



Matthew 2:1-12

The Gifts of the Magi.

Certainly, the Christmas season is a time for celebration. Virtually the entire world-wide culture system is impacted by Christmas, and probably joins together in sharing this celebration more than any other annual event. Nations that know little or nothing of the significance or even the occurrence of the birth of the Christ Child still celebrate Christmas in various ways, including the sharing of gifts, decorating, and gathering together to share meals. Of the many billions of people who celebrate Christmas in some way, very few actually understand and appreciate its true meaning. Some of these who openly reject the gospel of Jesus Christ work actively to squelch its true message as they also work to persecute the open expression of Christian faith. A tiny part of this vast population, however, does understand and respond to the true message of Christmas that God, the creator of this universe, came down to Earth through the life of the Christ Child, born to clearly communicate His message of grace and to provide the one path of forgiveness to all who would place their faith and trust in Him.

Some think that the Christmas story starts with a jolly elf in a red suit who drops down a chimney to bring gifts on Christmas morning, an image that was well-defined and established by a single poem written by Clement C. Moore, a poem that has led us away from the true identity of St. Nicholas.¹ Some may know of the ancient Turkish monk by the name of Aghios Nikolaos,² Bishop of Myra who was canonized for his unique act of generosity, a circumstance that speaks to the brutality of the culture in which he lived, both within and without the organized church. The myths surrounding his acts of generosity form the basis for the Santa Claus³ traditions.

The Christmas story really begins with the creation of mankind when God revealed Himself and His purpose to those in whom He breathed His life. We often encounter Him through history as He reveals His presence, such as in the fire that illuminated a bush on a hillside in order to demonstrate His presence to Moses.⁴ We saw the same fire in the Shekinah Glory, the Pillar of Fire that led the nation of Israel from Egypt and stood over the tabernacle and Temple for many centuries.⁵ We know of how that fire descended into the holy place and consumed the sacrifice each year on the day of atonement,⁶ just as the fire consumed the

¹ Moore, Clement C. *A Visit by Saint Nicholas*, better known as “’Twas The Night Before Christmas.” 1822.

² 270-343 A.D.

³ Few may realize that “Santa Clause” is simply the redacted Spanish rendering of “Saint Nickolaos”

⁴ Exodus, Chapter 3.

⁵ Exodus 13:17 – 14 :29.

⁶ Leviticus 9:24.

prophet Elijah's sacrifice when he confronted the prophets of Baal and Asherah, and did so until the inhabitants of Jerusalem were taken into Babylonian captivity.⁷

Having seen the fire of God's presence for almost twelve centuries, imagine the shock and confusion that inhabited the hearts of the few remaining faithful when they returned from Babylonian exile to find that the Pillar of Fire, the Shekinah Glory of God, was gone. No longer did God's holy fire consume the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. No longer was God's presence seen as well as felt in the rebuilt city of Jerusalem. There followed a four-hundred-year period of spiritual darkness when there was no word from the LORD. God raised no prophets to bring His word to the people. There were no godly judges or kings to lead the nations of Israel. The Hebrews wandered further and further from faith, replacing it with a religion of traditions and rules that barely involved any true worship of the LORD at all. The future of faith was at its bleakest point since before the call of Abraham. However, the period of darkness ended when, in the fullness of time,⁸ God's glory returned ...

Luke 2:8-9. *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

When we look at Luke's version of the birth of Christ, we find the announcement of that birth made to shepherds by an angel of the LORD. Traditionally, we have assigned that task to the archangel, Gabriel, who also traditionally announced God's plan to Zechariah⁹ and Joseph.¹⁰ We may sometimes give more attention to the presence of the angel than we do to the presence of the "Glory of the LORD," that shown around them. It is little wonder that the shepherds responded with great fear. As Jews, they would have been familiar with the history of Israel and the presence of the Pillar of Fire for so many years. If these were temple shepherds who kept lambs and sheep for sacrifices, they would have been even more familiar with the prophecies, and may have recognized that they were witnessing the return of God's Shekinah Glory, a fire that lit the hillside, a fire that represented the very presence of God in their midst.

Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus is presented from Joseph's perspective. Mary, a young teenage virgin, was espoused to Joseph when she conceived, and Joseph had no reason to believe any other source of this conception than adultery. Espousal was as binding as marriage, so Joseph considered divorcing her quietly because he loved her, rather than allowing her to be publicly disgraced. When an angel of the Lord revealed the truth to Joseph, he quickly married her, though he did not become intimate with her until after Jesus' birth.

Matthew continues with the narrative, possibly as much as two years later, when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus are still living in Bethlehem. In this narrative we find again the return of the Shekinah Glory.

7 1 Kings 18:19 ff.

8 Galatians 4:4.

9 Luke 1:11.

10 Luke 1:26.

Matthew 2:1-2. *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.*

The Christmas story has been so steeped in popular tradition that we may have been misled by both tradition and religious dogma, so it is reasonable to spend a few moments and look at the biblical and historical context of the event. Matthew introduces us to King Herod and the wise men, the latter often referred to as the Magi or erroneously referred to as “three kings.” King Herod, also known as Herod the Great, died in 4 BC, placing Jesus’ birth as much as two years before that, around 6 BC. Furthermore, since the description of the birth describes shepherds in the fields watching over their flocks, the date could have been in the Spring or Summer, possibly not Winter as early Catholic tradition held. The first-century church celebrated the anniversary of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, not Christmas, as there is no record of the date of Jesus’ birth. The Orthodox churches of Asia Minor began celebrating Christmas, choosing January 6th as the day to do so. The Roman Catholic church used this celebration of Christmas to replace the pagan celebration of Saturnalia that was celebrated on December 25th. Eastern Orthodox churches still celebrate Christmas on the 6th of January. Consequently, the date of Jesus’ birth is not well-established. Its placement on the calendar is better established following the period surrounding the historical record of the Roman census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

King Herod ruled over Israel for over thirty years. He was appointed to the position by the Roman government, succeeding a series of kings from the Hasmonean dynasty by marrying his cousin, Miriamne, of the Hasmonean family. As a “half-Jew,” he was hated by most of the Jews for his Roman allegiance and hated by the Hasmoneans for taking the throne. However, he and his descendants were influential among a small sect of Jews, referred to as Herodians, who held that their dynasty was the fulfilment of the prophecies concerning the coming Messiah.¹² “As Rome’s puppet king and client of the emperor Augustus, Herod’s task was to foster loyalty to Roman power. He presided over a system that benefited a small elite while depriving many of their daily bread.”¹³ His reign was marked with brutal violence that was motivated by his insecurity, dealing with any threat to his reign with utter ruthlessness. During his reign he killed his wife and two sons, and even at his death he ordered the killing of another son who he had previously planned to succeed him to the throne. He was succeeded by his son, Aurelius who reigned during Jesus’ early childhood. His grandson, Agrippa I is mentioned in Acts 12, and his great-grandson, Agrippa II, is mentioned in Acts 26. King Herod’s ruthlessness comes into play in the following verses.

Finally, the Magi from the East are introduced. “The most surprising fact about the Magi is how little we actually know about them. Unlike “We Three Kings,” the writers of the Bible

11 Greek *magos*, a term referring to seers who obtain “knowledge” from study of the stars. They were known to be found in the region of Babylon (Chaldeans), a possible eastern location of their origin. BI Staff, QuickBites: The Wise Men. *Biblical Illustrator*. 46(2), Winter 2019-20. p 58

12 Agourides, Savvas. “The Birth of Jesus and the Herodian Dynasty: An Understanding of Matthew, Chapter 2.” *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 37 no 1-4 S-W 1992, p 138.

