

## Led to Joy

Matthew 2:1-12

January 2, 2022

One of the things that happens when you start digging into scripture is that you see bits of yourself in it—the good, the bad, and sometimes the ugly. That is, it's not just that we read Scripture. It's that Scripture also *reads us*. So how does today's passage read us? What does this passage say about us?

Let's begin by looking at the Magi, also called "Wise Men" Who were they? We know that they were outsiders. We don't know where they were from exactly, but it's clear that they were on the outside of every preferred category—geographically, religiously, ethnically, socially, politically. Pick a category. Whichever one you choose, Matthew makes it clear that they didn't fit in the "right" category in any way, shape, or form. They didn't belong. Geographically, they were from the East. They were from far away from the center stage of God's activity in the Bible. Religiously, their practices would've been anathema to God's people, probably some combination of, on the one hand, what we know today as astronomy—that is, the scientific study of the stars and their movements—but also on the other hand astrology—that more questionable interpretation of those movements and how they somehow direct our lives. The point is this: The Magi's geographical region and their religion could not have been farther away from the Israelites. Yet, somehow, God invites them in. God leads them in, from far away, without any initial help from God's people, using a star of all things.

This leads us to the first way that this passage reads us. It asks some probing questions of us. Have we excluded those that we consider to be outsiders? Scripture tells us that we human beings are fearfully and wonderfully made. For all our similarities, we are different in so many ways, right down to our

DNA, and we come in all kinds of shades and shapes and sizes, all across the spectrum. The question this passage asks us, again, is: In what ways do we exclude people—either intentionally or unintentionally? How might God be at work drawing in those that we would rather keep far off?

What Matthew is making clear here is that God's embrace reaches far beyond our comfort zones and personal preferences. As people of a God like that, our embrace ought to always be stretching outside of our comfort zones and preferred categories—socially, politically, religiously, and so on.

And the question that this passage also asks us beyond that is: What star are you following? What, in your life, is leading you to a particular goal or destination? At the beginning of this New Year, that often comes in the form of New Year's resolutions. Many of us have them: annual goals, personally and professionally. But beyond and even above those, what is your guiding star? What is it in your heart and mind, internally? What guides and leads all of those resolutions, big and small? These are some questions that Matthew asks us as he tells us this story of the Magi.

To help us answer this, let's look a little more closely at the Magi, those Magi that found Jesus simply by following a star. What's going on there? Some say that this is a good example of God leading people to worship God through nature. There may be something there. How many of us have had a transcendent experience while witnessing the awesomeness and the beauty of nature, some part of God's creation? Whether mountains or oceans, canyons or the brilliant night sky far away from

artificial light, words fail to do justice to what we experience in those kinds of settings.

Perhaps that sense of awe and wonder connected with something deep in the heart of the Magi, some longing to connect with something greater than themselves and then to be guided by that which they have connected to and experienced. Maybe that is what this star stirred in the Magi. Maybe you can relate to that kind of experience as well.

Now, researchers have gone to great lengths to try to uncover the scientific phenomena of that particular star. I'm sure that there are no shortage of TV shows and magazines promising to finally uncover this ancient mystery. My take is that that is, in a sense, beside the point. What Matthew focuses on here is not the physical phenomenon of a moving and leading star, but rather how the Magi—following a combination of what they observed, what they discerned, and what they believed in their hearts to be true—how they then found themselves led to Jerusalem, inquiring of the Jewish authorities where this new King could be found so that they could then worship him.

In other words, nature drew them to Jerusalem. What they found in Jerusalem was Scripture, which pinpointed where they might find what they were looking for, which was, precisely, Bethlehem.

Throughout history, there has been a longstanding tradition of *two books of God: the book of nature and the book of Scripture*, each with their own purpose and place. Nature is meant to draw us in to praising God. Nature even participates in praising its Creator. Scripture gives us words, gives us clarity, gives us direction for that praise. It enlightens the way that we are meant to inhabit God's creation.

In Jerusalem, the Magi seek out the leading experts in Scripture and are there led to the newborn King by Scripture's light. John Calvin has a helpful image for that interplay between nature and Scripture. What he says is: *When seen through the lens of Scripture, all of creation is a theater for God's glory.* I'll say it

again: *When seen through the lens of Scripture, all of creation is a theater for God's glory.* Scripture provides focus and clarity to that deep sense of awe and wonder we feel in experiencing the magnificence of God's creation. Our deep longings and experiences, our deep yearnings for all kinds of things in life, are given a direction and pointed toward a goal in Scripture, just as those of the Magi were. If we follow what we find there, we too will be led to Christ and experience a deep and overwhelming joy.

We read in Ecclesiastes that God has set eternity on our hearts. Augustine calls this a restlessness that each of us feels which can only find its rest in God. George Herbert calls this restlessness a kind of "pulley" by which God draws us toward himself. I think that is what the Magi are following. That is what pulls and leads each of us as well. I think that is what we most deeply long for, what that star represents, sometimes represented in a person, sometimes a possession or goal. Sometimes it's tied to the pursuit of an achievement or accolade, our deepest hopes and longings. Deep down, we imagine that if we reach or obtain these things, or if we can keep somehow from losing them, or having lost them, if we can regain them again, we imagine that if we can do this, that we will find happiness, that we will achieve joy.

