

## Matthew 2:1-12

The events surrounding the birth of our Savior are filled with unexpected characters. First, we meet **Zechariah** and **Elizabeth** - a couple who have been unable to have **children**, and who are now well along in years. This is the couple that receives a message from **God** that they will be the parents of **John the Baptist** - the one who would announce the **arrival** of the **Christ**. Next, we meet **Mary** - a young woman, a **virgin**, from the backwoods town of **Nazareth**. **She** is told that she is the one whom God chose to give birth to the **His Son** - the **Savior** of the world. Then we meet **Joseph** - a humble **carpenter** from Nazareth, who is engaged to be **married** to Mary. He's the one whom God chose to serve as the earthly **stepfather** for the Savior. Then on the night that Jesus was **born** we meet some **more** unexpected characters - the **shepherds** from the fields nearby. These **shepherds** were the **lowest** of the **low** in society, yet **they** were handpicked by God to be the **first** people to **hear** the wonderful news that the **Savior** had been **born**. But perhaps more surprising than all the rest are the characters we meet in our Gospel reading for today - the Magi, **Wise Men** from the East. These are men whom **no one** would expect to see in the little town of Bethlehem. Yet there they **were**, having traveled a **long** distance to **worship** the young child named Jesus. Their inclusion in the events surrounding Jesus' birth teaches us a very important lesson. This gift of the Savior is **A Gift For All People**.

We read in the first verse of our text: "*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, when Herod was king, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem.*" Matthew makes a connection between the **birth** of Jesus and the **arrival** of the Wise Men. Notice, however, that these events do **not** occur on the **same night**. The arrival of the Wise Men comes **after** Jesus was born - but, how **long** after? That's a good question, and we don't know the **answer**. The time range could have spanned between a few **months** all the way to a couple of **years**. And, just as there is no exact reference to the **time** of their appearance, there is also no reference to the **number** of Wise Men who came to worship Jesus. They are simply referred to as "*Wise Men from the east.*" The tradition of **three** Wise Men comes from the fact that the Wise Men offered three **gifts** - gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We don't actually know **who** these Wise Men **were** either. The Wise Men started out as a group of people who carried out **religious** functions for the Medes. But when the Medes were conquered by the **Persians**, their function **changed** a bit. They were considered to be experts in **astronomy**, and **astrology**, and the interpretation of **dreams**. So what were these Wise Men from a far away heathen nation doing in **Jerusalem**? We find the answer in the **question** they ask: "*Where*

*is he who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*” These Wise Men, who spent much of their time looking at the **stars**, had seen a **special** star - a **unique** star - a **miraculous** star. And they **connected** that star with the birth of a new **king** for the Jews.

The **question** is how could they even **make** that connection? We need to fill in a little more **history**. Even though the Wise Men started out as a **heathen** group, later on they received some **Jewish** influence. About 600 years before Jesus was born, the **Babylonians** had conquered the Southern Kingdom of **Judah**. At that time they deported the **brightest** and **best** of the Jews to Babylon. These captives lived and worked among the Babylonians during the 70 years of their captivity, and then the **Medes** and **Persians** took over. Interestingly enough, the great hero of faith, **Daniel**, was privileged to hold one of the **highest** positions in **both** of those administrations. After Daniel had demonstrated his tremendous **God-given wisdom**, he was appointed to be the **leader** of the Wise Men. It doesn't take much imagination to picture Daniel sharing the Old Testament **Scriptures** with the other Wise Men - Scriptures which included all kinds of **prophecies** about the **Messiah** who was to come - **including** the one which God had given to **Moses** in Numbers 24, *“I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A **star** will come out of Jacob. A **scepter** will rise up out of Israel. It will **smash** the foreheads of Moab and the skulls of all the people of Sheth.”* When the Wise Men saw this **amazing, new** star, they decided to make the journey to the capital city of the Jews, **Jerusalem**, because that's where you would **expect** to find their **king**.