13 Carter, Warren. “Between text and sermon: Matthew 2:1-12.” *Interpretation*, 67 no 1 Jan 2013, p 64-65.

never mentioned their number or lineage. Readers of the Bible are kept in the dark about the racial characteristics, their nationality, and their names.”¹⁴

“The time was 6 or 7 B.C. The birth of Christ was near. Wise men far to the east of Bethlehem studied the stars and were astounded by a phenomenon in the heavens that they regarded as a sign from God. So convinced were they that they traveled from Mesopotamia to Judea.”¹⁵ Most likely, these were Persian followers or priests of the Zoroastrian sect that sought guidance from the stars, since the Hebrew that is rendered from the Greek as “wise men” is of such Persian origin and use. It was common for kings to keep these astrologers close by so that they could receive their counsel in times of distress.¹⁶ Much of our perception of the visit of the wise men comes from the Christmas carol, “We Three Kings,” the first lines of which bear little resemblance to the literal biblical narratives.

We have no idea of how many visitors there were. The assumption that there were three is based upon the three gifts that were given. The traditional assignment of the names, Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar is pure fantasy, derived from medieval art.

The Greek word rendered “wise men” is used only two other places in the New Testament, in Acts 8:9 to describe the magician who Peter confronted, and in Acts 13:5 to describe the magician who Paul confronted. In both of these other uses, as with the modern interpretation of the word, *magician*, derived from the same Greek word that *Magi* is derived, there is an anti-Christian, anti-faith, connotation to it. Following the reign of Cyrus, King of Persia, who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple under Nehemiah, the relationship between the Jews and Persians was peaceful, so the Magi from Persia would be treated with significant respect by the Jewish community. Because of the advent and advances in modern science, the Christian community no longer lends any authority to astrologers, but any disrespect that we may afford to astrology today is unwarranted when applied to the culture of the ancient middle east where such beliefs permeated the Roman empire, having their origin in ancient Babylon.¹⁷

God had revealed to the Magi that the King of the Jews was born, and they had come to Jerusalem to find Him so that they could worship Him. Unfamiliar with Hebrew scripture, and unable to find answers among the people of Jerusalem,¹⁸ they went to the Half-Jewish King Herod to ascertain where the child was born, assuming that the King would certainly know of the event and of the location of this new, beloved, “prince.”

Another important component of this event that we may consider has to do with the “Star in the East.” Even as a child I found a paradox in this statement. If the Magi came from the East, and the star was in the East, they would have traveled East towards the Orient rather than West to Jerusalem. Consequently, there must be something interesting taking place in the biblical text. The language that is translated “Star in the East” can also be very accurately

¹⁴ Pouncey, Gregory T., Who Were the Magi?. *Biblical Illustrator*. 27(2), Winter 2000-01. p 43.

¹⁵ Moorehead, Cleatus, Mystery of the Magi, The. *Biblical Illustrator*. 02(1), Fall 1975. p 71.

¹⁶ Isaiah 47:13; Daniel 2:2, e.g.

¹⁷ Box, Bobby D., Astrology in the First Century. *Biblical Illustrator*. 06(1), Fall 1979. p 71.

¹⁸ Nolland, John. “The Sources for Matthew 2:1-12.” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 60 no 2 Apr 1998, p 292

rendered, “Star when it rose,”¹⁹ a common Aramaic idiom; and since the sun, moon, and stars always rise in the East, rendering it as East is quite reasonable. However, if the star that led the shepherds and the star that led the Magi did indeed lead them just as the Pillar of Fire led the Israelites during the wandering in the wilderness, it could simply have been the manifestation of the Shekinah Glory of God, and as such, could certainly have led them to the Christ Child. It is my opinion that the Star of Bethlehem was simply the Shekinah Glory of God, the Pillar of Fire, that came back after a four-hundred-year absence from the temple in Jerusalem and was seen by the Shepherds at the Annunciation. It would be appropriate that the Pillar of Fire that stood over the tabernacle and demonstrated God’s presence would stand over Jesus, who is fully the tabernacle of God, Jehovah, YAHWEH who came to tabernacle with us.²⁰ This idea is not supported by the “scholars” who assign a literal application of the term star, Greek *aester*, to be a literal star, comet, nova, or planetary alignment.²¹ The problem with following these celestial objects, none of these would settle over the place where the Christ Child would be found.²² A celestial object would lead them to continue traveling, since a star cannot be reached through travel.

