

RESPONSE OF THE MAGI

January 7, 2018
Lutheran Church of the Cross
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Our text is from Matthew chapter 2:

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."

This Sunday, we are celebrating Epiphany—the twelfth day of Christmas. It is the day that we remember the visit of the Magi to the Christ child. It is also known as the Gentile Christmas because the Magi were non-Jewish people who came to worship the Christ child.

I would like to turn our attention to the two different ways the news of the Christ child was received in our text. On the one hand, we have wise men who searched out and brought gifts to this newborn king. On the other hand, we have a king and a nation who were troubled at the news and who ultimately sought to kill the Christ.

Two Responses in Matthew 2

We do not know exactly who the magi or wise men were or from which specific country they came, but scholars believe they may have come from the region of Babylon or Persia. They may have seen the writings of Daniel and his three friends, as was recorded in the Old Testament. But what we do know is that when they saw the star, they believed that the king of the Jews had been born. When they saw the star, it was so significant and important to them that they put their own lives and families on hold to follow that star.

Many of you know what it is like to pack up your home up north and travel to Florida for the winter. You know how much goes into those preparations to be gone for an extended period of time. You are aware that you have to make arrangements for your travel and meals along the way.

For the Magi, before telephones and highways and Hampton Inn hotels, their preparation and journey was far more involved and challenging. In addition, they went to Bethlehem not simply for a vacation or a time of respite, but to worship and to offer costly gifts. The Jewish king was so important to them that they prepared gifts to present to the king who had been promised by God.

On the other hand, King Herod and the Jewish officials with him were troubled at the news. Herod had a tenuous relationship with Rome and with the Jewish people. Herod attempted to keep the Jewish people happy and even forgave taxes when his people experienced famine. But at the same time, he kept the Jews from revolting against the Roman emperor and prevented the occupation of their holy city. In fact, he was so paranoid about keeping and holding his power that he would kill any child who was a threat to his throne. It was even said that it was safer to be a pig in Herod's household (because as a Jew Herod did not eat pork) than to be his child (Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2:4:11).

We look at these two responses to the birth of the child Jesus—the king of the Jews—because there are still two types of responses people have today.

Two Responses Today

Today, there are people who, like Herod and the religious leaders, are comfortable with the status quo. Christmas brings a new king who demands our allegiance to him. It brings a God who has claims on our time, the way we spend our money, and how we use our bodies. But they do not want another authority in their lives. They are troubled by a king who expects obedience; ultimately, they try to get rid of such a king. However, the gospel of Matthew invites us to look positively upon the Magi. It invites us to respond as they did to the birth of the king of the Jews.

Follow Him.

We are invited to pack up our plans and our selfish desires in our own lives and to follow after Him. Some of us are even called to change jobs or locations in following Jesus. For instance, my own family had no plans to leave our life in Wisconsin, but following Jesus meant us packing up and following Him. For others, as they read the Scriptures, they find God calling them to a new calling in the service of the church or as a missionary or as a Christian teacher. And for others, it may mean something on a smaller scale, like bringing up conversations about Jesus with a friend or coworker who has been talking about “spiritual” things with you more often.

Worship Him.

We are called not simply to follow, but to kneel and worship the king of the Jews. We certainly do that together here at church, but our worship is not confined to these four walls. Our worship includes daily prayers and devotional reading of God's word.

Bring Him Gifts.

We bring our proportional first-fruit gifts to Him. But St. Paul also reminds us in Romans 12 that our whole bodies are living sacrifices to be used each day to God's glory. Our gifts to Jesus are also in the acts of love and service that we do. For as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 25, whatever you do to the least of these, my brother, you have done to me.

Today, on this celebration of the Epiphany, may we be encouraged to respond to the message of Christmas like the Magi. May we grow in our response of following Him, of worshiping Him, and offering Him gifts. Amen.