

# FOLLOWING THE STAR

## MATTHEW 2:1-12



This Week's Message  
December 3, 2023

*Following the Star*

*We saw his star when it rose and  
have come to worship him.*

Matthew 2:2  
(New International Version)

### ***Sunday's Scripture Reading***

#### ***Matthew 2:1-12***

<sup>1</sup>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 when it rose and have come to worship him."

<sup>2</sup>When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

<sup>3</sup>When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

<sup>4</sup>"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>5</sup>"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 shepherd my people Israel."

<sup>6</sup>Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

<sup>7</sup>He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

<sup>8</sup>After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

<sup>9</sup>When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

<sup>10</sup>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, frankincense and myrrh.

<sup>11</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Today is the beginning of Advent. The Advent season, as you probably know, constitutes the four Sundays prior to Christmas. The word, Advent, comes from the Latin, *adventus*, which means *coming* or *arrival*, referring to the coming of Christ into the world.

Sunday's message tells the familiar story of the magi, who followed the star to Jerusalem, looking for *the one who had been born king of the Jews*. Not much is known about the magi, and perhaps our lack of knowledge about them is what contributes to some misunderstanding and more than a little conjecture about them, such as their common designation as being kings. There is nothing in the story that Matthew tells that indicates the magi were kings. Neither does the story tell us that there were three of them. That element of the tradition surrounding them probably comes from the fact that they presented three gifts to Jesus – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Church tradition has even assigned names to each of the magi – Melchior, Caspar, and Balthazar. The speculation about the magi goes so far as to even designate the countries of which they were king. Where does all this come from? Some is based on what we would call extra-

### *Questions to Consider –*

\* Does it make any difference to you whether or not the way the nativity is generally portrayed is accurate? Why or why not?

\* The magi were most likely scientists of their day, and they would have particularly been experts in astrology. Not a lot of details are given by Matthew about the star that the magi followed. Over the centuries, it has been purported to be a comet, an alignment of various stars, or some other astrological phenomenon. In the end, does it really matter what it was that the magi saw?

\* The magi are very similar to some Biblical characters, in that they began their journey based more on fact than on solid answers. In verse 2, they began their journey based only on the information that they *saw his star when it rose*. After seeing the star, they began their journey, a journey we know next to nothing about. We don't know the time it took them, the distance they traveled, or where they began their journey. The story is not unlike that of Abraham, who began a journey with very little information, but was faithful to follow where he was led. What is important about their journey is that it was one of faith.

canonical writings. Extra-canonical writings were books that make up what are called the apocrypha and pseudepigrapha, which are books that purport to tell of Biblical or divine history but were not included in the Bible (although some are included in the Catholic or Orthodox versions of the Bible).

The arrival of the magi is the basis for Epiphany, which falls on January 6. Epiphany means *to appear*, and it is the day set aside to remember the appearance of the magi at Bethlehem. Matthew, unlike Luke, does not mention the shepherds, but he does mention that when Herod orders the killing of the male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding area, he ordered that it include those who were up to two years old. That Herod committed this horrendous atrocity to those children up to two years old indicates that the magi most likely arrived at Bethlehem a good while after the birth of Jesus.

*I think it is good for us to be aware of the differences between centuries of tradition and the Biblical texts, but I think the larger point is the reality that all those characters were drawn to Bethlehem.*

Does this mean that the portrayals of the first Christmas, with the shepherds and magi together at the manger are incorrect, and thus should not be presented in such a way? The traditional nativity scene is not accurate, at least not in the sense that the shepherds and magi were there at the same time. But I don't think it's necessary for us to pack away our nativity sets. For one, traditions are very difficult to redirect or to change, and that is especially true with Christmas, which has such powerful and very deeply ingrained traditions. And while the traditional nativity isn't entirely correct, in terms of all those characters being present at the manger at the same time, they were all there at some point. I think it is good for us to be aware of the differences between centuries of tradition and the Biblical texts, but I think the larger point is the reality that all those characters were drawn to Bethlehem.

Countless numbers of people continue to be drawn to the events of Bethlehem, either in person or in faith. The star continues to beckon us to come, by faith, and to worship the King.

I look forward to seeing you Sunday!

