

# Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



**Matthew 2:1-12** *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, <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: <sup>6</sup> "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" <sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*

We're officially on the other side of Christmas now and have entered into the season of Epiphany which is another joyous time in the Church calendar. But it's not all joy around Christmas and Epiphany, there is a darker side to all of this as well. For example, if you made a lot of credit card purchases in preparation for Christmas, right now there's the inevitable dark cloud of "payment due" reminders slowly descending upon you. Many of us know all about that darkness.

But there's another darkness to this season, a deep darkness. It's not all angel greetings, and shepherds out in the fields, and wise men stooping down with their gifts before the newborn King. No, because at the beginning of our text this morning, we find a context clue which ought to open our eyes to the darkness hovering over this whole story. I'll re-read the first verse where we'll find that clue: ***"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King. . ."*** That might not mean a whole lot to some of us 2,000 years later, but back in those days, Herod's reputation preceded him as a demented, power-hungry despot. His rule was one of fear, even for the members of his own family. And so, we see that the star which brought the wise men first to Jerusalem and ultimately to Bethlehem shined its light on a world of jealousy, hatred, cruelty, and deep darkness.

And yet the light does shine. The Apostle John writes about this in the intro to His gospel, ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."*** (John 1:1ff) No matter how dark the days of Herod were, the light of Christ shone brighter. No matter how dark our days seem to be, the light of Christ still shines brighter. We ought to remind ourselves of this truth as we consider the theme:

**"The Days of Herod the King" Bring Only Darkness**  
**"The Days of Jesus the King" Bring Light to Those in Darkness**

In the Days of Herod the King, there were a lot of political and economic successes all around the land of Judea. The temple in Jerusalem, for instance, had been destroyed once and ransacked multiple times over the centuries, but King Herod understood how important it was to his people so in about 20 BC he rebuilt and renovated and expanded the temple to the Lord. He had largescale improvement projects all around the capital of Jerusalem. He built great cities and fortresses around the country. The nation was generally at peace during his 35-year reign, and it seemed like everything he touched politically turned to gold. So in some respects, he had a very successful reign as king.

But there was another side to King Herod, a paranoid side which sowed fear among the people. He had been married to ten different women, having sons with many of them, and in fear that they were plotting against him for the throne, Herod executed three of his own sons to preserve his power. There was one wife whom he favored over all the rest, Mariamne, and he killed her also, along with her mother. On one occasion, he invited the high priest for a swim in Jericho, and he drowned him. He killed several uncles and a number of his cousins too. And as he was dying, he wasn't successful in this, but he plotted to arrest all the leaders of Judea, round them all up in in an amphitheater and kill them all to ensure that when he died, the people would have something to mourn about. A popular joke was told at the time, "I would rather be Herod's *hus* than his *huios*,"—which is to say, "I'd rather be his pig than his son." His was a rule of darkness and fear and sinful self-preservation.

This was the dark situation that the wise men stumbled into in our text, and they came to Herod inquiring, "***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.***" Having a better picture of Herod now, you can imagine this was not exactly the type of news that King Herod was happy to hear. And we're told at the end of our text, "***Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, [the wise men] departed to their own country by another way.***" God warned them against telling Herod of baby Jesus' location, because despite Herod's claim that all he wanted to do was to go and worship the Child, his real aim was to kill Him. And we know from the verses after our text, that Jesus and His family fled from Herod down to Egypt, and Herod just went ahead and killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem aged two and under, just to be certain the child died. So we see, "***in the days of Herod the King***" deep darkness reigned.

But it really gets even a bit darker. We can almost understand Herod's position in all of this, terrible and sinful as it was. Afterall, he was the King of the Jews, and here is news of another who would take his throne! Except that's not exactly what Herod was defending against. Yes, the wise men came and asked about the one who had "***been born king of the Jews,***" but Herod wasn't worried about losing his throne! He's about 75-years-old by this point, he clearly understands that even if this baby is a future king, He's no threat to *Herod's* rule. No, when Herod goes to his spiritual advisors and asks about the wise men's words, he doesn't inquire about the one "***born king of the Jews,***" but instead asks "***where the Christ was to be born.***" He knew. He knew, when he heard the news, that this wasn't just some young prince. He knew this child was the Christ, that this was the Messiah. Messiah and Christ are the same word in two different languages. This was God's Anointed One, and Herod knew it. Herod's reign in the darkness meant rebelling against God Himself, and Herod admitted it.

It was just like in the days when God sent Moses with the ten plagues to Pharaoh and Egypt so that Pharaoh would let God's people go. Again and again, Moses would pronounce judgment from the Lord, and Pharaoh would resist God. One time, Pharaoh even acknowledged, "***I have sinned; the LORD is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong.***" (Exodus 9:27) And yet even after that point, he still resisted God at every turn. *He* knew what he was doing. Or it's just like on that first Easter Sunday after Jesus' resurrection, the guards ran from the tomb and told the Chief Priests and

the scribes everything that had taken place just as Jesus had told them it would, and with this unmistakable proof that Jesus was God Himself, what did those spiritual leaders do? They paid off the guards and said, ***“Tell the people ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’”*** (Matthew 28:13) *They knew what they were doing, they knew who they were opposing.*

Throughout human history, all mankind has lived ***“in the days of Herod the king,”*** that is to say, that all humanity has been plunged into this deep darkness of the rule of Satan which opposes *God* at every turn. And yes, that includes us today. For we too know exactly what we’re doing. When we know what would be good and right, and we just do the opposite. When we know what we’re planning on doing is a sin against God and yet we just go through with it anyway. *We know! We know that whatever it is, it’s not just some harmless sin, that it’s God that we are up against, and so very often it’s as if we just don’t care. In our own selfish self-interest, in the self-preservation of our own self-will, we are just like the Sanhedrin in Jesus’ day, just like Pharaoh, and just like King Herod. “The Days of Herod the King” Bring only Darkness,* and that’s a darkness we know all too well.

