



Sermon Notes: Steve Stanis,

22 Dec 2024

“The Glory of the Gifts; The Wise men and Herod”

Readings: Isaiah 60:1-5, Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction:

Last week, we reflected on the lows and the highs—the shepherds, humble and lowly members of society, were entrusted with the highest honour of receiving and proclaiming the message of Jesus’ birth. They showed us that God’s grace reaches to the very depths of our world, lifting the lowliest to a place of glory in His story.

This week, we turn our focus to the small and the large.

At first glance, the birth of Jesus may seem like a small and ordinary moment—a baby born in humble surroundings. But within that small beginning lies the largest and most profound truth: this child is Christ the Lord, the Saviour of the world.

This understanding, transforms everything. It is a treasure beyond measure, a gift that the wise men recognised as they bowed down and offered their worship.

Today we reflect on Matthew 2:1-12 and the significance of events after the birth of Jesus.

Let’s watch the story in the mockumentary as the wise men, also known to us as the ‘wise guys’, focus us on the gift of the Saviour.

Matthew’s Gospel furthers the story of Israel through the story of Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew is best understood with one eye looking back to the Old Testament story, before Jesus, and the other attuned to shifts in the New Testament story that Jesus ushers in.

The passage begins and Jesus is already born. Joseph and Mary stayed in Bethlehem, making their home there. Meanwhile, educated men from the east, experts in the study of sacred texts, had heard that somewhere in Judea a boy had been born; King of the Jews. They remembered that the Jewish holy book said, *“A star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel.”*

So, when they saw a new star rise in the west, an uncommon one that seemed to have been lit just for them, they followed it. It led them to Jerusalem.

Wanting to honour this king and pay tribute to his majesty, they began to ask around. Where was he?

The Ruler Conspiracy: (Secrecy V1-2)

Herod the Great was a paranoid leader, a personality perfect for his position as the ruler of Judea under the authority of Rome. He built his empire to create the illusion that he was a man who could be in many places at the same time. In addition to his fortresses at Herodium, Sebaste, Machaerus, and Masada, he also built palaces in Caesarea, Jericho, and Jerusalem. Was he the first real estate entrepreneur?

At any moment, he could have been in any one of them, so at every moment, he might as well have been in all of them. His affinity for architecture was well known, as was his obsessive mistrust of those around him.

There could only be one ruler in Judea. This was Herod's passionate commitment. Already the bones of one wife, several sons, and multiple distant relatives cluttered the family tomb as the result of his conviction that each and every one of them was involved in a conspiracy to kill him.

You might say he was good at picking a bone with others!

When he heard of these educated men *and their quest, the dissonance of the words "King" and "Jews"* with no mention of himself was more than he could stand.

To Herod, the solution wasn't that complicated. If it meant killing every last baby boy in Israel, then that was what he would do. He called the chief priests and the scribes, to tell him everything they knew about this king.

The Ruler Captured & Compromised: (Scribes & Pharisees V3-4)

Herod summoned them, seeking a theology lesson, and the priests gave him the details without confusion or hesitation: the prophet Micah said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, just a few miles south, where Jacob's love, Rachel, was buried and where King David had been born.

The chief priests were the keepers of the temple and of the religious life and culture of the Jews. The scribes, or teachers of the law, were the guardians of the Word of God. They wrote out copies of the sacred Scriptures, poring over every detail. The Israelites, foretold by the prophets, waited for the coming Messiah. Still, curiously, not one of them seemed motivated to see for themselves if the Magi were right. Sadly, we can all be guilty of this!

They should have been the most expectant of the Messiah's coming, but all the religious leaders displayed, as they rehearsed these ancient prophetic details of their coming king, was apathetic suspicion.

Jesus came to his own, and his own did not receive him. They didn't seek him then, and they wouldn't seek him later either.

Even when he was grown and ministering among them, they refused to believe in Him.

It is a sobering reminder for us. Mark 8:36 "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? "

In the midst of our waiting for Jesus to return, do we keep our eyes on Jesus, or do we become distracted, and so our gaze loses focus.

The Ruler Concerned: (Disturbed V5-6)

But Herod believed. At least, enough to worry. He was one, prone to err on the side of caution, and so it was enough for him that the Magi had come so far, laden with such gifts. And if there *was* such a king, maybe the Magi could lead him there. Maybe if he feigned a desire to bring a tribute of his own, the Magi would trust him and lead him to this new king.

Herod told the visitors,

"Come back and tell me where he is. I have a little something of my own I want to give him." (v8)

The Confidant, the Magi: (Called Secretly V7-11)

After hearing him out, the Magi left for Bethlehem. It wasn't long before their familiar star rose again, leading them to a house on the outskirts of town. When they found the king, it was no wonder he was nothing more than a murmur in Jerusalem. They entered the place where he

lay and saw a child in the arms of a young woman, practically still a girl. There was no crown or majesty that would attract them to him, no miracle they could see, no signs of greatness.