So, this is how all of these **unexpected characters** became **connected** with the birth of Jesus. I can easily picture the Wise Men receiving some pretty strange **stares** as they traveled through the streets of **Jerusalem**, and perhaps even **more so**, when they got to **Bethlehem**. They didn't **belong** there. They looked **out of place**. But this was **exactly** where God **wanted** them to be. They had an important **role** to play in the account of our Savior's birth. It's good for us to **remember** the Wise Men when **we're** tempted to look **down** on someone, or think they don't **belong** in our congregation, because of their **skin color**, or their **ethnic** background, or their **physical** appearance, or for any **other** superficial reason. That kind of **prejudice** has **no place** among Christians. If we should ever fall **into** that way of thinking, it would be good for us to remember that **we ourselves** don't **deserve** to be a part of God's family. **We** don't **fit in**, or **belong** either. So, as we think about those **unexpected** characters in the Christmas account - we also need to include **ourselves**. It truly is **unexpected** that God would want **us** to come to Bethlehem, and to **worship** the Christ child, because we are by nature are **enemies** of God - and we daily **sin** against Him, and **dishonor** Him.

But, God **does** want us there at Bethlehem. He wants us there to **see** the Christ child, and to **know** that this holy child came to the earth for **us too**. No matter **what** sins we have committed, no matter how **little** we deserve God's love, this **Jesus** is a gift for **each** of us. He came to earth to **live** a perfect life for us, and **die** to pay for our sins. He came to earth to win **forgiveness** for **all people**, so in **Jesus**, we can have **peace**. **No one** is excluded. Jesus is **A Gift For All People** - tall and short, and **everything** in between - rich and poor, and **everything** in between - black and white, and **everything** in between. The Wise Men **remind** us of this beautiful truth.

They must have had some **idea**, that this **child** who had been born was someone they wanted to **meet**. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they **asked** about the child. They probably assumed that the people would be **rejoicing** at the birth of their new king. And yet, the people of Jerusalem were **not** overjoyed - and neither was King Herod. We're told that he was **alarmed**. And when **Herod** was alarmed, so were all the **people**. There was no telling **what** Herod might do when he was **upset** or **angry**. So, it took a bit of **work**, but the Wise Men finally found out from King Herod that the **place** where the Messiah was to be born was **Bethlehem**. For some reason or another, Daniel must not have had **access** to **Micah's** prophecy which had that information.

So the Wise Men **continued** on their journey, still not knowing exactly **where** in Bethlehem they would **find** this child. But, as they were on their way, the star appeared **again**, and **this** time it moved in front of them until it **stopped** over the house where the Christ child was living. The sight of the star greatly **excited** the Magi. Matthew tells us, "*They rejoiced with **overwhelming** joy,*" and that was just at the sight of the **star**. The sight of this special **child** must have brought them even **greater** joy. And that joy becomes **obvious** as they bowed down and **worshiped** Jesus.

Can you **imagine** that sight? Here was a group of **highly respected** men from a **far away** country, bowing down to a little **baby boy**. It sounds **absurd** - until we realize that this little boy is actually **God** in the flesh. They were worshiping the **Savior** of the **world** - the King of kings and Lord of lords. They showed their **love** for him by giving him **gifts** - gifts that were **fit** for a king - gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. When they had been warned in a dream **not** to return to King **Herod**, the Wise Men showed their **respect** for Jesus, by not telling Herod where they had **found** the infant Savior. This most certainly would have been a **death** sentence for Jesus, but God wouldn't have **allowed** it even if the Wise Men **had** informed Herod, because it was not yet **time** for Jesus to die. There

were more things for Him to **learn**, more people for Him to **help**, and more **prophecies** for Him to fulfill. Jesus needed to do **everything** that was required to accomplish His mission of salvation. And He **did**.

That's why we worship Jesus **today**, just like the Wise Men worshiped Him thousands of years ago. We probably **aren't** bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh to Him, but we **are** able to bring him offerings of our **time**, our **talents** and our **treasure**. No gift that **we** bring to the Savior can ever be **too big**, especially when we realize just how great **His** gift of **love** is to **us**. The Wise Men **honored** Jesus by **not** speaking about Him to **Herod**, but **we** can honor Him by doing just the **opposite** - by speaking about Him to **everyone** we possibly can. The great message of **Epiphany** is the fact that Jesus is **A Gift For All People** - **no one** is excluded. And that's a message we want to **share** with as many people as we possibly can. Amen.