How different from all of this are **the days of Jesus the King.** If you have a nativity set at home, I’m guessing there are about three wise men featured in the set, and you most likely put them around the manger together with Mary and Joseph and a few shepherds. That’s the common depiction, but the wise men were not present that first night. We don’t know how much time had passed, but at the very least, we do know that Mary and Joseph and Jesus were staying in a house by now, as we’re told in verse 11 that they went into the house and found the family. So they weren’t at the manger. But it doesn’t bother me that most nativity sets present the wise men as being present on that first Christmas night, because when it comes to art it’s generally unnecessary to be totally accurate in all the details; what’s more important are the ideas that are presented.

And when we look at our nativity sets and see the motley crew that is surrounding the Savior, there are some important ideas to be found there. There are the parents, poor and unimportant; there are the shepherds, also poor and unclean, outcasts; and then there are the wise men, Gentile outsiders—all of them being received by God Himself. These are our representatives surrounding God, all of them living in the darkness of sin in the days of Herod, and there lies God the King giving light to them.

Now, so much is made of this account, much more than we really know. For instance, it’s widely believed that their names are Balthasar, Melchior, and Casper, and we have no idea what their names are, and it’s not important. Every representation I’ve ever seen shows us three of them, but we don’t know how many there were either—at the very least there were two, and how many more than that we just don’t know. They’re often presented as being three kings, like on the bulletin cover they’re all wearing crowns of some sort, but they’re certainly not kings either.

Here’s what we do know. We frequently refer to them as wise men, but we also call them the magi from time to time, which is a more accurate translation since the Greek term is the word for “magician.” The only other time we find a group of magi in scripture is in the court of King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, and we find that in the book of Daniel. The king had a dream and he wanted his wise men to interpret it, and they used all manner of methods: sorcery, divination, astrology, enchanting, all of that satanic stuff. Needless to say, those magi, those fools in the court of the King of Babylon, they didn’t get the job done.

Now, we don’t know where *these* Magi came from, but on the basis of the term used to describe them and the general region from which they came, they likely held a similar position in some king’s court somewhere. Even though right now they’re on a good course, it seems evident that they’ve

carried out a lot of superstitious, idolatrous practices in the past, relying not on God's Word but on everything else to guide them. They too were among those who were sitting in the darkness, that is until the light from God very literally shined upon them from the star.

What's interesting about this text is we think of these magi as "wise men," and we like that terminology much better. Catchy sayings are made from that, "Wise men still seek him," making a great deal about these men and us by extension. But they literally know nothing that isn't revealed to them by God. Every single thing in this text that they know, they *didn't* know before God intervened. They didn't figure out that Jesus was born because of their astrological examination of the sky—it was a special star that God sent, appearing and reappearing on command. They don't have a super in-depth understanding of the Scriptures, they had to ask what the Scriptures said about where the child would be born. They didn't know where to find Him, the star led them to the exact house. Afterwards, they didn't know Herod wanted to kill the child, God had to reveal it to them in a dream. They don't know anything on the basis of their earthly learning or their astrology or their human wisdom, yet here they are. They're the ones who come to worship the king, and it's only because of God.

God found these men who were just as sinfully foolish as any of us, and He led them exactly to the place where He wanted them, to His Son. And they rejoiced. For the God who had set His Son on earth to reveal the grace and love of God, had now revealed this Son even to these undeserving Magi. And it's the same for you. You didn't come to believe in God through a star in the sky, neither did the magi. You didn't come to believe in Christ as your Savior because you were wise, you came to believe in Christ because God led you here through His Word. He shined a light on you, you who were sitting in the darkness of sin, so that you might find hope in the Son of God, your Savior. And any time you feel like you've lost your way, when the star disappears and you're plunged into the darkness of sin and your unshakeable guilt, God lights up the cross so that you can see *your* Savior once more.

Paul writes to the Corinthians, ***"Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, . . . so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."*** (1 Corinthians 1:26-29) Yes, we are not wise men at all, we are fools, we are sinners, by nature we love living in the days of King Herod. We have nothing to boast about before the Lord, but we can boast in our God. For He has shined His light of grace on us, so that we too may find ourselves in our nativity sets. We could take little figurines of ourselves and place them there alongside Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the wise men around that first meager throne of the Savior. It wouldn't be historically accurate, but it would be an accurate representation of the way God thinks about you. After all, God has declared that there will be a day when you will surround your Savior's throne when you're welcomed into His court of heaven.

For you are ***"The people who walked in darkness [yet] have seen a great light."*** (Isaiah 9:2) The light shines on you because this Child, who escaped the hands of Herod as a baby later died at the hands of his successor, taking the darkness of our sins upon Him and exchanging it with the marvelous light of His grace. And so may we bring our gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh to our Savior's throne, because, thanks be to God, He's invited us to gather there with Him. Amen.

***"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*** (Philippians 4:7)

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh  
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