

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We have had four distinct worship services dedicated to a celebration of Christ as our newborn king. We had our children's service. We had our Christmas Eve Candlelight service. We had our Christmas Day service, and then Pastor Schell led you in worship on the Sunday after Christmas. In each of these service we rejoiced at the news that Christ our Savior is born.

Today we begin the season called Epiphany. Another name for it could be "Christmas, part 2." We continue to contemplate the miracle that God took on human flesh and lived among us for our salvation. The difference in emphasis now, though, is that this man is also God. Christmas is: "Christ the Savior is born." Epiphany is: "This man who was born is the promised Christ, and he is *God*." An epiphany is when something that is hidden becomes evident. Hidden in what looked like an ordinary child who grew up to look like an ordinary man... was God. God, who had entered human history to save us!

What we want to do today is look at how different people receive this newborn king. What you consider him to be, and whether or not you rely upon him directly determines how you will receive him. So what we will do is contrast three reactions to the newborn king: **Genuine interest. Self-interest. And disinterest.**

Look for those three reactions as I read the text to you from Matthew 2:1-12. And then I am going to challenge you to take an honest look at your own heart, and mind and life and honestly answer the question: what is your response to this newborn king?

Let's read the text and then we can talk in more detail.

Matthew 2:1-12

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and **have come to worship him.**"

3 When King Herod heard this he **was disturbed**, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, **they were overjoyed** [they rejoiced with exceeding great joy]. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they **bowed down and worshiped him**. Then they

opened their treasures and **presented him with gifts** of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

This reading causes many questions to arise, and I'd like to quickly deal with them so that we can concentrate on what is most important. Central characters in this text are the Magi. Sometimes they're called Wise Men. Sometimes they're called the three kings. First: how many were there? The truth is, we don't know. They are never enumerated. We are told they gave three gifts, but we really can't assume the three gifts means three people... the gifts were probably given collectively from the group. So we can't say how many there were, except that there was more than one.

Second, when did they come? If you believe all the manger scenes, they arrived on the evening of Jesus' birth. That would be quite a feat since the star appeared when Jesus was born, and their journey was over 500 miles long. The reality is probably that they arrived a couple years after Jesus was born, and they came to the house where the child was. Mary and Joseph long out of the stable, were living in a house. So if you want to make your manger scene at home historically accurate, don't put the wise men in the manger scene that's in your living room. Take them out and put them on your bedside stand in the master bedroom... they have a long journey to make.

Third, who were they? Truth be told, this is also a mystery for us. All we know is that they are "Magi from the east." The Greek word for "Magi" is "magoy." In the narrowest sense, the term was described a scholar of great knowledge and understanding based upon astrology from the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. They had a belief in one god, and believed the stars significantly influenced human lives. Others believe these wise men would have come from the Babylonian civilization. The truth is both the Babylonians and the Medo-Persian empires would have had wise men influenced by Jewish scholars. They were integrated into their kingdoms and even their government when they were originally deported from their home country. The Jewish rabbis must have instructed the Magi or their predecessors and this story of a Jewish king (Messiah) who would be born stuck. When they saw the star, they knew he was born, so they came to honor him and worship him.

More questions: What was the nature of the star? Why did the wisemen associate the star with the birth of a Jewish deliverer? And the short answer to both questions is: we don't know. It seems the star's original appearance was in line with the behavior of other stars... it would rise each night. But later the star leads them to the very house of Mary and Joseph, so it is described differently. Rather than speculating, can we just be content we don't know? Likewise, why did this star mean to them that the Jewish king was born? Again, while the Messiah is called a star in some prophecies, we don't have a prophecy that says a star will lead to the Messiah. So again, we must say: I don't know. Matthew doesn't fill in all of the details because he doesn't want us to be distracted from the main point. And that is the response of the Magi to the Savior's birth. *They came to worship him!*

Let that really sink in! Some non-Jewish stargazers from a faraway country made a long, dangerous, difficult, expensive trek to Palestine to find this baby who is born king of the Jews in order to worship him. In order to revere him. And when they found him, they did exactly that. **"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed [they rejoiced with exceeding great joy]. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down**

and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.”

So note the reaction of the wise men: Genuine interest. Persistence. Watching carefully whatever would point the way to Christ. Joy. Worship. Humility.

