

Sunday School Lesson for December 21, 2025
Matthew 2:1-12

Merry Christmas and welcome to Sunday School on the go from the First Baptist Church in Tallassee. I'm Jim Glass, one of the teachers in the Pairs and Spares Class, and, on this third Sunday of December and the fourth Sunday of Advent, we're preparing for the celebration of Christmas by focusing our attention on the reason for the season--that moment when God sovereignly intervened in human history to present us with a Gift--the greatest Gift ever given, the most important Gift we could ever receive, and the most important Gift we could ever share with others.

Last week, our lesson closed with Luke's last look at the borrowed manger and the Child Who lay there--the Light of the world and the Bread of Life born in Bethlehem--the city of pretty good bread--all while the young woman whom God had chosen to be the mother to give birth to the Savior of the world treasured up all these things in her heart and pondered them in light of prophecy and the present moment.

It's Luke who provides us with these simple yet profoundly intimate moments of insight and wonder as he writes of angelic appearances to an old man, a young woman, and to shepherds, announcing good news of great joy to all the world. John's account of the Lord's time upon the earth is no less profound yet far greater in scope as he takes us all the way back to the beginning when the Word was with God. Matthew takes a different approach, offering only eight verses for a description of the events surrounding the birth of the Lord Jesus. Because he's careful to show his readers how Jesus' life and influence was a fulfillment of God's promises through the prophets of old, he tells us, for example in the closing verses of the first chapter of his gospel, how this birth fulfilled prophecy: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)."

Then, as the second chapter of Matthew's gospel opens, he tells us about an event that followed soon after--the visit of wise men from the East. Like the people of Israel who had longed for God's promised Deliverer to come, these unnamed, unnumbered, largely unknown, mysterious scholars also longed to find this newborn King, and Matthew shares that part of the Christmas story in the first twelve verses of chapter two: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.' After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."

The great British pastor, Charles Spurgeon, invites us to wonder at the majesty of God's sovereignty in this event with these words: "The incarnation of the Son of God was one of the greatest events in the history of the universe. Its actual occurrence was not, however, known to all mankind, but was

specially revealed to the shepherds of Bethlehem and to certain wise men of the east. ... No angelic bands entered the assembly of the Sanhedrim and proclaimed that the Christ was born: and when the chief priests and Pharisees were met together, though they gathered around copies of the law to consider where Christ should be born, yet it was not known to them that he was actually come, nor do they seem to have taken more than a passing interest in the matter, though they might have known that then was the time spoken of by the prophets when the great Messiah should come. How mysterious are the dispensations of grace; the base things are chosen and the eminent are passed by!”

He goes on to add that these glad tidings were made known also “to wise men, magi, students of the stars and of old prophetic books from the far-off east,” those for whom Hebrew would have been a foreign language and the worship of the living God a rarity. He then asks, “Why was the birth of the King of the Jews made known to these foreigners, and not to those nearer home? Why did the Lord select those who were so many hundreds of miles away, while the children of the kingdom, in whose very midst the Saviour was brought forth, were yet strangely ignorant of his presence?”

In answering the question, he invites us, once again, to behold the wonder and majesty of God’s plan for salvation: “Sovereignty in these cases clothed itself in the robes of mercy. It was great mercy that regarded the low estate of the shepherds, and it was far-reaching mercy which gathered from lands which lay in darkness a company of men made wise unto salvation. Mercy wearing her resplendent jewels was present with divine sovereignty in the lowly abode of Bethlehem. Is it not a delightful thought, that around the cradle of the Saviour, as well as around his throne in the highest heaven, these two attributes meet? He makes known himself--and herein is mercy; but it is to those whom he has chosen--and herein he shows that he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and he will have compassion on whom he will have compassion.”

Although Matthew's story raises all sorts of questions in the minds of 21st-century, scientifically-minded, Bible students, let me encourage you to begin your study of this text by allowing it to lead you--first of all--to a greater sense of wonder and worship with the amazing, all-encompassing vastness of God's plan for how the Seed of the woman would crush the head of the Serpent.

Matthew begins by providing the historical context: "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king." Herod was not one of the kings of Judah in the lineage of David that had ended with the Babylonian exile in 586 B.C. The land of Judah in the time of Jesus' birth was a Roman province, annexed to Rome in 63 B.C., and forced to pay tribute to the Empire.