Matthew 2:3. *When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*

Why would King Herod be disturbed by this news? Recall that he would perceive the coming of any king as a significant threat to his dynasty. In the past he dealt with all threats by killing those who would challenge his authority, and this event would be no exception. He saw the birth of any declared king as a clear and present danger to his throne and that of his descendants.²³

Why would Jerusalem be disturbed? There could be two reasons. First, any time this King was disturbed, there could be violent consequences, and any such worries would be well-warranted, as we shall see later in this chapter. Also, the Israelites had been waiting for the coming Messiah, expecting a powerful political leader who would free them from foreign oppression. The birth of such a King would be understood as the beginning of their freedom from Rome. The Jews would see the reign of a godless, traitorous, half-Jewish King Herod as one of the first to be destroyed by the new King. There was a lot of reason for grave concern.

Matthew 2:4-6. *And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. ⁵And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, ⁶And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.*

¹⁹ Craig L. Blomberg. “Matthew.” *The New American Commentary*. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press. 1992. p 62.

²⁰ John 1:1-6, 14.

²¹ Lanier, David E., Following a Star. *Biblical Illustrator*. 32(2), Winter 2005-06. p 44.

²² Matthew 2:9.

²³ Bertram, Robert W. “An Epiphany crossing: programming Matthew 2:1-12 for readers today.” *Currents in Theology and Mission*, 7 no 6 Dec 1980, p 329.

It is obvious that King Herod approached this subject with great gravity, importance, and no little treachery. He called together all the chief priests and teachers of the law. What was the purpose of this gathering? Apparently, Herod's half-Jewish background left him lacking in the teaching of the prophecies. He was a Jew only by hypocrisy, led by his insecurities to dress like a Jew and act like a Jew so that he would be more accepted by the people. It is quite obvious that he was not raised in a faithful Jewish home.

The location of the birth of the Messiah was prophesied by Micah²⁴ to be in Bethlehem. This is no surprise since Bethlehem was the city of David, the city where King David, to whom the promise of an eternal kingdom was given, was born.

Matthew 2:7-8. *Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, inquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.*

Herod's blatant hypocrisy is again revealed by his actions. Why did Herod call the Magi secretly? He did not want the Jews to know that he was looking for the Christ Child. The result of such public knowledge could be disastrous. Certainly, this open threat to the seemingly defenseless prophesied Messiah would incite a revolt, as the Jews would know that Herod's purpose would be to destroy this threat to his throne. Such a revolt would be far more dangerous to Herod's throne and position than any individual would cause since Rome placed him in Jerusalem solely to keep the peace, maintain allegiance, and assure the collection of taxes. His inability to maintain peace would result in his immediate replacement, and he would pay violently for the ruthlessness of his reign if it were ended. Obviously, Herod had no intention on worshipping the Christ Child, and sought a way to locate this threat without invoking any public knowledge of his act of "reconnaissance."

Matthew 2:9-10. *When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.*

After leaving the King, the "star" appeared a second time to the Magi. They were overjoyed at its appearance. Certainly, as the star "went before them," this was the first star of its kind they had ever experienced, and it was leading them personally to this child King that they were even now learning more about. The trip from King Herod's Palace in Jerusalem to Bethlehem was about five miles, so it was probably a little longer than an hour's journey. The star led them directly to the house where Jesus was and then remained over it. The nature of this leading again supports the opinion that the star was the return of the Shekinah Glory of the LORD, leading the Magi in the identical manner that the Pillar of Fire, the Shekinah Glory of the LORD led the Israelites as they maintained the Tabernacle beneath it.²⁵ God's

²⁴ Micah 5:2.

