

## HEROD AND THE MAGI

### Matthew 2:1-12

King Herod was furious!

He pounded the armrest of his throne and thought, “How dare these foreigners come into *my* city and ask, ‘Where is he who is born King of the Jews?’” I AM KING OF THE JEWS! Did not the Roman Emperor appoint me? Did not the Roman Senate grant me jurisdiction over this section of the empire?

“If these foreigners want to worship the King of the Jews, the person they should bow down to is ME!”

Herod stood and walked out on the balcony of his magnificent palace. He looked out over Jerusalem. His city. His kingdom.

He looked towards the temple mount and saw the Holy Temple that he had built. It was the biggest construction project of the first century BC. It was larger and grander than anything Jerusalem had ever seen.

He thought about his other building projects: the fortress at Masada, the port city of Caesarea Maritime – and the huge, 2500-foot high castle-fortress called the Herodian. It was twice the size of the Roman coliseum.

Herod thought, “Do the foreigners not know of my achievements—my fame—my wealth? Do they not know that I am called Herod the Great, and that other than Caesar himself, I am the most powerful ruler in the world?”

You see, for Herod it was all about power and prestige and achievement and wealth. And he was willing to do whatever it took to gain and keep those things. He had fought and clawed his way to the top. He pulled all kinds of tricks and paid all kinds of bribes to get in good with the Romans. He even led the Roman army that took Jerusalem from the Parthians. His city. His kingdom.

And now as he thought about these foreign dignitaries who had come to his city, he said to himself, “Whoever these men are, they will not take

away my power! Because I am, and I will always be, THE KING OF THE JEWS!”

And then Herod remembered something. The priests always babbled about some mystical leader, foretold by prophecy, who was supposed to come and lead the Jewish people to freedom. They called him Messiah – the anointed one. Herod never took them seriously. *But still* –he thought – *just in case...*

Herod called for them: the chief priests and the religious teachers. They came into the throne room, bowing and scraping and making all kinds of deference: “Yes, your highness,” “Most gracious, your highness,” “Right away, your highness.” Herod grew sick at the sight of them. These weak men who thought they could gain power by attaching themselves to the things of God – they knew nothing of the real world. They knew nothing of real power.

He ordered them to open their pitiful scrolls and tell him what the prophecies said about where the Messiah would be born. “Yes, your highness, right away, your highness...” Herod thought *please get this over with before I throw up.*

The priests and the teachers gathered around a table and unrolled their scrolls. They argued back and forth for a few moments, and then they turned to Herod and read from the scroll of the prophet Micah:

*But you, Bethlehem...*

(and when Herod heard the name of that one-horse town, he almost laughed out loud)

*But you, Bethlehem,  
though you are least among the clans of Judah  
Out of you will come for me  
One who is ruler over Israel*

“Nonsense!” Herod thought. “Rulers don’t come from little farm villages like Bethlehem! The priests are mistaken. I have nothing to fear!” *But still*– he thought -- *just in case...*

He dismissed the priests and he called for a messenger. He said, “Go, find the foreigners who have arrived in the city. Don’t tell anyone what you’re doing. Just find them and bring them to me.”

And when the foreign dignitaries came into the throne room, Herod was actually quite impressed. They seemed like men of power. They wore robes of finest silk. They spoke eloquently. They carried themselves with regal bearing.

Herod learned that they were royal advisers to the king of Persia. They were certainly wise men, but their official title was *magi* – magicians – men who practiced the secret arts forbidden by Jewish law. Their main job was to study the stars and interpret the signs so the king would know what to do.

Herod listened to what they had to say, and then he hatched a plan. He smiled a great big politician smile, and in a smooth voice said, “Gentlemen, go with my blessing and find this precious child. And when you’ve found him, come back and tell me where he is, so that I can go and worship him also.”

And as the Magi left the throne room, Herod felt something he had not felt in a long time. It was small at first, but it grew to the point that it consumed him. The thing he felt was fear. Fear that what he had worked so hard to attain might be taken away from him. After all, the Magi studied the skies. They knew the movement of the stars. And they had seen a new star, the star of a king, rising over Herod’s country. Maybe the priests were right. Maybe there *was* a new king. Maybe Herod’s days were numbered.

But as Herod paced back and forth, he calmed himself with this thought: “I am the King of the Jews. And I am good at gaining and keeping power. When my first wife got in my way, I banished her along my 3-year-old son. When my second wife got in the way, I killed her and her mother. When my own sons threatened to take my throne, I took their lives, one by one by one. And when the foreigners find the baby child with the star in the sky – I will kill him also.”

Meanwhile, the Magi were almost jumping for joy, because as soon as they went out the door of the palace, it was right there: that wonderful star,

that miraculous star, the star they had seen when it first appeared. It was brighter than it had ever been, and it was clearly pointing the way.