Herod had received his appointment from the Roman Senate--primarily through his friendship with Marc Anthony--and had reigned for some 34 years before Jesus was born. Although his title was "king," he served at the pleasure of the emperor. He's commonly known to historians as "Herod the Great" because he distinguished himself in battle in his earlier years, in addition to repairing the Temple in Jerusalem and building and decorating the cities of his tiny kingdom. His greatness was also due in large part to his cruelty, and he reigned with an iron fist.

Herod was an Edomite--one of the descendants of Esau. He was a son of Antipater, whom Cæsar had appointed as procurator of Judæa. When he was only fifteen years old, Herod's father appointed him as governor of the province of Galilee. In order to improve his standing with the Jews, he rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem. Construction began around 20 B.C., and continued until 63 A.D., although Herod died in 4 B.C. According to the Jewish historian, Josephus, Herod believed that building the temple would be a task great enough "to assure his eternal remembrance." He went on to say that "The exterior of the building lacked nothing that could astound either mind or eye. . . . To approaching strangers it appeared from a distance like a snow-clad mountain; for all that was not over laid with gold was of purest white."

His rule is best remembered for its extreme cruelty, however, / including the murder of his wife and three sons. For most students of the Bible, Herod is best known for his response to the wise men's failure to report back to him about the Child they sought, leading him to order the execution of every child under the age of two in Bethlehem and the surrounding area. But we're getting ahead of ourselves.

So, Matthew has provided us with the historical context for what he tells us next in the first verse: "Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'" The word translated in the English Standard Version and others as "wise men" is the word from which we get our word, magician; however, the meaning of the word is far different now from what it meant then. The word was used by the ancient historian, Herodotus, to refer to a learned tribe or class of sages who lived among the Medians and Persians and who were devoted to the study of astronomy, religion, and medicine and studied the movement of the stars and their connection to earthly events.

Ancient documents from this period and before provide us with a number of predictions and prognostications related to the stars. Some of these prophecies spoke of one who would come from Judea to conquer the world, recorded for us in the biography of Vespasian, the Roman Emperor who ruled from 69 to 79 A.D. "An ancient and settled persuasion prevailed throughout the East that the Fates had decreed some one to proceed from Judea who should attain universal empire." The Roman historian, Tacitus, who died around 120 A.D. writes of a similar expectation: "Many were persuaded that it was contained in the ancient books of their priests, that at that very time the East should prevail, and that some one should proceed from Judea and possess the dominion." With the construction of Herod's Temple, Messianic expectation was at a high point throughout the Jewish world, and His arrival

and anticipated restoration of Israel would not have gone unnoticed by scholars far beyond Israel.

The Old Testament prophet, Daniel, was actually the head of such an order of astronomers. Babylon was the ancient home of astrology, but we don't know the exact place from which these men came. Several legends have developed around the wise men. That they were kings is connected with an interpretation of Isaiah chapter sixty, verse three: "Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising." They were not kings, as some traditions suggest, but they had great influence with kings due to their supposed ability to foretell future events from the movements of the stars and planets.

The idea that they were three in number is due to the mention of three kinds of gifts. Legend has even given names to the three--Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, and the remains of these wise men lie interred in the magnificent Cathedral in Cologne, Germany. I've been there and seen the casket myself, and the traditions are very strong, but how true the legends are, we can't know.

John Chrysostom, the fourth-century archbishop of Constantinople, said that there were twelve wise men, and his contemporary, Epiphanius, a bishop in Cyprus, said there were fifteen. All we can say for sure is that there were at least two wise men who studied the stars, and who understood some connection between the appearance of a particular star and the birth of one who would be king of the Jews.

Matthew tells us they "came from the east." How far east they had come from, we don't know. Most scholars suggest Persia or Arabia since the best students of astronomy were located there and because of the possible influence of the Jews who had been displaced to this area by the Assyrians and Babylonians hundreds of years before. Some writers believe they may have come from as far as China. What Matthew does tell us is that the expectation

of the coming of a King had reached far beyond the boundaries of Jerusalem, and scholars of that day were convinced that a star had led them there.

You may have heard of a religious holiday known as “Epiphany,” celebrated on January the sixth--the end of the twelve days of Christmas. In the western Church--primarily the Roman Catholic Church--Epiphany or “Three Kings Day,” marks the day when wise men from the east who were not Jews came seeking the Messiah, showing that Christ had come for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. In the Eastern Church--Primarily the Eastern Orthodox Church, Epiphany celebrates the Lord’s baptism.

