

MATTHEW 2:9-11

WHAT THE MAGI FOUND

“After listening to the king, [the wise men] went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”¹

Expecting a king, they found a humble family. Anticipating a palace, they found instead a humble house. Nevertheless, they were not undeterred in pursuing their noble purpose. They had travelled across a vast expanse of desert to worship, and worship they would! A consistent theme from our Advent studies this year is the fact that those who should have been prepared to worship missed God’s presentation of His Son. This is evident from the text today.

Christmas myths, rather than the Word of God, more frequently shape our understanding of the First Advent of the Master. The common assumption is that since the Christ was born in Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph remained there, perhaps setting up housekeeping in a sheepcote. Consequently, the accounts provided by Matthew and by Luke are conflated so that what has become the traditional nativity scene pictures three Magi kneeling before a manger surrounded by a number of animals standing placidly in front of a baby in a manger. Usually, shepherds are added to the Nativity scene, I suppose, in an attempt to lend authenticity to the scene.

In point of fact, we do not know how many Magi were in the entourage. We may be reasonably certain that though Mary and Joseph may have continued in the Bethlehem area, they were not still in the sheepcote when the Magi arrived. The text specifically states that the Magi went “into the house,” where “they saw the child with Mary His mother” [MATTHEW 2:11]. The child that the Magi found was likely a toddler, perhaps as old as two-years-of-age. The shepherds had come and departed long before the Magi ever ventured onto the scene. It is extremely doubtful that either ox or ass ever stood around the child, and even the sheep were left in the fields when the shepherds came to see the child whose birth was announced by angels.

The Magi in their search troubled Herod and all Jerusalem with him. The king, a political appointee to the position he occupied, intended to hold onto power at all costs. Therefore, all threats to the throne had to be eliminated ruthlessly. Accordingly, Herod hatched a dastardly plan. He would feign interest in worshipping this child whom he considered to be a pretender to the throne until he could obtain intelligence of his whereabouts. Then, he would kill him.

So, he inquired about when the Magi had first seen the star they were following. He consulted with the scholars that attended the throne to discover where Messiah was to be born. Having learned that the King of Israel was to be born in Bethlehem, and that the Magi had been observing the star for two years, he urged them to go to Bethlehem to find the child and then report to him so he, also, could worship.

Warned in a dream not to return to Herod [MATTHEW 2:12], the Magi returned home by another route. When it became apparent that he had been deceived, Herod ordered the slaughter of all children two years and under in the entire region surround Bethlehem [MATTHEW 2:16-18]. Perhaps twenty children were murdered by Herod’s order; a tragedy of monstrous proportions.

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Herod's action is not at issue in this message; but rather God's provision for mankind by sending His Son as a child. The Magi, astrologers from Persia, trekked across vast deserts to find one whose birth was heralded by stars shining brightly in the heavens. It was not customary for them to take note of the birth of every member of human royalty, but they had never encountered such a birth announcement as a new star. What did they seek? I am phrasing the issue in the form of a question that asks, "What did the Magi find when they entered the house?"

THE MAGI FOUND THE KING OF THE JEWS — The Magi found a child tended by Mary, His mother. However, the child they found had been identified by the celestial announcement as "King of the Jews" [MATTHEW 2:2]. Now, it is perhaps significant that the child was said to be a king, but the reign of this child would be unlike anything they might have imagined.

The Magi, to say nothing of Herod, and perhaps even of the vast majority of Jews, anticipated a physical reign. Superficially, that is the correct view. However, it fails to appreciate the prophecies God had provided. Let's review the history of Israel.

After they were delivered from Egyptian bondage, Israel was a theocracy—God reigned over the nation, raising up leaders as required. First Moses, then Joshua led the nation. After the death of Joshua, a series of Judges were raised up at specific times as required by emergencies. The provision of Judges to lead the nation was dependent upon God. The provision of Judges was always in response to national repentance following times of spiritual declension. The history of Israel before the provision of kings is a cycle of corruption and contrition.

God raised up the powerful prophet, Samuel. However, the people complained, demanding that Samuel appoint "a king to judge us like all the nations" [1 SAMUEL 7:4,5]. Samuel did appoint a king, the first of three who would reign over the United Kingdom of Israel. Saul, the first king over the United Kingdom, was a man of great promise and of greater disenchantment. He was highly successful in war against the enemies of Israel, providing cohesion of the tribes through uniting them against common enemies. However, his spiritual temper is sadly deficient. Saul is utterly focused on his desires rather than seeking to do the will of the LORD. Time-and-again he justifies his disobedience to the detriment of the nation. Saul demonstrated that he was unfit to serve as king over God's people.

