

The Gifts of the Magi: *Home By Another Way*
Matthew 2:1-12

How many wise men were there? Actually, we don't know. The Bible doesn't say.

Where do they come from? Somewhere in the East.

Just because we sing, "We three kings from Orient Are," doesn't mean that they were actually kings. It is very unlikely that they were.

Legend says that they came from Persia, India, and Africa and that they were named Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. In fact, the Cathedral in Cologne Germany claims to have the bones of the wise men, sequestered in a shrine. The word 'legend' there, should be a clue. There is absolutely nothing in scripture to support any of these claims.

Probably the one thing we do know for certain is that the Magi, the wise men from the East, came to give gifts to the new born King. What I want to explore with you this morning, is this: what gift do they give us as we too attempt to worship this King of the Jews, this Lord of our lives?

In all likelihood what we call the wise men were emissaries of one of the Eastern Kings—most Bible scholars have assumed they were from the Parthian Empire since they have been traditionally associated with Babylon. I believe a compelling case can be made for their coming from the Arabian kingdom of Nabatene, which you might remember if you saw the third Indiana Jones movie, the last part being filmed in the Nabeteian city of Petra. *Does this scenery ring any bells?*

Yes, they were astrologers, magi and such figures were often called upon to be impromptu diplomats. They saw the star, they drew the connection to the Hebrew people, and they concluded without a doubt that a new ruler was in ascendancy. Both the kings of Parthia and Nabatene were on the outs with all powerful Rome and its undefeatable leader, Caesar Augustus. It just so happens that Herod the Great was Caesar's darling in the region. To celebrate the birth of a new King in Judea was in all likelihood to congratulate Herod for the continuation of his lineage under a new heir. The wisemen were sent with gifts, protected by soldiers, ready to negotiate stronger ties with Rome through Herod's grandson—or whatever relative had been born into royalty and future greatness.

These are trained international negotiators and they know that they've got a problem when Herod has no idea what they are talking about. He is not aware of this star nor the new king it points toward. No, old Herod has stayed on the throne as long as he has with a combination of ruthlessness as well as knowing how to play the long game.

After checking with his resident religious experts, Herod suggests the Magi try Bethlehem, based on the prophecy in Micah. But the King also makes it very clear that he too is thrilled with the news and would like nothing more to come and worship the baby King himself. So Herod makes the Magi promise that once they've found the child and paid their respects, they will come back to the palace and tell him where to find this wondrous sight. Nothing would please him more. And of course, being pleased, he couldn't help but put in a good word for their own King and country with his good buddy Augustus.

Needless to say, there are a few surprises along the way for the wisemen. Jesus is not at all what they were expecting and yet he was unmistakably the One they were seeking. They gave him their gifts. They gave him their worship. But they did not go back to the palace in Jerusalem.

The Magi scrubbed their mission, put themselves in hot water with their Master, and choose to question the integrity and honesty of the ruler they were sent to reach out to. Yes, they were warned in a dream, but it was also because they were wise that they hashed it out—they thought it through. The life of this defenseless child versus the word of a successful well connected mover and shaker.

On the surface, there was every reason to go back and tell Herod.

1. It was their job
2. He said he only wanted to worship too
3. He is rich, powerful and connected—hence most would have assumed that meant he was blessed by God—he must be trustworthy as well.

These are certainly spiritual men who understood that their wisdom was a gift given to them—a gift given to dig deeper and discern the best path forward. Together they decide the best path forward was to bypass Herod and go home another way. **And in Going Home Another Way the Magi offer the greatest gift they can to Jesus and the Holy Family.** And they also demonstrate for us how to use a gift we have neglected far too much of late.

If you were to look up the word Discernment, you'd find this definition: *The ability to judge well.* But right next to it is a definition within a Christian context meaning: *The process of determining God's desire in a situation or for one's life or identifying the true nature of a thing.* The wise men are demonstrating their wisdom by stopping and discerning whether or not Herod can be taken at his word—to ask if it is in the best interest of Joseph and Mary's son to share his location with the current King. The dream helps, sure, but to turn their back on what they were sent to accomplish would have required more than just that.