Naturally, these wise men came to the capital city of the Jews and requested an audience with the political leader of Israel to ask him about the birth of the Child that this star signified. It was only natural that they come to Herod, since, surely, he would know about this all-important birth. Somehow, the wise men knew that a King had been born, and that He was born as the King of the Jews. What more likely place to come than to Jerusalem?

Note that Matthew says, “We have seen His star.” Once again, they somehow connected His birth with the appearance of **His** star--a heavenly phenomenon that was directly related to Him. The word that we have translated, *star*, is ambiguous enough to include a conjunction, or lining up, of planets, or the appearance of a comet or a new star. Or it could have been a brilliant light, divinely created and appointed for this task.

Unfortunately, our modern, scientific minds hear the word “star” and immediately assume that the heavenly light the wise men followed was a luminous, gaseous, spherical, celestial body of great mass that produced energy by means of nuclear fusion / visible in the sky, especially at night. However, God could have used any glowing object to lead the wise men on their course. For example, some have suggested that the brilliance of the angelic host’s appearance to the shepherds was seen as far as the place where the wise men came from, and the glory of the Lord that shone around the shepherds was

what drew the wise men to Bethlehem. Even though it may not have been a star as we define it today, we'll use the word as it appears in the text before us.

The wise men had seen His star "in its rising"--a more accurate translation than "in the east" as many translations read. They saw the star as soon as it appeared just above the horizon. Although the whole system of astrology is a superstition, God could still use this ancient belief system to guide those who truly sought Him.

How they knew it to have been His star--the star that announced His birth and was leading them to His exact location, we don't know. Perhaps it had been predicted from Daniel's prophecy of the seventy weeks of years, or from Balaam in the book of Numbers, chapter 24, verse seventeen, where Balaam said: "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel."

In any case, the purpose of the star was to draw the wise men to Judea that they might be witnesses and heralds of the birth of the King of the Jews. They understood the significance of the star's appearance, and they had come to worship this new-born King--to give homage and reverence to this Child as would be appropriate to the customs of Persia or whatever country they had come from in order to gain His favor early so He would treat them favorably and kindly if His rule should extend to their homeland--and perhaps nothing more.

Their question to Herod was simple yet direct: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" They showed no signs of doubt. They didn't ask, "Is it true that the King of the Jews has been born," but "Where is He?" The Jews were expectantly looking for the Messiah. Various interpretations of Daniel, chapter nine, verses 25 through 27 suggested the time was near. Focused as they were on their own deliverance from national and political subjection to their Roman overlords, the people of Israel were expecting a temporal prince who would restore their nation to its former glory as in the days of King David.

However, a Savior who would save them from their sins was the very last thing most of the people of that day wanted. In spite of his cruelty, they liked Herod, for his example of the luxury and licentiousness characterized the people of Jerusalem. On the other hand, there had been several individuals who had posed as the Messiah, capitalizing on the people's hopes and expectations and gathering a following only to be brought to a quick and--usually--bloody end by the Romans.

Perhaps this was one of the primary reasons that "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." Herod was, of course, troubled by their question not only because it suggested a competitor to his own rule--one of his own titles may have been "king of the Jews"--, but also because of his very limited understanding of the spiritual force within Judaism and the religious fervor that sought a deliverer.

Spurgeon writes: "Unhappy Jerusalem, to be troubled by the birth of the Savior! Unhappy people, to whom true godliness is a weariness!"

Herod didn't know why the star was so important, so he called together the religious leaders of that day and demanded an explanation from them--verse four: "Assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born." These chief priests and teachers of the Law were made up of those who had, at one time or another, served as the religious leaders of Judaism at the discretion of their Roman overlords, along with those who were the professional expounders of the Hebrew scriptures which we call the Old Testament. If anyone would have known about the birth of the Messiah, it should have been those who had made it their life's occupation to study the scriptures.

They were able to answer Herod's question by quoting from the writing of the prophet, Micah, who, some eight hundred years before, had written down that it would be in Bethlehem that the Messiah would be born--verse five: "They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

“And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.”” Their answer seems to have been given without any hesitation or need for research as a matter perfectly understood and settled by divine authority.

