

**HE DOES NOT LOOK LIKE A KING**  
**a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Jan. 6, 2019**  
**based on Matthew 2:1–12**

The sermon this morning is the conclusion of a sermon series entitled, “The Kingdom Is at Hand.” In the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth, the one in which he is most distinctively acclaimed as king is the story of the visit of the wise men, which will be our focus this morning. {prayer}

Matthew tells us that “wise men” came from the east and visited the infant Jesus. In spite of such songs as “We Three Kings,” the Bible does not say that they were kings, nor does it say that there were three of them. The idea that there were three comes from the fact that they gave three gifts. In the Greek language of the New Testament, these men are actually identified as “*magoi*,” often transliterated into English as “magi.” The magi were a caste of learned religious scholars, who were prevalent in the East, especially in Persia. They were highly educated, familiar with the sciences of their day, especially astronomy, and they were quite religious. Because of their extensive knowledge, the magi were generally held in high esteem, and they often served as advisors to kings and rulers. Thus while the magi were not themselves kings, they were on a level close to that of kings. These were men not only of great wisdom but also of considerable influence, power, and wealth.

So what caused these magi to depart from their country and travel an enormous distance in order to see a baby in the obscure territory of Judea? The story reports that they had observed a “star.” There has been a lot of investigation into what the star might have been—perhaps a comet, or a conjunction of planets, or something else. Magi believed that God can provide revelation through signs in the heavens; and these magi saw something which led them to conclude that that long-awaited Jewish Messiah had been born.

Religious scholars in Persia at the time would have been well acquainted with the Jewish idea of the Messiah, since Judaism was widespread in Persia and had been so in the whole region for centuries, ever since the Exile. It is quite clear in Matthew that the magi were looking for the Messiah, since they asked, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2) And Herod subsequently call together the priests and scribes, inquiring as to where the Messiah was to be born. [*And calling together the chief priests and the scribes, Herod inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. Matthew 2:4*]

But even if the magi had observed something intriguing in the stars, and had concluded that God was doing something significant among the Jews in the land of Judea, why would they choose to personally set out on such an ambitious journey? The wise men at this juncture are a picture of the deep spiritual longing that in some way lies within everyone.

During the Christmas season, there are always articles written about why so many people choose to go to church during Christmas time. At Christmas Eve services, every year, there are quite a number of people present who do not ordinarily attend worship. It used to

be thought that these folks were just coming as a part of cultural tradition, that a candlelight worship service was simply another little ritual like putting up a tree. But in today's culture, scarcely half the population connects with any kind of worship at Christmas time; it is not so much the cultural thing to do, since there are so many alternative activities in the cultural holiday season. So what is it in this time of year that moves people who have not been attending worship to say, "In the midst of all the hubbub of this season, on Christmas Eve (or perhaps some other service during this time) I want to join in worship?" The best read on the phenomenon is that something in this time of year triggers the spiritual yearning that is deep within the heart. People want something more than the glitter, something more than the silly seasonal songs that are playing in the stores, and something more than the pile of gifts that can never answer our real needs. So they set out on a journey to church, looking for what can answer the longing of the soul.

This is what moved the wise men to set out for Judea. As they sensed the working of God, they realized their own spiritual need and they acted upon it, embarking on a journey to seek a personal encounter with God.

But what exactly did they expect to find when they arrived in Judea? That foreign dignitaries would visit a newborn king was actually a fairly common occurrence in the ancient world. If a child was born who was the heir of an emperor or a powerful king, emissaries from other lands would often show up with gifts. It was a way of building good favor with that dynasty. Such emissaries would find the newborn in a glamorous setting and would be received with pomp. The visit would occur, of course, at the palace; and it is notable that the wise men went first to the palace in Jerusalem, since that was the logical place to look for a newborn king. But they were looking for a godly figure, and what they found at the palace was King Herod. Herod, like many of the rulers of the world through the ages, responded with deceit and conniving. The wise men were pointed to travel on to Bethlehem. *[He sent them to Bethlehem . . . Matthew 2:8]*

There they arrived at a most unlikely spot. Matthew does not tell us exactly what sort of place it was; he simply calls it "a house." *[Having entered the house, the magi found the child . . . Matthew 2:11]* Apparently the holy couple had gotten out of the stable and into a house somewhere. But the whole picture is a very humble one—some ordinary lodging in the obscure village of Bethlehem, where there was a tiny baby with peasant parents. This was hardly an auspicious conclusion to a daunting thousand-mile journey to visit a newborn king.

Yet the wise men were inspired to see that they had arrived at the right place. Here before them was the Messiah—not just any king, but the one possessing the title, Messiah, which means "the anointed one" of God. Jesus, of course, did not look at all like a king, at least not in terms of the world's expectations. But the wise men were wise enough to realize that real glory and power transcend appearances. As they gazed upon Jesus in that place, they perceived that God had entered into the world in the midst of common people, in a very common setting. God had turned the tables on the mighty and had identified with the lowly.

This king born in Bethlehem was destined to redefine power, as he would bring deliverance not by force or self-exaltation but through humble, loving service. The magi saw the divine wisdom in all this, and they knelt down in homage. *[They fell down and worshipped him, and opening their treasures they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Matthew 2:11]*

The wise men are especially remembered as wise because in their dramatic act of offering gifts to the infant Jesus they recognized what or who finally is worthy of our life's allegiance. They were thoroughly unimpressed with King Herod, giving no allegiance to him, and ultimately flouting his authority, as they declined to report back to him as he had requested. They also showed little interest in the usual earthly treasures that have so often commanded people's devotion. They themselves had wealth, but they gave out of their wealth as they set their gifts before Jesus. They had a good bit of status and power, but they knelt before a child. They had fame and renown in their home country, but they concluded their long journey in the most obscure spot, where they would be completely invisible to everyone outside the holy family. They moved beyond all the trappings of the world as they gave their allegiance to Christ, because in Him they saw God at work.

Later Jesus would announce that the Kingdom of God is at hand. As we have observed during this sermon series, God's Kingdom is a spiritual kingdom—it is wherever God reigns in human hearts and lives. The kingdom breaks into the world in Jesus; and we see this happening already in the story of the wise men, as they respond to Christ in faith and offer themselves in devotion and go forth to tell the story to the world. We are invited to join them—in recognizing Jesus as king, in offering our allegiance, and in joining in how God is at work today.