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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL  
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## **Behold Magi from the East and Behold Your King**

Matthew 2:1-12

INI

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

We are blessed by Word of the Lord this Epiphany Sunday from Matthew 2:1-12.

### ***Matthew 2:1–12***

<sup>1</sup> Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

<sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

<sup>5</sup> So they said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;  
For out of you shall come a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel.’ ”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.”

<sup>9</sup> When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. <sup>11</sup> And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

<sup>12</sup> Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

This Word of the Lord is spoken for your spiritual welfare today.

We pray, O Lord, teach us to see Christ Jesus in this word, to know him as our Lord and Savior, and to rejoice with the Magi at this epiphany.

I'd like you to behold something – my Bible. Behold, it. Look at it. Consider it. It is a Bible. It is a book. It is a little worn around the edges, a few maps falling out of the back pages. What do you see?

Epiphany Sunday teaches us to behold. To grab our attention and put something into our hands and mind that otherwise would not be there. An epiphany is a revelation, a discovery, a seeing something that if it weren't for God, we would have missed.

When Matthew twice in our text writes the word: "Behold" he is telling us to pay attention. To behold something, is to pay attention to it, to look at it, to consider it; in a way, it is to hold it in your hands, or even more so, to hold it in your mind.

"Behold, Magi from the East." Matthew is welling us to stop what we are doing and consider something rather peculiar or important: Magi have come to Jerusalem. As we learn to behold the Magi, to hold them in our mind, we learn to behold what they behold: a star and a word which leads them to the joy of finding the king.

But in order to behold what the Magi behold, we should note the contrast. Because, there is a stark contrast in the text. Herod is right there, seeming to look upon the same thing, the same events, yet in his eyes, he beholds something completely different. Where the Magi are led to rejoice and worship, he is led to worry and evil plotting. Today we will look at this contrast between Herod and the Magi. We will see the contrast in how they treated the star. And in how they treated the word. By beholding the Magi, we behold what God would have us behold. That is to say, God would have us see that what I hold here is more than just a worn out book with pages falling out. Behold!

They show up seemingly out of no where and they are looking for the one who is "born king of the Jews." Herod is right there with us beholding what God is doing, yet he sees something different. They have seen his star in the east, a wondrous revelation, but Herod sees something different. He is looking at this turn of events, considering it, but rather than wondering at what God is doing, he sees something different. He sees a threat. Behold, this is disturbing news.

Magi have come from a distant land to honor the king, but the gifts they bring are not for him. This disturbs him, and all of Jerusalem. Because they come for the one

“born king of the Jews.” They look for the one who by birth is given rights to the throne. And the Magi know Herod is not this King. Herod knows it too, and all Jerusalem know it; Herod is not the natural born king.

This is Herod the Great was born in 73 B.C. to a family from Idumea, a land to the south of Judea – so he was not a native born Jew or a native born king. The way he became king of Judea was that in 40 B.C. he was named king by the Roman Senate. He found his way to this position, by his wealth, privilege, and cunning. He was a very successful politician whose accomplishments are marked on the pages of history books. But he was also known for his paranoia. He was ruthless in his quest to retain power. He taxed the people heavily. And as he grew older he became more and more jealous of those around him leading him to kill even his own wife and son in order to secure his throne.

So when beholds this news of a star, for him, it is disturbing. Which means it is disturbing for all Jerusalem. He is a false king, and knows it, and will do whatever he can to hang onto what he has worked for; to keep things under his control. He considers this power and privilege something that is his. So when he learns of this, his anxiety stirs; we learn later in chapter 2 that his real purpose in finding the true king is not to worship him, but to kill him.

And what do we behold? As we look for signs from God in our lives, a star of our own, something to lead us to a great destiny, what do we behold? So often unexpected news disturbs us, it throws a wrench into our nicely oiled machine. Are we really sure we want that star? What if it that news means we are going to be dethroned, lose our privileges, lose our health, lose a job, lose a loved one? What if this star means we will lose control of our kingdom?