Just a woman and her child. But there was something about that moment, clearly Spirit led, that only the woman, her husband, the Magi, and the child knew—something that bent the knees of those scholars who came to worship when they saw him. One of the Magi moved forward and produced a purse of gold, laying it at the child's feet.

Another came with a flask of myrrh, then another with a box of frankincense. They gave these gifts for no other reason than to honour the One born **King of the Jews**.

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were, without a doubt, the richest of gifts that could be offered to a newborn king. It can be said that gold stands for the Christ child's kingly status, frankincense for his divinity, and myrrh for the anointing at his sacrificial death.

I wonder what Mary and Joseph did with these gifts? These glorious gifts must have been quite overwhelming for them. For the Magi, He wasn't even *their* king. Israel's God was not their people's God.

And yet, they had come because the thought of a God of justice and righteousness awakened in them a desire to be close to the One through whom that justice would flow.

They followed the star, and after countless miles of travel, they found the King.

This baby has changed them forever!

My prayer this Christmas is that, like the Magi, we would be truly thankful to the God of justice and righteousness, and that He would awaken in us a desire to be close to the One through whom that justice would flow.

The Conquering: (Coming though the Dream V12)

But that night as they drifted into a deep sleep, an angel, unfamiliar to them but well known to Mary, stepped into their dreams, and told them the truth of who Herod really was and what he meant to do to this baby.

The angel warned them to take another route home. Herod's motives were murderous. History would remember him, dripping not only with the blood of his own wives and sons, but with the blood of countless others.

But not this boy King.

Herod would not take his life. The Magi departed for home in secret, avoiding the area around Jerusalem.

For most of the residents of Bethlehem, Jesus's birth went unnoticed, but heaven and earth converged in this little pocket of the Promised Land for the most important birth in history. The angels orchestrated the unlikely meeting of the poor, the displaced, and the curious to announce the coming of the Saviour of the world.

God's justice could now be done!

The Conclusion: (Though the Promise today and tomorrow!)

Since the rebellion of humanity, God's promise to redeem and restore has been foretold. It is fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. Jesus is God's perfect justice. He lived as one of us, obedient to God's will, reflecting God's character of justice and mercy, especially to the needy and marginalised.

His life, and death on the Cross and His victorious resurrection offer redemption, restoration, and eternal life to all who turn to Him. This is the gift of God to us. And the world would never be the same.

God's Kingdom is come, God's will is being done, on Earth, as it is in Heaven. This is our new story.

Herod's response to the Magi's inquiry reflects the twisted nature of earthly power when it is driven by fear and deception. Herod schemes to preserve his reign, resorting to deceit and brutality. We see this same response in today's world.

Today we reflect:

- Do we use our power to empower the vulnerable and the needy?
- Do we seek God's justice for individuals and communities where the injustices of earthly power and self-preservation overshadow God's plan for perfect justice?

The star that guided the Magi symbolises divine justice, a celestial compass leading them to the true King.

Today we reflect:

- Are we allowing God's righteousness to illuminate our path and guide our decisions?
- Are we allowing the transformative work of the Spirit of God to shape us?

The Magi presented gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, a profound act of justice in worship.

Today we reflect:

- Do we live lives that worship God, trusting in His saving grace and faithfully obeying Him in all we say, think and do?

The Magi not only worshipped but also acted justly.

By heeding the warning in a dream, they avoided Herod, thereby protecting the Christ child. This reflects the importance of justice and action.

Today we reflect:

- Do we listen to God speaking into our lives?
- Do we honour His character and act justly?

May the peace that surpasses all understanding fill your hearts this Christmas.

For God's gift to become apparent in each of our lives in our hurting world, let's go out always glorifying God making Jesus known as we love and serve together.

Let us pray:

Heavenly Father, we come before You with hearts full of awe and gratitude.

Thank You for the beauty of Your plan, where the smallest beginnings, hold the greatest truths. In the humble birth of Jesus, You revealed the Saviour of the world; Christ the Lord, the treasure of our heart.

Lord, we marvel at how You chose the lowly and the ordinary to proclaim the extraordinary. Help us to see with eyes of faith, to understand the greatness of Your love and the depth of Your gift in Jesus. Like the shepherds, may we respond with joy and obedience. Like the wise men, may we bring our worship and offer You our heart.

As we reflect on the small and the large in Your story, teach us to trust in the power of Your presence, even in the smallest moments of our lives.

May the truth of who You are shape our hearts, our choices, and our worship.

We give You all honour, glory, and praise, now and forever.

In Jesus' name, we pray. Amen