

The King Arrives
Matthew 2

Turn to Matthew chapter 2 please. Matthew 1 takes us up to the birth of Jesus, and Matthew 2 takes us from there. We see how others responded to the birth of Jesus. So we could call this the King's Arrival, or we the King's Welcome, because it tells us what others did about Jesus' birth.

Indirectly there is much about God in this story and how God operates. How does God get things done? What's his method? We'll keep an eye open for that and summarize at the end.

Matthew made clear in chapter 1 something we are not used to: already then, Jesus was the rightful king of Israel. Herod was king of the Jews when Jesus was born, and Herod felt very threatened when he heard about this baby boy, and he was right to feel threatened.

Herod was an imposter, not a Jew at all, he had no business being king of the Jews. He was Edomite, descendant of Esau, but the Romans ruled, and they made Herod king of the Jews. Jesus of David's line belonged on that throne. And in time, he will be on that throne, the King of the Jews. Except for being too young at this point, Jesus was the rightful king of the Jews.

Matthew 2:1 *After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² 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."*

³ *When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.* ⁴ *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.* ⁵ *"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "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."*

⁷ *Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.* ⁸ *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."*

⁹ *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.* ¹⁰ *When they saw the star, they rejoiced with immensely great joy.* ¹¹ *On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and bowing down they worshiped him, and opening their treasures they presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.* ¹² *And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

¹³ *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him."* ¹⁴ *So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night*

and left for Egypt, ¹⁵ where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

¹⁶ When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ¹⁸ “A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”

¹⁹ After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt ²⁰ and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child’s life are dead.” ²¹ So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³ and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

The Magi from the east, the wise men. We assume something like this: the east would be Babylon, or somewhere close, perhaps Persia. Jews had been exiled 600 years earlier, and some returned but many stayed, and spread all over the place. They talked about the Christ who would come, king of the Jews, and a great world ruler.

The scholars of the east were astrologers, they looked at the stars to find out what was happening on earth, horoscope and such came from those scholars. In the OT God speaks clearly against that, God made the stars, look to God for these things not the stars. That’s the wise men.

Nearly the first prophecy about Christ comes from Balaam, a scoundrel of a prophet, back in Numbers 24: *A star shall come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel, he will crush his enemies; one out of Jacob shall rule.* A star shall come out of Jacob. These men of the east were fixated on stars, and they caught that.

Something happened in the sky that made clear to them that this great Jewish king had just been born. They had no doubt. God did something with a star that made it clear that the great Jewish king had been born, the Christ himself. They made the trip, a long trip, 1700 miles, would take most of three months each way. This story is full of the work of the Holy Spirit.

And don’t think three men on camels. Think thirty or fifty camels. They bring the gifts of the wealthy, which means they will have an armed guards with them, enough to keep bandits away, and servants. This big tour group comes into Jerusalem, which will have made a stir on its own.

But the real shocker is their question: “Where’s the real king of the Jews? Anyone know? We saw his star, we know he’s just been born, we know he’s around here somewhere. We are here to worship him. Where is he?” I love that. Herod and all Jerusalem in turmoil.

In Luke's Gospel, written for Gentiles, the birth of Jesus brings praise from devout Jews: Elizabeth, Mary, Zachariah, Simeon. In Matthew's Gospel, written for Jews, the birth of Jesus brings praise from unknown star-gazing Gentiles from far, far away. The gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh, are gifts suitable for a king. These gifts are fitting for a king.

At his birth, the Gentile Magi worship Jesus as the great king of the Jews. At the end of Matthew, Jesus tells the eleven, I want disciples from ALL the nations, make disciples from all the nations. That starts here. In Matthew, the Gentiles are the first to see who Jesus is.

The Joy of the Magi. No where else in the NT do we find as strong an expression of joy as what we read here about the wise men when the star reappeared. The writer is writing in Greek but thinking in Hebrew. In Hebrew, to emphasize joy we'd say "they rejoiced with joy." This phrase emphasizes joy that way, "they rejoiced with joy," then adds two more words.

First "They rejoiced with *great* joy," and then "they rejoiced with *immensely great* joy." They were going to see the great king and be able to worship him, so they rejoiced with immensely great joy. This is *not* written to tell us to feel such joy. That is *not* the point. This is written to tell us what a wonderful thing it is to come before the great King and worship him.

Which we are doing here this morning, and do often. We know the King of Kings, we meet with him, come into his presence, and worship him. He is our King and we are his people. We know all this, but lose our sense of how marvelous it is. The Magi caught that.

The Gifts of the Magi. V11 - *On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and bowing down they worshiped him, and opening their treasures they presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.* They gave Jesus royal gifts, lavish impractical gifts, gifts fitting and suitable for a great king.