You see there is a false king inside of each of us. One who would make us think we are in charge of our destiny. One who looks at money and image as something that defines us and determines our future. Who sets goals for ourselves and our families that have nothing to do with God. He imagines that our positive thinking, our toughness, our wit will determine our fate. And so many preachers in Christianity are quick to play on this weakness. They preach a gospel which is all about your dreams and what you can become and how your choices and will power can make you into something great. They behold this star not as something that will

This is not a power we are not so quick to give up; when these Magi come along and speak of another king, another one who was born with rights over our money, our goals, our future. One who takes away our control over our lives. In fact, it is when we

begin to lose control of our money or our future or our image that we become just like Herod: depressed, disturbed, jealous, angry. But behold now, O Herod, Magi from the East have come!

But they have a different perspective on this. They have received a star unexpectedly and they know it. They are off wandering about, lost, undefined, in another land, when God comes to them with an epiphany. Such an unlikely event.

Behold, Magi from the east. But this not necessarily what you might have in mind. Contrary to popular thinking, these are not what we might imagine them to be. These are not wise men. They are not kings. And there are not necessarily three of them.

These are not wise men. In fact they are quite the opposite. In Daniel chapter 2 we read of the same sort of men who are brought before the king, and who are unable to interpret his dream. They are listed among the sorcerers and astrologers of the kings advisors. That is why I call them "Magi" which is the Greek word in the text. From that word we get our English word: "magician." These are not wise men; they are Gentile astrologers who practice superstitious star gazing and other witchcraft. They are also not kings. Rather they are servants of kings. They do not have power or privilege beyond what the king allows. They are servants. We also have no indication there were just three of them. Paintings assume this because there were three gifts, but there is nothing in the text to suggest this. There was likely a whole caravan of travelers along, and may have been several magi. The point is, they are an unlikely sort to show up in Matthew chapter 2. Shepherds, yes. Angels, we get it. But Magi? And there they are, Behold the Magi.

But of course, this is exactly what we need to behold. Because it shows us what it means to behold our king. What it means is to be totally reliant on God's grace and God's purpose. It means losing control of your privilege. Of your power. Of your righteousness. It means learning that finding Christ here and in your life, will be totally a matter of God's grace. It will be by God's doing, not yours. Which also means, that we should see ourselves are undeserving, unlikely, and unprivileged before God's will and power. That star is not something for us to manipulate for our purpose, just as our future is not something for us to control or determine, just as our sins are not something for us to make up for or excuse away. Rather we behold the truth of Christ by finding total reliance on God to bring this to us, to make it appear, to open the pages of this ragged looking book and behold the wonder and grace of what God is doing for us. Then we behold him. Then we see God's plan. Then we see the star reappear right

above where Jesus is. And it leads us to joy. It leads us away from depression, anxiety, jealousy, and anger, to joy and worship.

It leads way us to such joy that Matthew must pile three words on top of each other to express it. "When they saw the star," they didn't just rejoice. They didn't just rejoice a lot. But they rejoiced, with joy, and a joy that cannot be measured. Matthew ties these three words together to show us what an unsurprisingly great joy there is in all of a sudden seeing God doing the miraculous, revealing the true king, in the lowly town of Bethlehem, in the city of David the king, there is the one born to save us, born to bring faith to us in God.

Together with the Magi, this leads us to joy. When we behold God doing what God does: choosing the unlikely, the unexpected, the undeserving; choosing us, in our sins, from our wandering and lost ways, in our unprivileged lives, and revealing the way to Christ, to salvation, to everlasting life. Behold the Magi, and behold your king.

But the star is not enough. The Magi needed more than the star to bring them to Jesus. The star got them to Jerusalem, but they needed the word to get to Bethlehem. Signs and wonders and miracles are not enough if they are not confirmed by God's Word. However, unlike the Magi, Herod would try to use that Word for his own purposes. He beholds the word as something he can manipulate to change God's plans.

He calls in the experts. The scribes are his religious consultants, so he calls them in to find out more about this king. He knows of the Christ and the promise, as we see when he asks them where "the Christ" was to be born. But the Scriptures are not something he seeks to understand or to use to discover God's purpose. Rather the word is something he thinks are to be used for his own purposes.

The scribes quote Micah chapter 5. And Herod rips the passage out of its context, and pastes it where he wants it. He has no interest in what words surround this passage, or what wondrous truth God is indicating. He has no interest in being drawn to Bethlehem to worship. Rather, as we know from later verses, Herod's plans are to have the baby Jesus assassinated. He is violating God's copyrights, robbing Micah of his meaning, and using it only to further his own agenda and benefit his own plans.