Scripture tells us something different. The joy witnessed to in Scripture is of a different order altogether. It is not attached to external circumstances. It is not contingent on successes or failures. It is not the product of power or possessions. It is not something that can be achieved or attained. Joy, when the Bible talks about it, is a state of mind and heart, and it is always something attached to the one who is its source and object. God is both the giver and the object of joy.

Personal joy and communal joy both find their source and destination in God. God's words of promise and hope in the midst of deep longing and waiting elicits joy in Scripture. The birth of Jesus is marked by joy. Encounters with Jesus throughout the

Gospels are marked by joy. The crowds rejoice at the marvelous deeds and wonders Jesus performs. Meals with Jesus are marked and categorized by joy. As the early church is filled with the Holy Spirit, it is filled with joy. Joy is the result of Jesus doing the work of his Father, and that same joy is ours as we abide in him and are about that same work as Jesus. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, a healthy and nourishing sign that God is near and at work among us.

Here's a question: When was the last time you found yourself overwhelmed with joy? If we follow the Magi's lead here, well then, the Good News is that joy is freely available to each of us every week right here as we gather to worship the King of Kings.

Have you ever felt joy wash over you in worship? It is certainly one of the things that brings me back again and again—that no matter how hard or difficult life is at any particular moment, God leads me still to joy in the midst of that in worship. Whatever burdens we bring, whatever longings or losses we carry, whatever celebrations or lamentations, they can be covered with joy in the act of worship, whether in song or in prayer, whether in sermons or in silence. God means to take what we bring with us and to transform it all by us bringing it to our Savior. Our gifts, our possessions, our prayers, our obsessions—we are simply asked to bring them to the One who is King over all things, including *our* things.

Finally, this passage reads us in the person of King Herod. King Herod is contrasted with the Magi in *every* possible way. Whereas the Magi are outsiders, King Herod is on the *inside*. Professionally, politically, religiously, Herod fits neatly into all the preferred categories that we tend to aim for. As a religious authority and king, he has at his disposal the best Biblical minds. He is connected with the most powerful political and professional allies. And yet, when God's Messiah is born, King Herod misses the mark. In fact, he misses the dart board altogether.

Herod has access to God's Word in Scripture. He *knows* where to go. He knows where this King will be born. He knows all too well all of the things he needs

to know. The problem is that Herod has also bought into a lie. It is a lie that we are all tempted with, every day. And the lie is that *we belong to ourselves*, that we are our own personal kings. Or perhaps conversely, that others have undue power over us. That unkind people, more powerful than us, are finally in charge.

In the face of these lies, the birth of Jesus announces that there is a king, over all people and all things, and it is Jesus. It is not any of us, regardless of what particular position or lack thereof. Herod sees Jesus as a threat to his power, to his plans. If Jesus is King, then Herod is not. Dale Bruner, commenting on this passage, puts it more pointedly: If Jesus is King, *we* are not. None of us.

So, Herod reads us too. We, who have ready access to God's Word in Scripture. We who have the means and opportunity to bring what we have—our power, our possessions, our opinions and plans on all matters of every kind. We have Herod's choice. Will we respond to what God tells us in Scripture by laying these things down before the King of Kings to put them at his disposal? Will we acknowledge that there is a Good King in charge, not only of them but also of us who have some measure of power, and who has charged us to be stewards and shepherds that bear witness to that good power?

Herod chooses Door #2. He chooses to hold tight to his power and plans, and behind Door #2 Herod finds *fear* rather than joy. Fear is the fruit of Herod's response to Jesus—fear that endangers not only Herod, but has deadly consequences for all of those under Herod's charge, as we learn later in this chapter.

Herod reads us too. When faced with that choice, will we submit to Jesus as king, or will we keep that crown for ourselves?

This Sunday we are celebrating Epiphany. Epiphany signifies the appearance of God, which is precisely what we celebrate throughout Christmas. Jesus is Emmanuel. Jesus is God-with-us. His appearance is no secret. He has come; he is King of kings. There is no person or power in heaven or on earth that

is not finally subject to that reign. In light of this, Scripture's question for us is this: Will we continue holding tight our own plans? Our own power? Or will we hold them loosely, allowing them to be directed at every turn by our Lord? Scripture reads us this way: Will we choose to reap fear, or will we choose to reap joy? Will we, at every step, follow God's leading? Will we allow those longings and restlessness, planted deep in our hearts and our minds, to lead us to Bethlehem? Will we pay attention to the voice of creation singing God's praises, pointing to their Creator? Will we faithfully hear and obey God's voice in Scripture, following it, again and again, to that same place where it led Herod and the Magi: to Jesus, the King of kings?

This New Year, whatever your plans are, whatever your goals are, I hope that you will follow God's leading right here, like those Magi, led to joy, again and again. Amen.