

# **An Important Question**

**Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12**

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People of God: It Christmas. And last night or this morning, churches throughout the land have been filled with people, singing the familiar Christmas carols and hearing the familiar Christmas story. It's great to do this each year.

But the problem is that the Christmas story has become so familiar. We know it too well. How do we make the story come alive? Well, I tried that last week, by retelling the story from the shepherd's point of view. But there's no way I can top that this morning. If it's all been said before, if it's all been done last week, what I am left to say this morning?

Perhaps the story of the Magi, or the wise men, can help me out. While the arrival of the wise men is also a familiar part of the Christmas story, it's not as widely used on Christmas Day as Luke 2 and this passage brings with it various different aspects that can help us get beyond the familiar and get into the heart of the meaning of Christmas.

In verse two, the wise men ask a question that needed an answer. It needed an answer in their day and it needs an answer today in your life. The question is: Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? This Christmas morning, I want to consider that question with you. I want to consider three aspects to that question: First, it is an unexpected question; second, it is a disturbing question; and third, it is a demanding question.

First of all, it is an unexpected question. The account in Matthew begins "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea" which seems to indicate that some time had passed by since the night Jesus was born. The fact that latter on Herod orders boys two year old and under to be killed also suggests that a few months had gone by since that eventful night. The shepherds had long gone home. The angels of heaven were silent. Everything seems to have gone back to normal. Then these visitors come with their unexpected question that once again stirs everything up.

It's easy to let the Christmas season fade away. Tomorrow the focus becomes Boxing Day sales, as well as preparations for New Year's Eve. Christmas is soon past. Society puts thoughts about the Christ-child back onto the shelf until next year. After a long-count down, our culture quickly puts Christmas behind it. But this unexpected question doesn't allow that. It raises an unexpected question that forces us to re-consider who this baby Jesus really is.

Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? This unexpected question comes from the most unusual source. It came from some Magi (traditionally called wise men) who had traveled from the East, following a star, and who ended up in Jerusalem.

There have been many questions asked about these Magi throughout the ages. Who exactly were they? How many were there? Where exactly did they come from? How did they know this star represented the birth of a king? To these questions, we don't have any answers.

What we do know is that these Magi were wealthy, influential people. They could afford to travel a long way and offer expensive gifts. They were able to get a quick hearing before King Herod. We also know they are Gentiles. They were not part of the covenant community. We also know they were astronomers. They studied the stars. But more than that, they were astrologers. Astronomers study the stars for technical information, while astrologers study the stars to see how the stars affect life on earth. Horoscopes are an example of astrology. It is an activity forbidden by God. As a result, these Gentiles were clearly pagan people.

Yet God used these unexpected visitors to raise an unexpected question. These outsiders challenged the religious leaders to search through the Scriptures and to re-discover God's plan of salvation for the world. A plan that centers upon the child born on Christmas day. These seekers do not have the answer. God's people do. But these seekers do pose questions that get God's people to re-read their Bibles.

Is it possible that this continues today? In our post-Christian society, questions are asked of us that force God's people to re-read the Scriptures and to tell the story of salvation anew. We think the story of Christmas is so familiar and so well known in our society that everyone knows it, but is that really the case anymore?

A whole generation has arisen without the Bible in the public school, without attending Sunday School or worship services, so that while aspects of the Christmas story are indeed very familiar how the Christmas story fits into the whole story of the Bible, why the birth of Jesus is so important, why Christmas leads to the cross—well these are questions that we need to be

able to answer. We cannot assume “outsiders” know the answer. Instead, we need to be able to explain, how the birth of Jesus is one step in God’s great plan to restore the creation. Is that something we are able to do? Are we able to answer the questions coming from unexpected sources?

These unexpected visitors of the wise men raise their question. Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? This unexpected question is also a disturbing question. We read in verse three: “When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all of Jerusalem with him.”

