

RESPONSES TO THE COMING OF THE KING

Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction:

A number of years ago I read a sermon by Robert Deffinbaugh, who is a pastor at Community Bible Chapel in Richardson, Texas. It was about the account of the wise men, which we find in Matthew 2. I revisited that message this week and it stirred some thoughts in my mind that I think are worth pursuing as we wind up the Christmas season and move into another year.

So, as is often the case, I cannot claim everything this morning as being original with me. I am using Pastor Deffinbaugh's message as seed material for what I want to challenge you with this morning.

As we look at the account in Matt. 2, there are three key people or groups of people involved – the wise men, Herod and the general population of Jerusalem. Each of these responded to the message of the birth of a king in different ways.

As we wind down the Christmas season for 2015 and look toward another year, I think this text has much to say to us about our response to the King of the Jews, who has come as the Saviour of the world. I would suggest to you that everyone of us, in fact everyone in our world, when faced with the truth about Jesus birth, will respond in one of these three ways. How we respond has eternal implications.

So what I want to attempt to do in the next few minutes is to consider and compare the response of the magi, of Herod and of the city of Jerusalem to the news of the coming of the King. Then we will focus on the question of our response to the coming of the King. We begin with...

The Zealous Worship of the Magi

Think for a moment about what we know about the magi, or wise men. I think the first thing we need to do is to put away almost everything we think we know about them. Most of our ideas about the wise men come from the pictures we see on Christmas cards or nativity

scenes, or from Christmas carols, rather than from the Scriptures. We don't actually know how many there were, what their names were, how they travelled, or even for sure where they came from. And we know they did not arrive the night Jesus was born, and they did not visit the stable. We also are not told where they got their information about the birth of Jesus.

So what do we know about them:

- We know they had an interest in astronomy. They studied the stars and constellations. That was not unusual in Babylon, Persia and other eastern nations.
- They had to have had some knowledge of the OT Scriptures. It would be very unlikely that they would have come to the understanding they had regarding the birth of a king in Israel otherwise. How they gained that knowledge we don't know although it is quite possible that some of the prophetic Scriptures had been passed down from the time of Daniel.

They arrived in Jerusalem sometime after the birth of Jesus. Matthew begins his account at this point. *Read vv. 1-2.* One of the things to note is that, contrary to what most of us have always thought, the wise men did not come to King Herod to ask about the birth of the new king. In fact, if the reputation of King Herod was as well-known as we expect that it was, they probably would have gone out of their way to avoid seeing him.

Matthew records that they arrived in Jerusalem asking, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." They were probably asking anyone who would take time to listen. After all, if they knew about this newborn king, having come from so far away, these Jewish residents of Jerusalem must be excited about the birth of their new King and Messiah. I'm sure they were confused by the blank look on the faces of the people, who did not seem to know what they were talking about, nor even seemed to care.

Well, it didn't take long for Herod to hear about these men and the questions they were asking. He quickly brought in the Jewish teachers

to find out what they knew about this Messiah these strangers were talking about. *Read vv. 3-4.* He was told that the OT prophecies indicated that the Christ was to be born in Bethlehem – vv. 5-6.

It was only at this time that Herod brought in the wise men, asked them some questions, and sent them on their way. We'll look at Herod's plot and his intentions a bit later.

As they headed south from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, the star reappeared and led them, not to a manger, but to a house and to a child, not a baby. When they arrived, they worshipped him and offered him gifts.

It is amazing to consider the devotion and the determination of the Magi. Why would these presumably Persian astronomers (sorcerers) be interested in a Jewish King? Yet they were on a mission and would not be deterred. They persisted until they found the child. They worshipped Him and they offered the best of their possessions as gifts to Him. What an example they provide for us.

The Jealous Hatred of King Herod

As Pastor Deffinbaugh says in his message, "While we may be surprised at the response of the magi, a quick look at history will show us that the response of Herod is no all that surprising. In fact, Herod's response to the word of the birth of the King of the Jews is quite what we might expect from such a man."

At the time Jesus was born, Herod was probably around 70 years of age and in failing health. He had begun his reign, appointed by Caesar more than 30 years earlier.

So what kind of man was he? On the positive side, he is remembered for his amazing architecture. He built cities and palaces that are still considered wonders of the world. He rebuilt and enhanced the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. By the time of Jesus, it was one of the most magnificent buildings in all of the Middle East.

But on the negative side, the cunning and the cruelty of Herod is almost beyond description. He was a man who ruled with fear and paranoia. His distrust and suspicion led him to remove by force anyone or anything that he threatened his rule as king of the Jews. He used his

power to destroy anyone who might get in his way, or pose what he considered a threat to his position.