After this the LORD appointed David, whom He identified as "a man after His own heart" [1 SAMUEL 13:14] to be king over His people. David was not a perfect man, but he was sensitive to the LORD's will and responded to His rebukes with alacrity. He guided Israel for forty years, laying the foundation for the nation to be great. Even to the present time the Jewish people look back to his rule with longing. Hold this thought in your mind, because I will have more to say about this in a moment.

David's son Solomon succeeded him, serving as the last king over the United Kingdom. Solomon, richly blessed by the LORD God, squandered that blessing in pursuit of personal gratification. He sated every appetite with whatever he desired. Undoubtedly, under his rule Israel reached the pinnacle of wealth and power, but spiritual power was utterly absent from the nation. Therefore, after his death, God permitted the nation to be divided, never to be reunited.

You can imagine the nostalgic thoughts whenever Jews looked back to the reign of David. His reign was a magical time in the memory of the Jewish people. He led the Kingdom to unprecedented plateaus of respect among the nations of the world. Israel was respected as a powerful player on the world stage. Foreign potentates sent envoys to consult with David and to seek strategic alliances. God was blessing the nation and the Temple was filled with worshippers who sought the Word of the Lord.

However, there is so much more than mere nostalgia in the longing for the King of Israel. God made a covenant with David. The promise of God was delivered from Nathan the Prophet. ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel. And I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may dwell in their own place and be disturbed no more. And violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son. When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever” [2 SAMUEL 7:8-16].

Near the end of his days, David testified, “[God] has made with me an everlasting covenant” [2 SAMUEL 23:5]. Later, Ethan the Ezrahite recalled this promise and in a Psalm presented the LORD speaking and saying,

“I have found David, my servant;
with my holy oil I have anointed him,
so that my hand shall be established with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.”

...

“I will not violate my covenant
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
Once for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.
His offspring shall endure forever,
his throne as long as the sun before me.
Like the moon it shall be established forever,
a faithful witness in the skies.” *Selah*

[PSALM 89:20, 21, 34-37]

Though multiple kings had sat on David’s throne, and though his descendents could be identified, God’s Anointed One and David’s promised son, had not been revealed. The Assyrians had conquered Israel and deported the peoples, replacing them in the land with other conquered peoples. Judah, also, was defeated by the Chaldeans who held them captive for decades until at last they were returned to the land. Despite their return, they had no native king and certainly no king who was able to lay claim to fulfilling the multiple prophecies made concerning David and his descendents. Thus, the promise of a king who was David’s descendent seemed to be a dream. It was Camelot writ wistfully in the imagination of the people.

To the Jewish mind—and especially at that late date after such a long time without regent or sovereign from David’s lineage to sit on the throne, the idea of the King of Israel represented the fulfilment of divine promise. That one who would be identified as the King of Israel would be appointed by God to bless the nation, to turn them to holiness and to rule in righteousness. However, the fulfilment of the prophecies seemed more mythical than practical. Still, there remained that one stunning promise written in the Psalms.

“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,
‘Let us burst their bonds apart
and cast away their cords from us.’

“He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord holds them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury, saying,
‘As for me, I have set my King
on Zion, my holy hill.’

“I will tell of the decree:
The LORD said to me, “You are my Son;
today I have begotten you.
Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

[PSALM 2:1-9]

The King would present Himself to the nation, fulfilling yet another ancient prophecy, certifying that He was the fulfilment of every aspiration and hope of the people. That prophecy said:

“Say to the daughter of Zion,
Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden”

[MATTHEW 21:5].

Yet, the leaders were incensed that little children were praising Him and that the common people were rejoicing; and their obstinacy and inflexibility ensured that the nation would reject Him. Nearing the city, the King wept over it. “If you knew this day what [would bring] peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes” [LUKE 19:42].²

² Holman Christian Standard Bible (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2003)

THE MAGI FOUND THE SHEPHERD OF ISRAEL — When the chief priests and scribes were asked “where the Christ was to be born,” quoting Micah of Moresheth they identified Him as the Shepherd of Israel [MATTHEW 2:6]. The kings of Israel were frequently compared to shepherds. Asaph penned a Psalm that addresses this matter.

“[God] chose David his servant
and took him from the sheepfolds;
from following the nursing ewes he brought him
to shepherd Jacob his people,
Israel his inheritance.
With upright heart he shepherded them
and guided them with his skilful hand.”

