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The Festival of Epiphany – Matthew 2:1-12 – Come to Worship Your King

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Herod was no *real* king of the Jews. He was a foreigner, an Idumean, a descendant of Esau, not of Jacob. He had no right to rule on this throne. No matter how hard he tried to cover it up, everyone knew he was put on this throne not by birth, not by God, but by Rome and through bribery. These Magi just said what everyone was thinking. “Where is the one who has been *born* king of the Jews?” That must’ve been nails on a chalkboard to Herod. Not the one who was made king by Rome, not the one who took the throne by deceit and cunning, but who was *born* king? Where is the one who has legitimate right to rule on this throne that truly belongs only to the line of David? Where is he?

Now maybe the Magi didn’t mean all that when they asked to see the one born King of the Jews. They were foreigners themselves after all; they didn’t know the king and they had no idea how volatile the political situation was in Judea. But you can bet that’s what Herod heard. It may have been an innocent question, but it was one that the people of Judea knew all too well was almost certain to come with horrific backlash.

See, history has nicknamed Herod “the Great” – but that certainly didn’t come from the people he ruled. His people hated him, they resented him, and not just because he wasn’t one of them. Herod was ruthless and paranoid and vengeful and the list could go on. Sure, he did a lot of good things with building programs and so on, but as far as the people were concerned, Herod was everything a good king should not be.

Herod was so worried about preserving his own power that he was willing to imprison and kill just about anyone to do it – including some of the most well-respected and beloved members of the community, and even his own wife and sons. In fact, it was King Herod “the Great” who just after this time slaughtered all those babies in Bethlehem in the name of protecting his throne. That’s the kind of guy he was. *That’s* why all Jerusalem was disturbed when Herod was disturbed!

No doubt Herod’s blood boiled at the disrespect he felt from these Magi. “You come into this city that I myself built up and glorified, bearing gifts not for me but for some kid I’ve never heard of, and asking me for directions to where you can worship him? You’ll be lucky if I let you leave here alive.” No, Herod didn’t take too kindly to all this talk of “the one *born* king of the Jews.” The Jews already had a king, and he didn’t plan on stepping aside.

But you see, King Herod and the Jewish religious leaders of that day really had no reason to feel threatened. While they may have feared the worst about the possibility of civil unrest and

rebellion and political takeover, this one born King of the Jews actually came to inaugurate a kingdom that wasn’t anything like the kingdoms of this world.

This King – this promised *Messiah*, as the Jews called him – wasn’t a threat to Herod, because he wasn’t what Herod or the Jews were expecting. They expected the Messiah to be a military strongman who would throw off foreign oppression and bring back the glory days of Israel, like in the time of King David. The Jews were hoping for someone who would treat them like God’s children *should* be treated and right all the wrongs that Herod had done to them. But that wasn’t God’s concept of the Messiah. God’s Messiah would be so much greater than Herod or even the king that the Jews were expecting, but he would be a Savior-King, coming in meekness and humility.

The King of the Jews would be gentle and kind and generous and selfless. He would come to bring peace on earth and goodwill to men. He is rightly called a King – but he’s the heavenly king who reigns over us not with an iron fist from a golden throne, but with the Gospel and from a wooden cross.

This king was everything Herod was not – he loved and cared for his people like a shepherd and did so much more for them than Herod could ever hope to. God sent his Messiah into this world through the Jewish race to be their Savior from sin and the King who rules all things for the good of those all those who love him. Jesus was truly the king of the Jews, and all the Jews in Jerusalem really should have joined in when the Magi came searching for him.

I mean after all, it was only because of the Jews that these Magi even knew about the hope for a Savior in the first place. These Magi were “from the east,” it says – probably from Babylon or Persia, where the Jews were exiled hundreds of years before. Well the Bible says that during that time, the prophet Daniel was made head of all the wise men in the empire, and there were lots of Jews who never returned home to the Promised Land after the exile was over. No doubt those Jews shared their faith and brought the hope for a Savior from sin to some of the Magi who handed that tradition down through the centuries. No doubt that influence played a huge role in bringing these Magi to Jerusalem.

Isn’t it awesome how God works? God weaved together this plan starting hundreds of years beforehand to show that the Gospel of a Savior is for people of all nations, and he does what he has to in order to make sure that message gets to them – no matter the circumstances. And yes, that means sometimes he even works through evil intentions to accomplish his good purposes. And that’s exactly what happened here with the Magi and King Herod.