So what do you see here? Behold, its my Bible. What do you see? Do you see only individual writings of individual men? Do you see only a series of doctrines like a dogmatics textbook? Do you see only a series of proof passages? Or rules? Or is it

some meaningless writing for you to make what you want of it? Do you see only a worn out book with pages falling out?

It is tempting to just rip pages out and use them for our own purpose. For instance, we like the warm feeling of the Christmas story, shepherds, angels, these three wisemen who come to Bethlehem and offer their gifts to the cute baby. But we'd rather stay away from the rest of the Christmas story. We'd rather stay away from Matthew chapter 2 where we find Jesus and his family forced to flee Herod and make the traitorous journey to Egypt. It is not so warm and fuzzy to read how Herod orders the massacre of all babies, two years and younger; and how God allows this and so many other troubling events to go on in the world and in Scripture. We are tempted to rip out the part we like and discard those parts we don't like.

You see these men really aren't wisemen and neither are we. They are from a foreign religion, lost and wandering. They superstitiously worship the stars and practice witchcraft. They have a little sense of the promise or where to find Jesus. And they are left at the mercy of God's word. But rather than use the passage from their own purpose, they receive it as a gift of God's purpose. They listen to Micah's prophecy, and become totally dependent on God to reveal where they are supposed to go next. And so are we.

So Micah has a bigger context. He has a bigger vision. He has a bigger story. As does this whole book. These pages fit together for a reason. And that reason can only be known when we join the magi in beholding the king.

So Micah speaks these verses in the midst of a larger story. A prophecy of how God's will be plundered by the Babylonians, they will be led into a plan that they never would have chosen. They will be robbed of all their rights and priviledges. And will be left with only this defense, only this strong hold, from Micah chapter 5.

*'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;  
For out of you shall come a Ruler  
Who will shepherd My people Israel.'*

And here the Holy Spirit helps us understand the bigger story. We hear it being sung: "O Little Town of Bethlehem" – From this little town of Bethlehem, though Micah writes that it is the littlest, Matthew here records the opposite. You are by no means the least. Though my people may be plundered, scattered, suffering, a Ruler will come to

save them. He will come, not as a tyrant, but as a shepherd. And he will feed you, and he will guide you. And the bigger story begins to come into focus.

The truth cannot be found among the scribes, but in the word itself. As we see it through the Magi, and as we see it lead to Christ. It does not take a scribe to understand these words. But it takes only the Spirit. As we approach this holy word not to make it what we would have it be, but to let it speak. And when it speaks, it leads us to where we are supposed to be: at the feet of Jesus, on our face, laying down flat on the floor, worshipping him for all the wonder of what God has done in allowing us to see it. This child has come for us. To save us. To rescue us from our plundered lives, bondage, suffering, sins.

We are so filled with freedom, wonder, and joy, that there is nothing that we withhold from him. He is our king. The one we owe all allegiance. The one who deserves our finest treasures. The best we can offer. And it does not need to be much. For God is more pleased, with what is in your heart, than what is in your hands. And they presented to him, gifts, offerings, gold, the finest medical incense, the the gum of the myrrha bush which was used for embalming.

And so we behold them and see ourselves. The treasures of our innermost heart, belong to him, the work we do, the money we earn, the savings we invest, the efforts and plans we make – they are his. But he does not wish to have them for his own. They are given to this family. A family which must soon make the traitorous journey through the desert to Egypt. And this will be their means. God provides. And so in our families, in our lives and congregation, God provides for the unexpected events. Because like the Magi, we are totally dependent on Him and his grace to reveal, to guide, to protect. And he does protect. Telling the magi to return home another way and not return to Herod. All because they behold the word as it should be seen, a holy book that leads us to Jesus.

So its more than a worn out book you see. And at home on your shelf is the same thing. When you read your Bible, do just this: look, consider, see the word unfold; see yourself through the characters in Scripture, through events, be there, and always behold where the Scriptures are leading: they are always leading, like the star, to the Christ, the King, Your Savior. Behold, Magi from the east, behold, your King! Amen.