[PSALM 78:70-72]

This is an important point which must neither be glossed over nor ignored. Israel’s kings were to see themselves as shepherds, bearing responsibility for the welfare of the people; the people were to be viewed as flocks under care of the kings. The situation was not so very different from that of the pastor, or shepherd, in a contemporary congregation. Leadership, divine appointment, imposes responsibility before God to ensure the welfare of those under the care of the leader. Thus, Messiah is both the King of Israel and the Shepherd of Israel, as the chief priests and scribes recognised when they appeared before Herod [see MATTHEW 2:6].

When leaders of Israel’s tribes came to David to invite him to assume the reign over them, they framed their approach in the thought that he was appointed by God to shepherd them. They said, “In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, ‘You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel’” [2 SAMUEL 5:2]. Previously, the judges had been designated as “shepherds” of Israel [see 2 SAMUEL 7:7; 1 CHRONICLES 17:6]. Now, David was taken “from the pasture, from following the sheep, that [he] should be prince over [God’s] people Israel” [2 SAMUEL 7:8].

Writing of Messiah’s millennial reign, Ezekiel writes, “I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from all around, and bring them to their own land. And I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel. And one king shall be king over them all, and they shall be no longer two nations, and no longer divided into two kingdoms. They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. But I will save them from all the backslidings in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore” [EZEKIEL 37:21-28]. David’s Son will be king, and the people will have one shepherd.

How can we speak of the Christ as the Shepherd of Israel without acknowledging the twenty-third Psalm and the teaching it provides? Listen to the familiar words of the Psalm.

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.

“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.

“You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
forever.”

[PSALM 23:1-6]

The Shepherd of Israel was prophesied to provide all that would be required by His flock. He would provide rest and refreshment for His weary people. He would renew the disheartened among the flock and direct them in the way they should go. The knowledge that He is their Great Protector would give each one eternal comfort. He was prophesied to feed them on His Word, exalt them by His presence and fill their souls with joy. This He would do for Israel throughout His reign; and this He does for His people even now.

So the Magi came into the presence of One who was identified as the Shepherd of Israel. Searching for a king, they learned from unbelieving scholars that He was the Great Provider for His people. A sovereign who assumes responsibility for his people rather than being supplied by the people is foreign within our ken. A monarch who abuses neither power nor position, who administers justice and walks in righteousness is virtually unheard of in our experience. However, this shepherd would be unique, for He was also the Son of God.

THE MAGI FOUND THE SON OF GOD — One may kneel before their liege or bow before a sovereign, but a person worships only one whom they believe to be a god. Indeed, as the Apostle has said, “there are many ‘gods’ and many ‘lords’—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” [1 CORINTHIANS 8:5]. However, when the Magi came into the house and saw the child, the text before us is quite specific in stating that “they fell down and worshipped Him” [MATTHEW 2:11].

Have you ever noticed that whenever someone witnesses the Master in unveiled glory, they fall down and worship. The action is involuntary as mortals fall down in the presence of the majestic glory. Throughout the pages of the Old Covenant is an awesome individual identified as “the angel of the LORD.” This mysterious individual, repeatedly called “the LORD,” is seen to possess attributes of the Living God. Many theologians who have studied the accounts of this individual are convinced that this is the Son of God—the preincarnate Christ. Whenever the preincarnate Christ appears in the accounts provided in the Old Covenant, the reaction of those who meet Him is astonishment and an attempt to turn away from looking on His glory. Whether Moses at the burning bush [**EXODUS 3:1-6**], or Balaam, arrested in mad pursuit of personal glory [**NUMBERS 22:22-31**], or Manoah and his wife when told of the birth of Samson [**JUDGES 6:19-24**], individuals fall down in astonishment and awe before the unveiled glory of the Lord.

Given this background, it should not be surprising that whenever the glory of Jesus was revealed, the reaction of those who witnessed that glory was to fall down and worship. When Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John, His clothing glowed white as light and His face became as radiant as the sun. A voice spoke from a bright cloud that appeared above Him, saying “This is My Beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him” [**MATTHEW 17:1-5**]. At this, the disciples “fell on their faces and were terrified” [**MATTHEW 17:6**]. When the Risen, Reigning Son of God appeared to John during his exile on Patmos, John “fell at His feet as though dead” [**REVELATION 1:17**]. Jesus, His glory revealed, inspires awe that compels even the most jaded individual to fall before Him. The reaction is not intentional or voluntary, but spontaneous, unconscious, unprompted.

What I find instructive, even amazing, is that the Magi did not see the Master in unveiled glory when they came into the house. Falling down and worshipping before Him was not involuntary, but deliberate. The Magi made the conscious decision to worship the child—paying homage because of what they had come to believe about Him. They had come to believe that He was the King of Israel, and though they could not have realised all that this entailed, they were prepared to bow before Him in acknowledgement of His exalted position. Israel was not a great and powerful nation at this time; it was a cultural backwater. The events that took place in that land at that time were not noticed by the world. If all that was known was that one who was royalty had been born in such an insignificant nation, they would not have bothered to make the journey, much less fall down before the child. However, this was more than a prince, more than one born into privilege.

