

# The Journeys

## Matthew 2:1-12

### INTRODUCTION

This is the day we celebrate the Epiphany of our Lord. The actual date is January 6, but since that date doesn't fall on a Sunday, we celebrate it today. Epiphany is one of those words that used only occasionally in everyday conversation. Every once in a while you might hear someone say "I had an epiphany!" By that they mean that something really big just occurred to them.

And that is essentially the meaning of the word as we use it on this day. Something big just dawned on us. There was an appearance, a revelation of sorts. We saw something that we never saw before. And particularly for this celebration, we talk about the appearance of the star of Bethlehem and the wise men who saw it.

The Wise Men (or Magi) are believed to have come from Persia (what is now modern day Iran). We believe they were a part of a priestly tribe much like the Levites were among the Jewish people. Over time, they became the group responsible for educating the Persian royal family – and particularly those who were in line for Persian throne.

These were men of holiness and wisdom. They could interpret dreams. They also knew the Jewish Scriptures very well, which is why we believe that the Old Testament hero Daniel may have been one of the group's early leaders, and maybe even its founder.

As was common in those ancient days, such men of science and wisdom studied the stars. They believed that a man's destiny was influenced by the star under which he was born. So whenever something rare or unusual happened in the heavens, they took it to mean that the gods were breaking into the natural order and initiating some special event.

So when they saw the star of Bethlehem, their knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures convinced them that this was the event about which all the Old Testament prophets had spoken, and they wanted to see it firsthand. So they set out on a journey ... a journey which first of all led them to the second key figure in this Epiphany drama.

King Herod was a man with far fewer admirable qualities. He was by birth half-Jewish and half-Idumaeon, a fact that always left him insecure about whether full-blooded Jews accepted him. Throughout his 40 year reign, he wavered between being nice so the Jews would like him and being vicious so they would fear him.

To his credit, King Herod did a great job of keeping order in Judea, so the Roman authorities basically left him alone. He rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. It was said to have been the most magnificent of all the temples. During a famine used his own personal resources to make sure the Jewish people didn't starve to death.

But he was also a man of great suspicion. In his older years he earned the nickname of “Herod the Murderer.” He is known to have killed his wife, his mother, and three of his sons. Caesar Augustus – the one who ordered the census that caused Mary and Joseph to make the trip to Bethlehem – once said that it was safer to be Herod’s pig (*hus*) than Herod’s son (*huios*).

When Herod knew that he was dying, he arrested a large group of prominent citizens in Jerusalem and had them imprisoned. He issued orders that the moment he died every one of them was to be killed so that at least someone would be shedding tears when he died.

It was the physical journey from Babylon to Bethlehem that brought the wise men and King Herod together in this story, but I want to focus on a different journey taken by the wise men for a few moments. This journey moves from a STAR to the SCRIPTURES to the SAVIOR.

## #1: THE STAR

*We saw his star when it rose... (v. 2)*

Step one of the journey for these wise was seeing the star. Whether it is the stars in the sky or any of the other wonders of the world around us, all around us we can see evidence of the existence of God.

Psalms 19:1 says:

*The heavens declare the glory of God;  
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.*

Romans 1:19-20 says:

*(W)hat may be known about God is plain..., because God has made it plain ...  
For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power  
and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has  
been made so that men are without excuse.*

One of the great hymns of the church captures it like this:

*This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres.  
This is my Father's world: I rest me in the thought  
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas;  
His hand the wonders wrought.*

*This is my Father's world, the birds their carols raise,  
The morning light, the lily white, declare their Maker's praise.  
This is my Father's world: He shines in all that's fair;*

*In the rustling grass I hear Him pass;  
He speaks to me everywhere.*

The wise men experienced something of the majesty of God in the world around them, and it started them on a journey – both physically and spiritually – to Bethlehem.

We don't know if Herod ever saw the star, but he clearly knew about it. The wise men told him. And even if he didn't Herod still could see the majesty of the world around him and know that God was real. He just didn't start a journey of his own to Bethlehem.

Some people today revel in what God has created, and well we should. This is our Father's world! But that is only the starting point of the journey, never the destination.

## **#2: THE SCRIPTURES**

*"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written..."*  
(v. 5)

What the wise men saw in nature took them into the Scriptures, both while they were in Babylon and when they stood before King Herod.

It is fascinating, isn't it, that the same passage from Micah caused such different reactions among these key players. For the wise men, the reaction was joy. For Herod, it was anger. Same passage. Different reaction.

What we get from the Scriptures is a reflection of what we bring into them. If we come to God's Word expecting to discover God, we will encounter joy and peace and blessing and wonder and amazement. But if we come to God's Word expecting to find judgment or wanting to find justification for our current attitudes and actions, we will come away with an entirely different set of feelings.

Your reaction to the Bible is a reflection of your heart.

For Herod the Scriptures were a threat. For the wise men, they pointed the way to Jesus.

## **#3: THE SAVIOR**

*On coming to the house, they saw the child (v. 11)*

Eventually, the journey of the wise men brought them face-to-face with Jesus Himself. And that is the goal. From the star to the Scriptures to the Savior – from realizing He existed through what they saw and experienced ... to reading the words of the Bible to see what they could learn about Him there ... to having a personal encounter with Him

themselves, the wise men took that spiritual journey that culminated in an act of worship and adoration.

Herod never made it that far. He never made it to the Savior.

### **APPLICATION**

Both King Herod and the Magi lived in a time when there was a growing expectation that the divine beings (God, the gods) were about to do some major event. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote about that expectation, as did several Middle Eastern wise men. The Roman poet Virgil believed that the savior of the world was the Emperor Augustus and wrote as much in the *Messianic Eclogue*.

I can't help but think how the same expectation characterizes our world today. There is a growing realization that the problems we face can only be resolved by someone greater than ourselves.

Our job as a church is to move those people along the same journey of faith the wise men took ... from star to Scripture to Savior.

Amen.