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Matthew 2:1-12 Wise Men Seek Jesus

Dear Visitors to Bethlehem:

What do you know about little Bethlehem?

- Little Bethlehem stood at the center of history
- It was the fulcrum for dramatic events throughout the oriental world
- For strangers from afar Bethlehem became the goal of their quest
- For the citizens of Bethlehem it was transformed into a place of terror.

At Bethlehem the firstfruits of the Gentiles found life...and the first flowerets of the martyr band suffered death.

Bethlehem of Judaea was also known as Ephratah meaning “fruitful place” as it was long famed for its productive soil. Bethlehem means “House of Bread.” From Bethlehem God brought all men the Bread of Life.

Jesus said: “**I am the bread of life.** He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” John 6:35

Jesus offers what people need. He offers what people are looking for. Yet, many people have bought into life “without God.”

Author Philip Yancey says: “As a result many people in societies advanced in technology go about their daily lives assuming God does not exist....No society in history has attempted to live without a belief in the sacred, not until the modern West...We now live in a state of confusion about the big questions that have always engaged the human race, questions of meaning, purpose and morality....Now, people with no faith find themselves lost and alone...” Rumors, pp. 19-20

Jesus came so we would not be lost and alone. He came to give us life and life to the full. John 10:10 The wise men were searching for Jesus because they had heard about the Messiah from the words of the prophet Daniel who had lived in

their land during the Babylonian captivity. They were searching for the Way, the Truth and the Life.

So, they came to King Herod looking for help to find this newborn King.

King Herod was the regional ruler of the area around Jerusalem set up by the Roman government. Visitors from the East came to Herod seeking his help to find the recently born baby known as the king of the Jews.

The possibility of a king who may become a rival to Herod was too much for him to take. Herod considered himself as a great ruler:

- he was a descendant of Esau, son of Isaac
- he was a warrior, orator and diplomat
- he built theaters and race tracks for entertainment for the people
- in the great famine of 25 BC he melted golden items from his palace to raise money for the poor
- He managed an efficient government
- He had rid the area of bandits
- He had won the patronage of the Roman emperors
- Rest and prosperity existed throughout the land
- He was rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem which would surpass the temple Solomon built

Herod could be very generous as king, however, he could not put up with a rival.

- Herod was cruel, merciless and jealous
- He put away his own sons when he thought they were plotting against him
- He executed his beloved wife on the suspicion of treason
- Near the end of his life he felt threatened by a report of a newborn king

Now visitors from the East came talking about newborn king. We don't know their names but tradition calls them Casper, Balthazar and Melchior and they came from the East. Where was the East in relation to Bethlehem? The East was Babylon and beyond – present day Iraq and Iran.

In old Babylon lived Persians, Greeks and Jews. The people there had an interest in science that carefully charted the motions of the heavenly lights. They scrutinized the skies for anything irregular or extraordinary. These wise men saw this special star and it did not look like other stars and it did not act like other stars.

People found hope in the regularity of the motions in the skies. When they looked on earth they saw uncertainty but when they looked in the skies they saw hope. This special star guided them to the very house where Mary and Joseph were staying with the Christ child. This star led them to the Lord of Hope and Life. This star led them to look up and to continue to look up. We, too, as believers are to look up and keep our eyes fixed on heaven.

Colossians 3:1ff “Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.”

People believed that celestial happenings influenced happenings on earth. The experts of science and superstition were called magi. They were near cousins to astrologers. These wise men knew of the Old Testament prophecies which has been introduced in their land by the prophet Daniel when he lived there during the Jewish captivity some 550 years before Jesus was born.

From this region of the East they came to King Herod possibly about a year after Jesus’ birth. How many wise men came? The Bible does not say. The number three was fixed into popular legend by a group of monks in the Middle Ages.

The Old Testament foretold that these men of royalty and wisdom would come to see the baby Jesus led by a star:

- Numbers 24:17 “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel”
- Isaiah 60:3 “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

- Isaiah 72:10 “The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts.”

It was all part of God’s plan. The magi announced that they had sighted the Christ-king’s star. According to modern astronomers a remarkable conjunction of planets occurred at this time. It was the Star of Jacob and Ruler out of Israel predicted in Old Testament prophecy.

The child of whom the wise men inquired Herod was the Christ of prophecy. The Jewish people knew this prophecy. They were longing for this Deliverer and Herod knew it.

People today, too, are looking for someone to deliver them from this crazy and confused world.

Admiral James Stockdale was a prisoner of war in Vietnam for eight years. He was once asked how he survived the eight years in a prisoner of war camp. He replied: “I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end...”

As believers in Jesus we know how the story will end. Yes, we live in a crazy and confused world. Yes, there will be trials and testing in our lives. But remember the words of Jesus: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” John 16:33

Psalms 37:7ff **“Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes....the days of the blameless are known to the Lord...in times of disaster they will not wither...the salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; he is their stronghold in time of trouble...he delivers them from the wicked and saves them because they take refuge in him.”**

We don’t have to fear the Herod’s of the world. We don’t have to fear times of trial and trouble.

Herod needed help with the details of this prophecy so he consulted with the priests, lawyers and scribes who were experts with Moses and the prophets. These men had the information Herod wanted. They quoted to Herod from the Old Testament.

Herod hid his true intentions from the magi. He continued his talks with the magi in private. Though the place of Christ's birth was known, the exact time of the birth still had to be determined.

Herod thought I will pepper the magi with questions for information on the time of this baby's birth. Let the magi uncover the facts and then report back to me. Herod wanted to be sure of the evidence before he made his next move.

As viewed from Jerusalem the star now reappearing beyond the Judean hills to the south, pointed to the place where Herod told the wise men to go. The sight of the star proved as reassuring to the magi as would any familiar landmark to travelers who are lost.

The worship of the wise men merits our attention.

- Though their eyes saw an ordinary child in the care of an ordinary mother, the Word that brought them to this child --- God's Word to which God added the outward sign of the star – persuaded the wise men to accept what they saw.
- They paid this child His due honor as God
- Their faith was made further active in outward expressions of love
- They opened their cases for the storing of their valuables and gave the child what was in their power to give

The size of the gift Matthew passes over. What counts is the spirit behind the giving. God desires not the gift but the heart. When the heart is right...the gift, too, will be right.

- Precious gold suggests royalty for Jesus was King of the Jews.

- The incense reminds us of Christ's deity. Incense was regularly used in connection with worship at the temple.
- Myrrh symbolizes Jesus' humanity and pointed to his suffering and death for our sins.

With the wise men we have journeyed to see Jesus. For many of us it is a long journey. Our journey begins where the wise men's ended. Like them, we have found a Wisdom not to ponder but to worship, a Wisdom that is not a matter of words but who is the Word. This Wisdom has everything to do with life because He is the Life. He gives us Wisdom because He gives us Himself. The Magi journeyed to Jesus, but our journey is with Jesus, a sacred and a long, long journey that takes us to heaven.