Although a small town as we’ve learned in our previous advent studies, Bethlehem’s importance outweighed its size because it would be the birthplace of the King of the Jews. That the chief priests and scribes told Herod that He would be born in Bethlehem of Judah as opposed to Bethlehem Ephrathah, as Micah originally wrote, doesn’t present any problem, for Judah and Ephrathah were essentially the same region, the additional clarification allowed them to distinguish it from another Bethlehem in the land of Zebulun, Herod may not have been aware of the reference to Ephrathah, and the religious advisors may have simply paraphrased Micah’s words, not having felt the need to quote the prophecy as originally written and most likely using the Septuagint as their source. Micah’s prophecy also included the fact that, not only would the One to be born in Bethlehem be a king, He would also be a shepherd--One Who would feed and protect, but also guide and lay down His life for the sheep of Israel.

As you might well assume and as Matthew explains, Herod was quite disturbed by this news and its implications, particularly to his own position as king. So he called the wise men aside secretly to find out when the star first appeared. In seeking to speak with them without the rest of the court knowing it, he may have been hiding his own fear as well as attempting to avoid further popular excitement before he had collected all the facts, or it may have been just his suspicious temperament. In any case, he wanted to know exactly when the star first appeared, most likely to find out exactly when this child was born so he would know how long he had / before this new-born King had a chance of gathering a following and interfering with his own rule.

Although we don't know what the wise men told Herod, we do know that Herod sent the magi on to Bethlehem to check out this prediction and report back to him. Herod claimed that it was his intention to come and worship the child as well, but we shouldn't suppose that was his true intention. His instructions to the wise men might have looked suspicious if he had not clothed them in the appearance of the worship the wise men themselves intended to offer.

And notice that Herod didn't order the priests and scribes to go with them in search of this new King, just as it doesn't seem that he allowed the wise men to explain their appearance to them--something that you would have expected since His birth was a fulfillment of prophecy--, perhaps trying to hide the reason for the wise men's appearance and attempting to avoid the possibility of the Jewish leaders aligning themselves with this promised Messiah King against him.

In any case, the magi left the palace and the city and followed the star that went before them--verse nine: "After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was." It seems likely that the star had disappeared for a time, causing the wise men to detour to Jerusalem to get a fresh fix on the location.

Now, with the knowledge of Micah's prophecy and fresh instructions from Herod, the star "went before them." How exactly it moved--if it truly did move relative to the wise men's travel or if it was simply fixed above the house where Jesus lay--we don't know, and scholars have put forth any number of possible suggestions, attempting to explain this heavenly phenomenon. It seems best to understand Matthew to be saying that this glowing light actually moved in such a way as if to be, according to Chrysostom, "taking them by the hand and drawing them on."

And--verse ten--“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” They were thrilled at the sight of the star not only because of the validation of their calculations and predictions, but especially because they felt assured that they were being led by divine guidance and would soon be directed to the newborn King of the Jews.

To say that they rejoiced with great joy seems to us to be redundant, but, in the minds of Matthew’s Jewish readers, this would have been understood as their way of expressing an extreme measure of joy since they didn’t have comparative words like good, better, and best. They really, really, really, rejoiced when they saw the star!

It’s possible that they had been discouraged by Herod’s not-so-hidden treachery in speaking to them secretly and telling them to report back to him. And, again, the light they had seen that initiated their quest may have gone dark for a time. But now, it’s back in all its brilliance, and it’s directing their very steps to the Object of their great quest for this newborn King.

Back to the second half of verse nine: “And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.” Matthew makes it quite plain that they were led by the star’s light to the very house where Jesus lay. Now, verse eleven: “And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.” It’s quite likely that, by now, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus had found a home--perhaps with relatives--in Bethlehem and may have been staying there for some time. Matthew tells us that “they saw the child with Mary his mother.” Joseph’s absence has led some scholars to speculate that Joseph was absent so that these wise men would see only the mother of the Messiah Who had no real human father. If they had seen Joseph, they might have assumed that he was the father.