²⁵ Astronomers, on the other hand, who may have limited appreciation of historical-critical methodology and do not usually know Greek, are keen to identify a real celestial phenomenon to match the elusive "star" described in Matthew 2 they are hard-pressed to find one, for they generally prove unable to agree upon a stellar event spectacular enough in scope or close enough in chronology to match a

Glory had indeed returned, and it came to rest over the new tabernacle, the Child who is Jesus, the Messiah, Savior, and LORD, the very presence of Jehovah, YAHWEH.

The Magi celebrated when they saw this star, this unusual manifestation that was clearly leading them. Their astrology was the accepted “science” of their day, and as students of this science they would be overjoyed to be a witness to this unique historic event. It is apparent that they had very limited knowledge of the Jewish prophecies, and this star would provide them with the opportunity to witness the culmination of those prophecies in this little town of Bethlehem.

Matthew 2:11a. *And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him:*

Note that Jesus was in a house, not in a stable. Also, Herod’s action that would take place later in this chapter suggests that Jesus could be as much as two years old. They are coming to meet a young child, not a baby. What is important here is the response of the Magi when they recognized the Christ Child: they worshiped him. What does it mean to worship? We might perceive worship as giving ultimate honor and praise to one to whom you are profoundly humbled. The humility of the Magi is shown by the state of reverence that they felt for the Christ Child. This is an appropriate motivation for worship.

As a minister of music, I have had the opportunity to lead several and various congregations in worship services with congregations numbering from a handful to thousands. My greatest frustration was that I rarely saw any true worship going on in the hearts of the congregants. Many people were attending the services led by motivations other than those demonstrated by the Magi. What are some of the reasons people come to church worship services other than in profound, humble, reverence?

(1) **Obligation.** Some people believe that they must attend church services through a sense of obligation. They would be somewhere else if that obligation did not draw them. It is these who are waiting for the services to end so they can return to their preferred routine.

(2) **Recompense.** Some people hope to get something out of church services. They might want to

- (a) be entertained by the music and preaching,
- (b) find friends or business contacts,
- (c) find a platform from which to exercise their needs of recognition and/or power,
- (d) want to be part of a Christian social club.

There are many reasons people come to church worship services, and when they come for the wrong motivation, they bring with them the sinful baggage of their lives, and that baggage prevents them from experiencing true worship, and their influence can stifle the worship experience of others. Instead of focusing on the One who loves them, and worshipping Him

messianic birth between circa 7 BCE and 4 BCE - the usual dates assigned to the nativity of Jesus. Kotansky, Roy. “The star of the magi: lore and science in ancient Zoroastrianism, the Greek magical papyri, and St. Matthew’s Gospel.” *Annali di storia dell’esegesi*, 24 no 2 Jul - Dec 2007, p 379.

without reservation, we often prefer to focus on ourselves or each other and are prohibited by our own pride to really submit ourselves to Him. We build and maintain barriers between ourselves and the Holy One who deserves our sincere and unfettered worship. The result of such self-centered church attendance is that we demand worship to take place on our own terms rather than those set forward by the LORD.

It is rare to see true freedom of worship in our congregational meetings. When we withhold worship, we are giving honor to satan by allowing him to close our lips, hold down our hands, and fill us with a pride that keeps us from the humility needed for true worship. The worship of the LORD that is demonstrated by the Magi can be a reminder to us that these men, highly respected by their peers to the point that they had an unencumbered and private audience with the King of Israel, surrendered all of their dignity, fell down on the ground, prostrate before the Christ Child.

What do we need to do to “fall down and worship Him?” The Magi knew very little of Jesus. Not only do we know so much more, but Christians also who truly worship Him are fully aware of what Jesus has done for us. We have far more reason to worship Him in “Spirit and in truth”²⁶ than the Magi, and we are far more socially common, yet we often refuse to truly humble ourselves before the LORD in corporate, or in private worship.