The list of those he had executed during his reign is long, including many of his own family. Many servants, several of his sons, uncles, wives, and others of his family were brutally murdered because of his fear and suspicion. History records that on more than one occasion, when Herod left Judea on what might be a dangerous journey, he left instructions with his servants for one or more of his family (including his wife) to be killed if he were to die. His position and power were a matter of paranoid fear and sudden retaliation.

Knowing what we know about Herod, his response to the suggestion that a new king was born in Judea is not a real surprise. He began a cunning a calculated plot to put an end to this threat to his throne.

He first called in the chief priests and scribes, from whom he learned the place of the Messiah's birth. They were certain it was to be in Bethlehem. Now he needed to know the time period involved, so he called in the wise men to see how long ago the star had appeared.

Having obtained his information, he sent the wise men away, hoping that they will eventually lead him to the Christchild, not to worship by to destroy this perceived threat to his throne. And if that plan did not succeed, he had an even more sinister scheme—to destroy all the baby boys in the area of Bethlehem, in order to rid himself of this threat.

And so we have the slaughter of many innocent children around Bethlehem, all because of the intense jealousy of Herod.

The Incredible Apathy of Jerusalem

The third response we need to see is that of the general population of Jerusalem. This one almost takes your breath away. We are surprised at the diligence and eagerness of the wise men to find a foreign king, and cannot help but be horrified by the hatred displayed by King Herod. But the most shocking response is that of the city of Jerusalem and their incredible apathy.

In v. 3 we read ... It appears that the people were just as concerned as Herod by the questions of the magi.

It is amazing to us that the wise men travel such a great distance just to find and worship a Jewish king, and all because of the appearance of a star. Yet, they went to all that trouble and time and expense. In contrast to that, the people of Jerusalem, including the priests and the Jewish religious leaders, couldn't be bothered to make the five-mile trip to Bethlehem to see for themselves whether the magi's announcement was true.

For centuries the Jewish people had been watching and waiting for the arrival of the Promised Messiah. They studied the Scriptures, and knew the prophecies. Just think for a moment about some of the things that had happened in and around Jerusalem over the past year or so, that were not exactly secret. These events should have heightened the interest of people in the coming of the Messiah.

- There was the miraculous pregnancy of Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist. These events had to have been known to the people of Jerusalem.
- There was the announcement to the shepherds of the birth of Jesus. Luke tells us that they told it to everyone who would listen to them.
- Then there was the presentation of Jesus in the temple and the proclamations of Anna and Simeon, which could hardly have occurred in secret - Luke 2:21-38.

So when the magi arrived, with their announcement of the appearance of the star and the birth of the "king of the Jews," the city could hardly have been caught the city by surprise. They should have understood these events as significant.

In and of itself, the announcement of the magi could not be overlooked. The whole city of Jerusalem could not have failed to have heard of their arrival, or of their search for the newborn king. All of the chief priests and scribes had been summoned and questioned by Herod, and the prophecies of Messiah's birth had been reviewed. Matthew is hardly exaggerating when he says that all Jerusalem was troubled with Herod.

Yet the surprising thing and the question that comes to mind is, why were people not flocking from Jerusalem to see this thing the magi

spoke of. In some ways it is easier to understand Herod's response than that of the people of Jerusalem. He must have believed that the babe really was a king, or he would have gone to a lot of trouble for nothing. Yet the city of Jerusalem failed to respond at all. How could they be so apathetic?

Conclusion

The three responses we have looked at here this morning are typical of the responses of mankind to the message of a Messiah, who has come to redeem fallen man, and to reign over all the earth as king.

Throughout history there have always been those who, like the magi, have sought God's Messiah and found Him. Often they have not been those whom we would have expected to find in worship and adoration. But it has always been God's way to draw some of those who worship Him from "afar," whether that distance be geographical, racial, or cultural.

Then there are those, like Herod, who take the claims of Jesus seriously, but who, for selfish reasons, actively seek to rid themselves of His sovereign rule. Fortunately, there are few who have been as active & aggressive as Herod in resisting the reign of Christ.

Finally, there are those, like the vast majority of those who dwelt in Jerusalem, who are so apathetic to the claims of Christ that they will not bother to make the minimal effort required to respond to the fact that He has come. At this Christmas season, millions have not made the effort to travel a mile or two to a church where they may adore the Christ who came to save mankind from sin. It is not because they were not told of His coming and His claims, but simply that people do not really care to bother themselves to respond to Him.

I think the key to our response is that we must have our hearts prepared. God revealed himself to those whose hearts were prepared to receive Him. And the same thing is still true today.

As the hymnwriter said so eloquently:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come, Let earth receive her King
Let every heart prepare him room, And heav'n and nature sing.*