Matthew tells us that, when the magi came into the house, they worshipped the Child King. They certainly recognized Him to be far more

than simply another in a long line of earthly kings of Israel. Their first act of worship was the presentation of themselves in humble submission to this Child Who was more than just another child. The second part of their worship was the presentation of the gifts that they had brought as was customary in the East to show respect for persons of distinction by making presents or offerings of this kind. In this case, it was gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Frankincense is a fragrant white resin or gum obtained from a tree of the genus *Boswellia* that holds deep, symbolic meaning throughout the Bible. It's extracted by making cuts in the bark, causing the resin to flow out. It has a very fragrant odor when burned and was therefore used in worship, where it was burned as a pleasant offering to God as we read in Exodus, chapter thirty verse eight and Leviticus, chapter sixteen, verse twelve. Because it's primarily found in Arabia, scholars have assumed the wise men came from there.

Myrrh--also found in Arabia--is harvested much like frankincense from a thorny tree of the *Commiphora* species. It's been highly valued since ancient times for its aromatic properties and its use in perfumes, incense, and medicinal preparations. The name denotes bitterness and myrrh was used primarily in embalming the dead because it had the property of preserving dead bodies from decay. Myrrh was often mixed with wine to make a drink like that which was offered to the Lord Jesus as He hung on the cross as we read in Mark, chapter fifteen, verse 23.

As you well know, several interesting theories have sprung up about the significance of the gifts. For example, some have suggested that gold was presented to Jesus to celebrate His kingship, frankincense to recognize His divinity, and myrrh to preview His sacrificial death. Others have suggested that the three gifts represented the three countries from which they had supposedly come. Whether any of this is true, we can't know, only that the magi recognized the great worth and importance of this Child and gave Him gifts accordingly.

While they were there, the magi were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod--verse twelve. So, they went back to their own homeland by a way different from that by which they had come. Again, whether they returned to Persia, Babylon, Arabia, or some other country we don't know. And, what became of these persons after they returned home and whether they were spiritually and savingly enlightened to the knowledge of the King they worshiped to be the Messiah, or what report they made of him when they came into their own country we have no account of either in sacred or secular history, in spite of what many have spiritually made of the words, "they departed to their own country by another way."

This remarkable report has made a lasting mark upon the Christmas story as we know it and sing of it today. Many of our hymns include a reference to the star and one of our most familiar hymns is sung about the visit of the magi, described as three kings. While the story has grown from what Matthew and Luke first recorded about the birth of our Lord, what we have in the Word of God is sure, and stands as our authority today in all matters of life.

As we reflect on this wonderful story as Christmas draws near, let me suggest a few practical applications. First, our worship of the Lord begins with the presentation of ourselves to the Lord, just as the wise men did. As we recognize that He is the Creator of life and all of life rightly belongs to Him, we respond appropriately only when we offer our very lives to Him as living sacrifices. When we give ourselves to Him, there is nothing that we can rightly hold back for ourselves. We freely and completely give ourselves to Him and submit totally to His authority, declaring that we are willing to do whatever He calls and commands us to do.

Second, our worship includes the presentation of all that we are, all we have, and all we could be to the Lord. The magi gave gifts that reflected their worship of the Lord Jesus. When we have truly allowed Him to be the Lord of our lives, we recognize that everything already belongs to Him; He has simply entrusted whatever we call "ours" into our hands for a very brief time. Our

love for Him, our worship of Him, and our obedience to Him are all reflected in what we do with what He has entrusted to us.

Finally, Christmas should be a time of worship. Let me encourage you this Christmas to set aside a time this coming week--perhaps an hour, perhaps an entire day--to do nothing but seek the Lord with all your heart, just as the wise men did. As you pray, as you open the ears of your heart and the eyes of your mind to His voice through His Word by His Spirit, may you discover the Lord afresh and come before Him in adoration, just as the wise men came in adoration before the Lord. This Christmas, it's my prayer that you might have a fresh encounter with the living God and that you might come to know and love and serve Him as your Lord and King more fully every moment of every day, for--as it's said--wise men--and women and boys and girls--still seek Him today.

Thank you for preparing your heart and your mind to engage with the wonder of Christmas and the Lord's promises about His greatest gift--the One Who would save us from our sin and grant us eternal life. Next week, we conclude our advent series by considering the Lord's second advent--His soon return in glory, ushering in a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells as we read in Luke, chapter 21, verses 27 and 28 and Second Peter, chapter three, verses eight through fourteen.

As always, as it's still a good thing to do, keep calm, trust in the Lord, and wash your hands! Merry Christmas, and may God bless us--every one!