In the ancient world, when you came before a king, you brought a gift. Example: In 1 Samuel 16, Saul asked David's father Jesse to send him David to play harp for him, because Saul was tormented by a dark spirit. So Jesse loaded a donkey with bread, a skin of wine, and a young goat, and sent these with David to give to king Saul.

Saul can use these but does not need them. But Jesse wants his family to treat the king properly, so he sends these. The bread and wine and young goat for king Saul are the same as the gold and frankincense and myrrh for Jesus: gifts for the king.

Our money in the offering accomplishes many things, and this is an important one. We are coming before the King of Kings, so of course we bring a gift. The practical use of the gift, in this sense, is irrelevant. What are Joseph and Mary going to do with a royal amount of frankincense and myrrh? It does not matter. Who cares? They are gifts for the King.

Three times in the books of Moses God said, “no one shall appear before me empty handed.” Some people bring offering every Sunday just for this reason: it is a concrete reminder that we come into the Presence of the King.

There are other gifts to bring than money. To come before him and praise him and give thanks are also suitable gifts for a king. But our money in the offering is the same as these gifts.

I mentioned before how God operates. Here are some other things this story tells us how God accomplishes his purposes.

Narrow Escapes. Joseph almost divorced Mary, instead of getting married. The wise men almost went back and told Herod exactly how to find the baby Jesus. Angry Herod almost caught and killed Jesus in Bethlehem. Coming back from Egypt, Joseph almost went back to Bethlehem, his home town. The birth of Jesus seems repeatedly on the brink of disaster.

Remember the Christmas nativity scene in Revelation 12? Our nativity scenes usually have Joseph and Mary and baby Jesus in a manger and shepherds and wise men and barn animals. A peaceful tender scene, which we enjoy, I enjoy.

But not in Revelation 12. In Revelation’s scene, just two figures: a woman in awful labour pains to produce her baby, and a huge vicious dragon waiting right there to devour the child as soon as it’s born. Let’s have a Christmas card with that on the front. Matthew 2 gets as close to that picture as anywhere in the Bible. Narrow Escapes.

Repeated Guidance from God. God told Joseph to take Mary as his wife, God used a star to tell the wise men that the great King was born, and later God used the star again to show them to the very place where Jesus was. God also told the wise men not to report back to Herod. God told Joseph to get up and travel to Egypt, then told him it was safe to come back to Judea because Herod was dead, and then God told him to stay away from Archelaus.

The Bible encourages us to assume our lives are full of this. He leads us in the right path for his Name’s sake. Normally not by an angel in a dream, just by making it happen. God guides the lives of his people, as a shepherd guides his sheep, including great concern for every individual.

Tragedy. Twenty or thirty little boys, toddlers, in and around Bethlehem, were killed. The number is just a guess. That many mothers could not be comforted. Their souls were torn open to the core. There is nothing to say or do that will make them feel any better. Horrible unjust unreasonable ungodly actions.

Don’t ask me why God permits such. Why did God not smite Herod? I do not know. You can ask God why, but he usually does not answer. He will weep with us though, that he will do. There is tragedy.

Obedience. Joseph in particular is the model here. The different Joseph episodes are all so brief. He must have said something, but it doesn't matter. He was a righteous man. He did what God wanted. The narrow escapes of Jesus rest on the obedience of Joseph.

God's Ancient Plan. *All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").*

-This is what the prophet has written: "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."

-This fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

-Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

-So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

From reading the OT we could never have pieced this story together. But after the events happen, we can see that this was God's ancient plan. God had an ancient plan for the birth of Christ, and he has an ancient plan for the turning points of our lives as well. He knew us and called us before the foundation of the world, he numbered our days, and so on.

So let's put together a few things that we have seen about God's plan. One, God has an ancient plan for us, going back much farther than our birth. The key turning points of our lives are already marked out. Two, our lives have regular narrow escapes, some we see and some not.

These two may not seem to fit together, but they do, God's ancient plan and our narrow escapes are both how he operates.

Three, he's with us and guiding us through the narrow escapes, he's with us and guiding us at the turning points, keeping us on the right path, making sure his purpose succeeds.

Four, there are tragedies. We feel like since there are tragedies, none of the rest is true. God is telling us, "No, all these all fit together, even if you can't figure it out."

Five, God uses ordinary obedient people to take his purpose forward. Like Joseph. Ordinary men and women who serve him, who are faithful in the basics, few heroic actions, who do what God asks them to do. That's how he gets it done, that's how God operates. That's how he treated Jesus, that's how he treats us all.

1, God has an ancient plan for us, the turning points are already marked out. 2, There are narrow escapes, not all of them noticed. 3, He's with us and guiding us the whole time. 4, There are tragedies. 5, God uses ordinary obedient people to move his plan forward. This is how God worked with Jesus, his one and only Son, and it's how he works with all of us. Amen.