

January 2, 2022
The Epiphany of the Lord
Matthew 2:1-12

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of King Herod, behold, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage."



When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and ascertained from them the time of the star's appearance. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage."

After their audience with the king, they set out. And behold, the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed at seeing the star, and on entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Background

The first chapter of Matthew's gospel ends with Joseph carrying out the instructions he had received in a dream. "When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus." (Matthew 1:24-25) The next event that Matthew describes is the arrival of the magi in Jerusalem. Many of us who are familiar with stories of the birth of Jesus might be tempted to fill in other details that Matthew has omitted. Another approach would be to spend some time considering what Matthew wants his community to focus on by his unfolding of the story of the birth of Jesus in this way.

Matthew's unique presentation of the birth of Jesus includes details like Joseph accepting Mary into his home as his wife, which spared Mary of the possibility of being sent away in quiet disgrace, or even the possibility of being stoned. He also reports that it is Joseph who gives the child the name Jesus. (Luke reports the name was given to Mary at the annunciation. "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus." (Luke 1:31)) Matthew has also skipped over such events as the census, not finding room in the city and therefore seeking shelter in a manger, the angels declaring the birth, and the shepherds' experience of the scene. Matthew does not even name Mary in telling us of the birth of Jesus. Despite not having relations with Mary, Joseph takes on the responsibility of the child as if he were his son, and gives him the name Jesus. But Matthew provides other details that will help his audience understand how God has been unfolding God's plan in the birth of this child. Some of Matthew's details are present in today's gospel text.

The Magi were part of the gentile world into which Jesus was born. The Magi studied the heavens for clues to the meaning of life. They functioned as political and religious advisers to the rulers of the Median and later the Persian empires. At one point in Persian history, the Magi revolted and replaced their king, demonstrating their importance within their culture. Given that they were looking for a person of significance, it is no surprise that they would first go to Jerusalem, the center of the religious and political world of Judea.

But Jesus is an entirely different kind of king, and therefore not to be found in Jerusalem, but rather in the small isolated community of Bethlehem. When the Magi arrived there and entered the house, they first saw the child with his mother, and then prostrated themselves before the infant. Matthew has described this encounter between the Magi and the child Jesus in such a way that his audience recognizes that even those without the benefit of their sacred tradition are able to recognize the hand of God at work here. Creation itself is revealing the way, so that those who are open and seek the ways of God can recognize what has taken place. Who these Magi were, their names, how many there were--the details that have been added later are not described by Matthew. The Magi are important because they help establish that the whole world was affected by what God had done, and now they can fade into history. Having discovered the child, they pay him homage, offer their gifts, and then step aside so that God can unravel God's divine plan. The magi are much like Simeon and Anna in Luke's gospel, who have waited faithfully most of their lives. Once the magi have seen the hand of God at work in the child Jesus, they praise God and depart by another route. Their role is similar to Simeon's, who, upon seeing the child Jesus, can say, "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you prepared in the sight of all the people, a light for revelations to the Gentiles, and glory for your people Israel." (Luke 2:29-32)

The Magi's response to the birth of Jesus is in sharp contrast to that of King Herod, the living and reigning King of Judea. Herod knows that he has not fathered an heir. Therefore, the news that there exists a newborn heir is a source of concern. Herod is also different from the Magi in that he is merely a puppet ruler for Rome, while the Magi have esteem and authority in their society. While the Magi have nothing but a star that signals the birth of a person of importance, Herod has advisors who know of the prophecies about the birth of the messiah, but they seem to be oblivious to the fact that the child has arrived. Herod's reaction is one of distress. He is not moved to personal action. Rather, with a deceitful claim for his motive, he directs the Magi to bring him the information he needs. The Magi have taken on the difficult and dangerous task of leaving their homeland to track down the person whom the star's appearance signifies. They have brought precious gifts that indicate his importance, and they bow before him. Herod keeps his intention secret, and in secret he asks the Magi to supply him with information he desires.

The Magi and Herod represent two opposite responses to the presence of Jesus. Those who have the advantage of being familiar with the religious traditions are unable to identify who Jesus is. They respond with fear, and even murder of the innocent. Those without the benefit of being familiar with the religious tradition are willing to take on personal risk. They recognize the significance of this infant's birth: God's love is powerful and pervasive--it will not be thwarted. They offer the gifts that they have brought, bow reverently, and take their leave.

Reflection Questions

1. Recall some of the times you have interacted with infants and young children. What impact do they have on you? What kind of emotions stir within you in their presence?
2. Focus on the role of caregiver and protecting infants and young children. What is your experience in that kind of role, or lack of experience? What emotions are present within you?
3. What is your experience of encounters with people from other cultures? What kind of feelings are present about that experience or non-experience?
4. Do you have experiences that speak to the kind of power of infants?
5. What does the importance that Matthew places on Joseph in his recounting the early events of Jesus' birth say to you?
6. The Magi were men who were comfortable enough with the darkness to study changes in the night sky. What are the areas of darkness in your own life today? How do you respond to those areas? What do the Magi suggest to you?
7. Imagine yourself arriving with the Magi in Bethlehem. Is there anything you would like to offer as your gift to Jesus and his mother?
8. Can you take some time to talk with God about the roles of Joseph, the magi, and Herod in the birth of Jesus, or about God choosing to become present among us at this point in history, or about any other thought or feeling that arose within you from this gospel?

The gospel background and reflection questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM.

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