In contrast, the reaction of Herod is quite different. Apparently the Magi were asking around town about this newborn king. They assumed that if they had figured this out from a star as they observed from the east, surely the inhabitants of Israel’s capital would know of the birth of the King. But they got no help. However, their repeated inquiries eventually caught the attention of King Herod. When he heard a Jewish King has been born, he was “disturbed.” That’s really not a good translation. The word really means *shaken, troubled, agitated*. Herod, simply, is afraid, because a rival king has been born. He saw this as a threat to his power and position. And we’re told all Jerusalem was shaken with him. Perhaps it’s because they knew that an agitated King Herod is a dangerous King Herod.

We know a fair amount about Herod from secular historians. He can be described with three words: *capable, crafty* and *cruel*. Some rulers are clueless, but not Herod... he was a **capable** ruler... he didn’t do a horrible job of ruling. He was especially noted for the many building projects in Israel. He was also **crafty**. He would lie and deceive, he would schmooze and flatter... he would do and say whatever it took to maintain and expand his power. But most notable: Herod was **cruel**. He was paranoid of everyone and saw those close to him as threats to his power. He killed his numerous members of his immediate family, including his two sons, because he was afraid they would take power from him. So it shouldn’t shock us too greatly when we find out that Herod orders that all boys in Bethlehem two years and under be put to death. That was exactly fitting with his character profile.

So we see Herod’s response to the newborn King was selfish interest. He was very interested in this baby’s birth, but he was only interested so that he could protect his own power and authority. He was only took interest that he might kill this potential rival.

Very briefly, there was one more reaction to the birth of baby Jesus. For the majority, the reaction was disinterest. For most in Israel, a hope in the coming Messiah just no longer existed. The majority of the people had forgotten God’s promised and turned to a secular life. There was no longer an attention to the will and ways of God. Jesus was born and most people yawned and went about their daily business.

Genuine interest. Selfish interest. Disinterest. Which of these best describe your reaction to the birth of Jesus? We might be tempted to hastily write off “selfish interest.” “I’m nothing like Herod!” You might claim. But not so fast. I would propose to you that we often take an interest in Jesus only because of what he threatens to overthrow in our life.

Don’t you honestly have to admit there is a part of you that resents Jesus and opposes his rule? Who of you doesn’t like to think you can control your life? How often do you make requests in prayer? Did you know praying results when a person believes: “You are in control, God, and I am not!” If your prayer life is irregular, is it because in your heart you believe you are in control? Do you find you only pray when things get really bad and you realize you’re not in control? When you believe that you are in control and God is not, you imitating King Herod. You are interested in Jesus only because he threatens to take away your control and your authority.

How often do you praise God in your prayers? Praise is acknowledging that God is great and I, in comparison, am not. If our praise of God is rare, what is that but the attitude of Herod toward Jesus? I'm interested in him only because he is a threat to my control, my rule, my glory. I like the whole Jesus idea and the peace and joy part, but will I yield to him? Will I conform my life to his will? Will I stop doing things my way, and start doing them his way? A part of us says, "No way! I must eliminate this threat!" And we detach ourselves from Christ. We resist being a true disciple of his.

If not the attitude of selfish interest, we also fall victim to the attitude of disinterest toward the newborn king. Christ is born, now let's get back to work. Christ is born, now let's go pay the bills. Christ is born, excuse me while I return to my hobby, or play another game, or watch a movie. Christ is born, now I've got to get back to my studies. Have you been guilty of a disinterest in Christ? Have you failed to realize that his birth impacts every area of your life?

Where there is a selfish-interest in Christ that sees him as a threat to your own control... where there is a disinterest in Christ... you will not be connected to Christ. You are in danger of losing him entirely.

Repent of these sins, friends, and today become a wise man, or a wise woman. Understand and believe the truth about Jesus. He is the King over all things. He is the Savior that is born to you and to me. And we desperately need him. He is the deliverer and rescuer who snatches us from the jaws of Satan and gives us safety and refuge. He is the conqueror who defeats our enemies that want to eternally destroy us. He is our redeemer who shed his holy, innocent blood on a cross. For there he took your sin debt in full, and paid it's horrible price. He took the blame for your refusal to submit to God and yield to him. He took the blame for your disinterest in Christ and his life-altering salvation. He took every last drop of punishment that should have come upon you. He exhausted the Father's anger at the cross. In Christ the newborn King you find peace, forgiveness, life, purpose, and blessed eternal future.

What is your response to Christ the newborn King? Fall down before him reverence, awe and love. Worship him with your mind, your heart, your hands, your feet, your wealth, your abilities and your time. Give him your first and your best, for he is most worth. Respond to Jesus with genuine interest... and interest that will be evident to all because of the way you live and the things you say. This is the only way to respond when you know that Jesus is the promised Savior, true God from eternity, the one who has restored you to a right relationship with your heavenly Father. Worship him! Amen.