Consequently, our worship services usually do not resemble worship as illustrated by the Magi. Our gatherings are often closer to Christian club meetings or Christian music concerts, containing much of the appearance of worship but little of its power. We may have some work to do here.

Matthew 2:11b. *and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.*

Some commentators argue that there is little or no significance to the three gifts other than their great value, and valuable they were. However, we might gain some inference to the true and amazing wisdom of the “wise” men if we look at the application of these gifts in real life.

Gold was the most precious of metals, and was useful, as it is today, for all manners of commerce. Herod’s brutal attempt to kill the Christ Child would cause Joseph to flee with Jesus and Mary to Egypt until after the King’s death. Certainly, the gift of gold from the Magi would be useful to sustain them during this period.

Frankincense and myrrh are similar in form, scraped from the dried sap of a tree and pounded into a powder in its rawest form. However, the application of these two pungent powders was varied and significant to ancient near-eastern culture.

Frankincense is a valuable and rare incense, derived from the sap of Boswellia and Commiphora trees, that is burned to create a perfumed smoke that was given as an offering to God, both in Israel and in pagan religious worship. The burning of incense is still integral to the worship practice of most world religions, including some of the more formal Christian

²⁶ John 4:23-24.

faith denominations. Incense was often burned in the Tabernacle as an act of worship.²⁷ The burning of incense in an ancient Jewish home was an act of worship, demonstrating humility, as they perceived the aroma of its smoke to be received as a pleasant sacrifice by YAHWEH.

The third gift, myrrh, is a most unusual gift for a newborn child. Myrrh is more refined than frankincense, taking the form of a highly valuable liquid perfume, or ointment, that is used to embalm the dead. Ounce-for-ounce, it was more valuable than gold, and was commonly used to store one's financial savings in a small space. The Magi literally brought embalming fluid as a gift for a child.

Note the strategic prophecies that were addressed by the wise men through their gifts:

- **Gold is a gift for a man, or for a King of men.**
- **Frankincense is a gift to God,**
- **and myrrh is a gift for one who is about to die.**

Through these three gifts we see the three primary depictions of who the Christ was to be: a depiction of the Messiah that is true to prophecy, and contrary to the then popular belief that the Messiah would free Israel from Roman oppression. The gifts describe a man-King, as the people were expecting. However, they also describe a God, referring to Jesus' deity as illustrated by his immaculate conception and later by His united relationship with God the Father, and again proved by His resurrection and ascension. The Apostles understood that Jesus was fully YAHWEH come to earth.²⁸ The Jews were familiar with the prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah, of his death on a cross²⁹ as an atonement for the sins of all mankind,³⁰ making a way for all people to be saved. The wisdom of these three strangers to Judaism seems to be far greater than all in Israel who missed the meaning of the prophecies that they still taught in the synagogues.

The three gifts were both valuable and appropriate. These gifts were also brought by men who were unfamiliar with Jewish Holy Scripture, and were not aware of the dynamic Christian history that would unfold over the next hundred years. We are aware of all these things, and yet when we worship God, what kind of gifts do we bring? For many Christians, the motivation for giving gifts to the LORD is the same as that of worship itself. Through obligation, or fear of embarrassment, some might put a dollar or two in the collection plate when it passes, contributing the leftovers from their self-supporting budget. I have seen some people make change: reducing the amount of their initial offering, when the plate is passed. Churches that struggle with issues of finance are invariably characterized by this self-centered form of worship, and their members fail to give to God what He truly deserves from us. This becomes a great sin when their pastors and staff are insufficiently supported.³¹

²⁷ There are over one hundred Old Testament recorded incidences of the use of incense for worship. C.f. Exodus 25:6, 30:1-8.

²⁸ John 1:1-14.

²⁹ Psalm 22.

³⁰ Isaiah 53:5/

³¹ 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10; 1 Corinthians 9:9-14; Luke 10:7; Philippians 4:16-19; Acts 6:2, et. Al.