From the scholars who had appeared at Herod’s command, they had heard the prophecy that the child was the One destined to be Shepherd of God’s people. Again, it is unlikely that they were able to fully appreciate all that it meant to be in the presence of One who would bear such title and who would fulfil such awesome responsibility. Nevertheless, they obviously understood that the designation heralded something of greatest significance.

They weighed the celestial announcement in light of the prophetic declarations they had heard, and concluded that this child must be the Son of God. And though they could not have fully appreciated all that it meant for God’s Son to take on human flesh, they understood that this was of utmost importance. Thus, having entered the house where the child was, they fell down and they worshipped. Ignoring the sensual and focusing on the spiritual, they worshipped. Rather than focusing on the humble surroundings in which the family lived and concluding that this was an ordinary peasant child, they witnessed the demonstration of divine power revealed through the star guiding them and heard the prophecies concerning the child, and realised that this was indeed the Son of God.

What does this mean for us today? If, in the spirit of the Christmas season, you should attend the service of a church, what are you seeking? Perhaps you attend because it is the thing to do at this season of the year. There, you will undoubtedly hear again the wonderful account of the birth of the Son of God. If all you see is cultural tradition, then you will have missed the crucial point of the season. Frankly, if that is all you see, you are no better than the scholars who knew the prophecies but ignored them and you will have wasted your time.

If you go to church because your child or your grandchild is participating in a pageant, you will see a representation of the events surrounding the birth of God's Son as they are briefly described in the Word of God. In that event, perhaps you were entertained and even amused by the antics of the children. However, if you failed to see the reason for the pageant, you will have squandered the time, which would have been better spent doing other things.

The Magi were no different from us. They could have focused on the physical, and they would have missed the opportunity to worship before God's richest gift to mankind. Instead, they came seeking the King of Israel, the promised Messiah. They came seeking the Shepherd of Israel who fulfils every aspiration of those who seek Him. They came and discovered the Son of God. They did not need to see His unveiled glory to worship Him. In the same way, if you seek to be awed by signs and wonders, you may miss the wonder of God's salvation.

This child born of a virgin was indeed God's promised Messiah. Those who know Him, or perhaps more properly are known by Him, know that He shall reign on the earth. Even now, He reigns in the hearts of His people. With the Apostle, we who await His return testify that "our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power that enables Him even to subject all things to Himself" [**PHILIPPIANS 3:20, 21**]. We are witnesses that "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works" [**TITUS 2:11-14**].

This child born of a virgin is indeed the One who now fills us with peace, hope and love. In Him, the Christian has peace with God and peace with himself or herself. Though the world rushes madly into ever-greater chaos, we who are Christ worshippers live confident and secure in the knowledge that He who walks with us rules over all and overrules all. He is in control; we know that "[Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" [**COLOSSIANS 1:15-19**].

If you attempt to serve God because of what you imagine He can give, you cannot worship at all. Worshipping God means that we see His glory revealed through the mercy He has extended to us, in the power He supplies so that we can live holy and righteous lives, and in the peace He gives, enabling us to live confidently in a world defined by uncertainty. Worshipping God means that we are awed by His might and that we are humbled by His grace. It means that we rejoice in His mercy and revel in His goodness. We see His glory revealed through His Word and through His presence with His holy people. We choose to worship, though we marvel at His acceptance.

Who are you worshipping at Christmas? When you entered the house of the Lord, what did you find? The Magi found the Son of God; and you, also, may find Him and the salvation He brings, if you but seek Him. Christ the Lord was born so that He might die. He took on human flesh so that He might “taste death for everyone” [**HEBREWS 2:9**]. Though it is true that He gave His life because of the sin of all mankind, until I realise that He gave Himself for me, the death has no value. He gave His life as a sacrifice because of my sin; He took my punishment upon Himself.

Wonderful though it is to know of the atonement, the Good News is that He did not stay dead. He was buried, and He broke the bonds of death, rising from the dead. Therefore, God’s promise is, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” Citing the Prophet Joel, the Apostle testifies, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**].

Our sincere prayer is that you have found the Son of God and that you now worship Him. If somehow you have failed to find the forgiveness of sin, though you may be living oblivious to the danger to your soul, there is peace with God, the forgiveness of sin and acceptance into His Family that is offered through faith in His Son. Believe the message of life and receive His salvation. Do it today; do it now. Amen.