American history our people have not been particularly Christian, but there was always a thin veneer of Christianity all over everything. Our money says “In God We Trust” which is true. We've just redefined who God is. More often than not, the god we worship is the money itself.

In some ways I would argue that the situation is better today because at least we're being honest. That veneer is gone so we see ourselves for what we really are. If anything, it shows that we need Jesus now more than ever. God sent the Savior even for the most hardened atheist who will spend their life denying and decrying him. God wants all people to be saved. The Epiphany makes it clear. If that's what God wants, then we want to spare no cost or time or effort to reach them with the life-saving message of Jesus.

Jesus Is for Everyone, even for those who reject him, but God leads everyone to him.

The most interesting and mysterious part of this text is the star that guided the Wise Men to Jesus. 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.”** After they left King Herod we're told, **“Then the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them, until it stood still over the place where the child was.”** <sup>10</sup>**When they saw the star, they rejoiced with overwhelming joy.”**

A lot of ink has been spilled by different authors trying to guess exactly what this star was. People try to compare it to some natural phenomenon. Was it a comet? Was it a meteor shower? Was it a star that had gone supernova? The problem is that none of those things fit with the way that the Apostle Matthew describes this star. I think the only thing that we can say is that it was some miraculous sign from God himself.

The other question that may even be harder to answer is how the Wise Men knew to associate this star with the Savior. There is only one prophecy that even mentions a star. In Numbers 24:17 we read, **“I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise up out of Israel.”** I guess that I will have to ask them when I get to heaven. In the meantime I will thank God that they did know regardless.

When it comes right down to it, God set up everything in creation to point to him. Everything he made is a testament to God’s power, wisdom, and love. No one can legitimately ask, “How was I supposed to know that there is a God?” Look around you. King David wrote in Psalm 19, **“The heavens tell about the glory of God. The expanse of the sky proclaims the work of his hands. <sup>2</sup>Day after day they pour out speech. Night after night they display knowledge.”**

As wonderful as this testimony to God is, it is also an incomplete testimony. It can tell us that there is a God but it cannot tell us what God has done for us in the Savior Jesus. The star guided the Wise Men to Bethlehem, but it couldn’t teach them who he was and what he would do for them. That’s why God the Holy Spirit inspired the human authors of the Bible, including Matthew, to write it down so that we could know.

Just look at that quote from the Prophet Micah from this text, **“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.”** Mind you, that was written seven centuries ahead of time. No detail was too small. God even told them where to expect the Savior to be born.

That passage is more than that. Jesus would not be born in a mansion in the capital city of Jerusalem. He would be born to a poor mother in a stable in tiny little village called Bethlehem. He would continue that humble life throughout his ministry. Only his miraculous signs showed that this was more than a regular man. He even went so far as to allow his own people to reject him and to nail him to a cross to pay for all our sins.

Remember what the shepherds did right after they saw the baby Jesus? They told everyone they could find about him. Guess what God wants us to be doing? Everyone should know that there’s a God but no one can really know him apart from the Word. That’s where we come in. For us every day is the Epiphany. Every day is a good day to reveal the Savior to people who need him more than anything else.

Jesus Is for Everyone—for those who believe in him and for those who reject him—but God leads everyone to him. We’ve been jumping around in history quite a bit. Christmas showed Jesus in a manger. Last Sunday he was 12 years old. This Sunday he is around 2. Next week we will see him at the start of his ministry at age 30. No matter what age in Jesus’ life we look at, one thing is very clear: Jesus is my Savior; he is your Savior; he is the Savior for everybody.