So they mounted their camels for the final leg of their journey: six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. And during that two-hour ride, they thought back to the night when they first saw it. They were back in Persia, studying the early night sky, looking for signs, warnings, omens. They looked to the north—all was well. They looked to the south—so far, so good. They looked to the east—nothing new to see. The mountains were dark silhouettes against the fading pinks and purples of the sunset. And there – over the tallest mountain – so bright they couldn't miss it, so unusual they couldn't ignore it – a new star – a star of such purity, such intensity—such beauty.

They couldn't stop looking at it. They felt drawn to the star—as if one of the gods were reaching out to them, calling them to himself. All of them at the same time felt compelled to follow the star.

And thus began the journey of a lifetime: Two years on the back of a camel. Two years over hard, bumpy roads and shifting desert sands. Two years through the dust and the heat.

And now, here they were, traveling the last six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. And as they finally entered Bethlehem, the star that they had followed for thousands of miles stopped, and its beams shone down on an ordinary house.

They were surprised when they saw the house. It was the home of peasants – poor, dirty, and ordinary – certainly not the kind of dwelling where they expected to find a king. They almost thought they'd made a mistake, but then they looked up again and saw the star right there, pointing to this house – and as they looked at the star again, they suddenly understood that the star was not something from this world, and that all the palaces and all the fortresses and all the castles in the world were nothing compared to the supernatural beauty of that star.

They knocked on the door. They entered the house. And there, on his mother's lap, was an ordinary child between 1 and 2 years old. In some ways he was no different from any other child, yet in other ways, he had...call it a presence.

Without any hesitation they fell down, and they worshipped. They encountered the presence of God and they responded with total surrender. These wealthy, well-dressed men from the royal courts of Persia fell to their knees before a tiny little child on a poor woman's lap.

What kind of humility did it take for them to do that?

What kind of faith did it take for them to look at this child and see a king more powerful than Herod?

What kind of hope did they feel when they began to understand that the God of the universe had reached out to them and called them to himself in the only way they would understand—through a star?

What happened next will surprise you. See, we've been misrepresenting the magi for centuries. They've always been represented as three kings with three gifts: "*We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we travel afar.*" One king has a little box of gold, one has a little jar of frankincense, and one has a cute little bottle of myrrh.

Well, first of all, I've already explained they weren't kings, they were magi. And second, the Bible never says there were three of 'em! And the third thing, they were not carrying tiny little gifts.

Matthew says that after they worshiped, "**they opened their treasure chests...**"

Apparently they traveled in a caravan and they had all their treasure with them—and when they saw Jesus they were so moved that they threw open their chests and they gave Jesus their all.

After the Magi worshiped, they were changed. Now they had a relationship with God. Now they could sense God speaking to them. And God told them not to go back to Herod, so they went home a different way. And not only did they go home a different way—they went home different *people*.

Now, think about the two stories I've told you today.

- On one side you’ve got King Herod in his magnificent palace, pacing back and forth as trying to outrun his anxiety.
- On the other side you’ve got the Magi in a little run-down house, on their knees before a tiny child on a poor woman’s lap.

Herod was all about power and wealth, and the things of this world. The Magi had the things of this world—but they understood that there had to be more.

Herod was afraid, because he knew that what he had could be taken away from him. The Magi were at peace, because what they sought, they had found—and what they found was a relationship that would never end.

**As you think about Herod and the Magi, think about this: Which one are you?**

And before you answer too quickly, let me suggest to you that you might be more like Herod than you think.

You say, “Claude what are you talking about? I’m not like Herod, I’m not gonna banish my wife and kill my sons and all that!”

But listen: When you get right down to it, Herod was a driven person who wanted success more than anything else. *Is that you?*

Herod did whatever it took to get what he wanted, even if it meant hurting other people. *Is that you?*

Herod insisted on being in control. *Is that you?*

Or are you one of the Magi? Are you a person who knows that there’s more to life than the things of this world?

Are you willing to follow God’s call wherever it leads?

Are you willing to humble yourself and worship fully?

Are you willing to open your chest and give Jesus the best you’ve got?

Herod. The Magi. Which one are you? Which one would you rather be?

Today we're going to give you an opportunity to take a huge step towards the way of the Magi by praying the Wesley Covenant Prayer. This is a prayer of surrender. After we've received communion—the sign of God's unconditional love—we're going to pray this together as a congregation.

And we've printed it on a bookmark so that you can take it with you and pray it on your own every day for the rest of 2015. What would happen if we all did that? What kinds of things could God do through us?

**THE WESLEY COVENANT PRAYER:**

**I am no longer my own, but thine.  
 Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.  
 Put me to doing, put me to suffering.  
 Let me be employed for thee or laid aside for thee,  
 exalted for thee or brought low for thee.  
 Let me be full, let me be empty.  
 Let me have all things, let me have nothing.  
 I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.  
 And now, O glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
 thou art mine, and I am thine.  
 So be it.  
 And the covenant which I have made on earth,  
 let it be ratified in heaven.  
 Amen.**