The Magi were not in any way obligated to give these gifts to the Christ Child. Had they come without gifts, they would still have been remembered for their act of worship. Their gifts came out of a simple desire to give, and ours should be likewise. When we joyfully give to the work of the Christian church, we are both worshipping God and providing resources that enable the work of the church to continue. Giving of ourselves and our resources to God out of love for him is an important, if not the *most* important, act of worship. If we give for any other reason, we are failing to realize the true joy that comes from this act of humility and obedience, an act that allows us to be a part of what God is doing around us.

Matthew 2:12. *And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.*

The wise men did not return to Herod as he had asked them to do. They probably had already discerned the king's hypocrisy since their true wisdom is evident in their actions. However, they were obligated to return to the king because of the authority that Herod had to demand their return. The question of their return to Herod would have arisen among them after they had left the Christ Child, if not even before they arrived in Bethlehem. Meeting them at their point of need, God warned them in a vision not to return to Herod, so they returned to their homeland without going back to Jerusalem. It may be interesting that these strangers to Judaism recognized the voice of YAHWEH when so many Jews could not. The idea that these men were acting purely out of their knowledge of astrology is clearly proven false by this communication from the LORD. Though they were known for their astrology, they were also open to hearing the voice of the LORD and it is this voice that led them through this entire experience. The wise men traveled back to the east at their own peril, knowing that if Herod knew about their flight, he would certainly hunt them down and treat them brutally.

In the verses that would follow, Matthew records Herod's actions following the flight of the wise men. The angel came to Joseph in a dream and told him to leave immediately for Egypt to avoid Herod's coming persecution. Herod, upon learning that he had been out-witted by the wise men, ordered the immediate killing of all male Hebrew children within the region of Bethlehem who were less than three years old.³² His orders were carried out, fulfilling the grievous and dooming prophecy of Jeremiah 31:15. Joseph would return after the death of Herod, but not to the still dangerous area of Bethlehem and Jerusalem,³³ but to the safer rural area of Nazareth, the community of his own raising; a community that was derided by the Israelites, and would not be a likely destination for any of the "elite" of Jerusalem.³⁴ This fulfilled yet another prophetic paradox, prophecies that described the Messiah coming from three different places: Bethlehem, Egypt, and Nazareth.

The narration of the Magi is full of history and significance. We saw men of respect who came to worship the Christ Child and did so in true humility and truth of heart. We can learn from them to do the same. We know that Jesus came to save us from the penalty of our sin, and as our LORD and King, he is worthy of all our worship and praise. We can put away our pride

³² The lack of an historical record of this event is attributed to the simple fact that there would not have been a large number of appropriate-aged children in the small village of Bethlehem to warrant regional attention.

³³ Herod's son Archelaus was now in power.

³⁴ John 1:46.

and the worldly baggage that we carry into God's presence and worship him in sincerity, and in selfless humility. We also see an example of giving that is also humble, sincere and selfless. We can give to God what He truly deserves: our heart and life. All of what we have is His already.³⁵

Let us not forget that the Shekinah Glory of God came to rest over the house where the child was. When Jesus preached His message of grace to the people, He announced that He was the light of the world.³⁶ As the light of the world, Jesus was, and is, the tabernacle of God, the Shekinah Glory. However, Jesus also made a statement to the church concerning their identification after His ascension when He said, "You are the light of the world."³⁷ God, through the power of the Holy Spirit resides in the heart of every person who has placed their faith and trust in Him. We may sing, "the light of the world is Jesus," but let us not forget that the light of the world that identifies the presence of God to this world is in those who love Him.

The setting of the first Christmas is a reminder that our modern Christmas season provides us with an opportunity to focus on its true meaning. It also gives us opportunity to share that meaning with others as people of faith are called to be the salt and light of the gospel. Let us not pass up those opportunities.

³⁵ Malachi 3:8.

³⁶ John 8:12, 9:15.

³⁷ Matthew 5:14.