The gift of God's spirit, the testimony of scripture, and the traditions of the church make the practice of Christ-centered discernment available for all those who love God and follow Jesus. So I wonder why so many of us are taking the Modern-Day Herods that populate our lives at their word. Why aren't we 'going home by another way' to protect the distinctive Christian understanding the world and our place in it?

Here's what I mean. For us, Herod is someone or some information that, on the surface, seems reasonable and even good, but who has ulterior motives that aren't obvious at first. Intentionally or not, they may try to remove or undermine some key aspect of our faith in Christ, just as Herod wanted to remove the threat of this new rival, Jesus, to his throne.

We are being told today by

- internet web sites,
- well-like celebrities or politicians,
- cable or talk-radio pundits,
- YouTube Influencers and Podcasters

what to think and what to believe about who we are and what is going on around us. Like Herod before them, they seem genuinely interested in telling us the truth—genuinely interested in wanting to join us in what we are doing or getting ready to do. Unlike Herod, they have a whole lot more access

to our attention and bombard us with their view as often as possible. In a media-soaked world the spoils go to the loudest and angriest voices in the room, because they know that fear and outrage will get them the largest following.

And yet we are called to go another way. We are called to follow the path of discernment—to put ourselves “in the Mind of Christ” in order judge what and who can be trusted.

Modern Day Herod’s might include

- YouTube posts raising doubts about the various vaccines coming out to protect us and our neighbors from Covid. Some sound reasonable other include theories about tiny microchips that will be injected into our bodies—all somehow mysteriously funded by Bill Gates.
- It might be the news that Kylie Jenner earned nearly 600 million dollars in 2020 from the sale of her cosmetic line. The Kardashians have long been touting a certain lifestyle on television and in celebrity magazines and on the internet—the necessity of physical beauty, and working every relationship and every event of their lives for profit.
- Herod might even be hiding in the friend who likes to give financial advice, and who often warns of the coming market collapse and how important it is to hoard every penny, instilling a fear in you, that you won’t have enough, that you’ll never have enough.

I’ve attached a document to this sermon that you can click on, download and print out, that highlights a number of biblical principles that ask, “Does this person, this information or this view of the world resonate with **the Mind of Christ?**”

Let me just give you the brief taste of what kind of questions you need to ask as you try to make godly judgments about the Herods you come into contact with.

Is this someone or something that makes **Humility a priority?** Think of the core teachings of Jesus:

***The Last will be First and
The Least will be the Greatest***

Does this person demonstrate **sacrificial Generosity?** Do they give of themselves freely or are they only asking you to give to them?

Is there evidence of **Relinquishing Status and Power?** Again the teaching of our Master:

If you want to find your life you have to be willing to lose it

And ultimately, does your Herod—does this theory, this pundit, this advice, **lead you to love the God of Jesus Christ more** and/or **does it lead you to love your neighbor—all your neighbors more?** Does it fall within the Great Commandments given by Jesus?

I could go on but you get the point.

There is a bumper sticker that was popular a few years ago that said, **“Wise men and women still seek him.”** And, I pray that it is true. But wise women and men, when they find him, worship him—they share their gifts and rejoice at what God has done. And because they are discerning—because they do not take their wisdom for granted—they come to realize old King Herod is not to be trusted and decide to go home another way. And in so doing, they protect and guard the greatest gift this world has ever known. May we be as just as wise and just as vigilant with the same gift that has been entrusted to us. Amen.

New Testament Principles of Discernment

Does this person or this information/view of the world resonate with **the Mind of Christ?**

Humility is a priority: *The Last will be First and The Least will be the Greatest*

Evidence of Mercy and forgiveness: *Forgive us as we Forgive others*

Generosity: *Receive by giving*

Servanthood: *Lead by serving*

Selflessness: *Find by losing* (losing our self-centeredness)

Relinquishing Status and Power: *Live by dying* (giving up control of our lives)

Faithful Resistance: *Always Return good for evil*

Moving others to **love God more**

Moving others to **love their neighbor more**

Does this person, social media post, or information **tell you what you want to hear?** If so, be as wary of it as a Wiseman. For an example, reread *1 Kings 22:1-40*