The Magi came to Jerusalem in genuine faith and eagerness to find the Savior. All this time they had been watching the skies for a sign, and when they finally saw that star, they trekked maybe a thousand miles or more from the east to find baby Jesus. Their search for the King of the Jews took them to the palace in Jerusalem – the place where royal babies are born, right? – but all they found out there was that Herod and the Jewish religious leaders didn't share their enthusiasm. When they asked around for more information about the Savior born, they were met not with excitement and willingness to help but with ignorance and fear and anger from King Herod.

The only help they got was an old prophecy that told them that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, a small village about six miles to the south. Well, that was enough for them to continue their search, so they saddled up and pressed on from there.

Before they left, though, crafty old Herod called them together secretly and asked for details on dates and places so later he could go to worship the newborn king – while really he was just planning how he could eliminate a potential rival to his throne. Report back to me as soon as you find the child, he said; once he found out exactly who and where the child was, Herod could act accordingly and swiftly. But God had other plans.

First the Magi would get to see what they came for, what their hearts had longed for. The Magi rejoiced when that star reappeared ahead of them, because they knew that soon they would behold their King with their own eyes. And when they finally arrived at that house in Bethlehem where the star led them, they did what I imagine we all will do when we see Jesus face-to-face – they bowed down and worshipped their Savior-King.

And that's exactly the point of Epiphany – Jesus is King not just of the Jews, but of all nations. Jesus was king even for those Magi, and with believing hearts they brought gifts fit for their King. They worshipped Jesus by offering their costly treasures of gold and frankincense and myrrh, but even more so they worshipped by devoting to him their hearts. Yes, it was a star that first led them to their King, but it was God's Word and promises that truly enlightened them to seek after him in the first place and then also guided them on their way back home and for the rest of their lives.

So people of God, let's follow the example of the Magi. Not just during the Christmas season, not just as Lent and Easter approaches, but every day and in every way, let's follow the light of God's Word that reveals Jesus as your eternal King. Don't do like Herod and the Jewish religious leaders did. Don't take Jesus off his throne and make him like your waiter, like he should be there to help you when you snap your fingers, but he should be invisible the rest of the time so he doesn't bother you. Don't let your spiritual lives go to the back burner

now that Christmas is over. No, you have the priceless treasure of God's Word right here in your grasp; always appreciate it, live it, and love it.

And don't be like the Jews just because there are Herods around, either. Don't be too afraid to live your faith because some people won't react well to you "forcing" your religion on them. Our King reigns – why are we afraid to live like it, even in the face of opposition? Epiphany is about Jesus being revealed in all his glory, and these days one of the ways he reveals his glory is through the words and actions of believers like you and me. So that means the only proper response for Christians is to keep their spiritual lives on the front burner and turn up the heat. Now that doesn't necessarily mean you have to go out preaching on the street corners, but people should be able to tell who your true King is by the way you speak and act and conduct yourself on social media and how you prioritize living a faithful Christian life.

So again, let's be like the Magi – let's enthrone Christ in our hearts as King. The King of the Jews is your King also, because Jesus came for all people and God reaches out to all people, no exceptions. No, God may not have sent a star to lead you to the Savior, but he did what he had to in order to bring you into the family of believers. Just as the light of the Gospel came to the Magi, so also it comes to you through God's Word and Sacraments and makes a home for Christ in your hearts. And even though you may only have to drive down the road to church rather than travel across a desert, you too can still devote your lives to God and his Word.

And you can worship like the Magi, too. When Christians put their faith in Jesus as their Savior, it's natural for us to bring him our earthly treasures. That's how we show him that we love him and support his work to reach more people with the Gospel message about him! Now those gifts don't have to be gold, frankincense, and myrrh; I don't think we use a lot of myrrh around church here. God simply loves faithful, generous, cheerful givers who want to glorify their Savior. We bring him our gifts in the same faith that the Magi did, and so that means all of our gifts, too, are fit for our King.

No, Herod didn't want Jesus as his king. The religious leaders in Jerusalem didn't recognize Jesus as their king. And many people today still fall into those same categories. Most often Christ the King is met with ignorance, indifference, and hostility. But Jesus was King for those Magi, and Jesus is King for you – no longer in lowliness, but now in exalted glory. That bright Gospel star that led the Magi to their Savior's crib hasn't yet grown dim and still shines in your hearts today, bidding you come, worship your King. Amen.