Why was this a disturbing question? Why did it cause so much commotion in the city of Jerusalem? Because this question of a king raises all kinds of political, social and religious issues. Because it means we’re not talking simply about a cute baby, with swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, we’re talking about a king. A King is one who rules. A king is one who demands obedience. And as these wise men recognized, this particular king, is one who needs to be worshipped.

And so this was a disturbing question. King Herod was disturbed. Was he not the one and only king of the Jews? These wise men aren't referring to him. No son was born to his household. Is it possible for another contender for the throne to be born? Herod, who was very paranoid about threats to his kingship, began to worry. He worked so hard to get where he was at. He was ruthless in getting to the top. Nothing will stop him now. He will get to the bottom of the matter.

We also read that Jerusalem was disturbed along with Herod. Why should the people of Jerusalem have this reaction? It’s not as if they were afraid of the Magi. No, they were afraid of Herod. They knew how ruthless and violent Herod could be. After all, it was this Herod who murdered his wife, his three sons, his mother-in-law, a brother-in-law, an uncle and many others. Caesar Augustus once said it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son.

As a result, the people of Jerusalem were also disturbed. They didn’t want Herod to go on one of his rampages. They just wanted to go about their regular lives; their normal routines. They didn’t want to change their lives because a new king has been born.

And so, this question is a disturbing question. What if Jesus was more than just an ordinary baby? What if he is indeed a king? What if he the King of Kings and Lord of Lords? What if it turns out that he is the one through whom the creation was made and through whom the creation is being restored and renewed? What if he establishes a kingdom that will challenge the nations of the world? What if the principles of this kingdom will undermine the ways of the world?

Do you begin to see how this is a disturbing question? It doesn't allow us to simply sing the familiar Christmas carols and hear the familiar Christmas story and then continue to live our lives as if nothing happened. No, a King has been born. And that makes this disturbing question, even a demanding question.

This question demands a response. If Jesus is not a king, if Jesus is not a Savior, if Jesus is not Christ the Lord—to use the familiar words of Luke 2, familiar words, but no less shocking or disturbing—if Jesus isn't the one the gospels describe him as—then Christmas is a farce, a fairy tale that might be sentimental, but not really dealing with the problems of our world. But if Jesus is a king, if Jesus really is the Savior of the world, if Jesus is the Messiah the Lord—then that demands a response of faith and worship.

This question of Jesus' kingship demands a response on our part. Not the hatred of Herod, who sought to kill the upstart king. Not the attitude of the people of Jerusalem, who didn't want their lives disturbed by the news of the birth of a new King. Not the attitude of the religious leaders, who knew their Bibles well enough to give the answer as to where the Messiah was to be born, but were completely indifferent as to whether it might be true.

No, the response demanded by this question is one of faith and worship. It is the response of the wise men, who on hearing where the king was to be born, continued to Bethlehem, found Jesus, and bowed down before him and worshipped him. And then gave him gifts, as a symbol of their faith and obedience. The birth of a king demanded such a response.

It continues to demand such a response. It calls us to bow down before Jesus and confess him to be our Savior and Lord. It calls us to worship him, as part of the community of faith. Weekly worship that will shape how we live our lives throughout the week. Offering to him our gifts, not just of money, but our heart.

That's demanding. It doesn't allow us to simply sing our carols and then go home as if nothing really changed in the world when Jesus was born. If Jesus is king, if he is the type of king that the Scriptures describe—a king who would defeat sin, death, and the devil through means of the cross—then the world drastically changed that first Christmas day.

Where is the one who has been born king? Where is he now? The answer is no longer in Bethlehem. The answer is heaven. The newborn king is now reigning over heaven and earth, working in our world to accomplish the restoration of the world.

And so, the question is asked of you this morning: Do you recognize this Jesus of the Christmas story as your king? I know that this can be a

disturbing question, even a demanding question—but it is question that needs to be asked. Is Jesus your king? Amen.