

Let's start off with some Bible trivia. Please name the four gospels in the New Testament that tell us about the life of Jesus? That's right; they are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. How many of the gospels have a narrative about the birth of Jesus? That's right; two of them. Finally, which two share a narrative about the birth of Jesus? That's right; Matthew and Luke.

Today, in the second chapter of Matthew we hear the story of the Wise Men that visit Jesus after his birth. Chapter one in Matthew starts off with a genealogy that connects Jesus back to King David who lived a thousand years earlier. In addition, it connects Jesus back to Abraham, the Father of Faith in Judaism, who lived about two thousand years before Jesus. Matthew is pointing out that Jesus is part of a larger vision that God has for humanity. In the latter part of chapter 1 we hear that Joseph stands by Mary who is with a child that is “conceived ... from the Holy Spirit.” We hear a child is born and he is named Jesus. That is all in Matthew's narrative shares about the birth of Jesus.

Mary going to visit her relative Elizabeth, who is pregnant with the child who will grow to be John the Baptist, is not mentioned. The journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem is not mentioned. The birth in a manger is not mentioned. The shepherds visit to stable is not mentioned. The dedication of the baby Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem with Simeon and Anna present is not mentioned. Those details are in the gospel of Luke but not in Matthew.

Yet, as we turn to chapter 2 we finally have some indication regarding the time and place of Jesus' birth in the gospel of Matthew. Matthew 2:1 reads, “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.” Here is another Bible quiz. How many wise men visit Jesus according to Matthew? The common answer is three but the biblical text does not tell us. Since the wise men give Jesus three gifts it was assumed that they were three in number. Now we are told they were from the East but where, in particular, is not shared. Most scholars believe they were from Persia and/or Babylon which are the locations of modern day Iran and Iraq.

They come to the capital city of Israel, Jerusalem, asking “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.” It seems as if the Wise Men assume that people would know about this child who was born as king of Jews. But nobody knows. This is the second clue that we receive from Matthew that Jesus is going to be king in a new and unique way. The first clue was his conception. The second clue is the obscurity of his birth. Usually, everyone knows about the birth of a future king. Although we live the United States we all know of Prince Charles, Prince William and most recently the birth of Prince George, each in line to be King of England. But in our gospel lesson no one knows of the “child who was born as king of the Jews” in Jerusalem. This child is going to be king but in a new and different manner.

The current king, Herod, hears about the Wise Men and their questions. Before Herod calls the Wise Men he calls together “all the chief priests and scribes” to provide him with some information about “this child who was born as king to the Jews.” We see a little foreshadowing by the gospel writer here. The chief priests are the priestly ruling class associated with the Temple. Scribes are a professional class of experts in the religious and civil law of the Bible and Jewish tradition. The chief priests are associated with the Sadducee party. Many scribes belonged to the Pharisees. From our vantage point we know that Herod, the Sadducees, and the Pharisees will never recognize Jesus as king. Yet, the chief priests and the scribes respond to Herod's inquiry with a passage from the prophet Micah, 5:2 that reads “And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no mean least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler...” How convenient? Bethlehem is just ten miles south of Jerusalem. The Wise Men were indeed close. Their journey to find and then pay homage this child is coming to a conclusion.

Herod calls for the Wise Men and tells them what he had found the answer to their question, Bethlehem is the birth place. Herod asks the Wise Men to let him know the exact location of this special child so he can visit and pay his respects as well. In fact, verses 13 and following tell us that Herod is lying about his motive to know the exact location of the child. Herod wants to know so he can kill the child. He does not want any rivals to his throne.

The irony of it all is that Jesus never would have challenged Herod for his governmental throne. Yet, Jesus would have challenged him and does challenge each of us with the question of who sits on the throne of our hearts. When Christ sits on the throne of our heart then God's ways come first and God's ways will impact whatever job or role we have in life. Herod would not have liked that because personal power sat at the throne of his heart. Jesus continues to ask us, "Who sits on the throne of our hearts?"

The Wise Men leave Herod and are guided by the star as they approach Bethlehem. I like the phrase we read in verse 10, "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy."

-Think of the last time you were overwhelmed with joy. I was overwhelmed with joy in November when the Finance Committee sent in our final monthly payment of \$3,402 to the Great Plains Conference for our Mission Shares. We finished our payments, a little over \$40,000 for the mission work of the larger church, before Thanksgiving and I knew that I would not be stressed out in December asking and pleading members to give so we could make that final payment as has been true in many years of my ministry. I was filled with joy because of the faithful giving of this congregation throughout the year that made that possible.

-Think of the last time you were overwhelmed with joy. One of our UMW Circles asks me to find a family they can adopt each year for Christmas. Two days before Christmas I was overwhelmed with joy as I delivered their packages to the parents of that family with four children. There were so many packages and they were beautifully wrapped. The mother just had tears in her eyes. Then I gave them a full Christmas dinner that another family in our church donated. They were overwhelmed by the generosity and I was overwhelmed with joy.

-Think of the last time you were overwhelmed with joy. The week before last I received a short e-mail from someone I hold in high regard and it was filled with words of affirmation for me. That really touched my heart and filled me with joy.

"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Then we move onto verse 11. Please tell me which word in this verse seems out of place. It reads, "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother..." Which word seems out of place? That right, as we think of the gospel of Luke with the manger and stable the word "house" seems out of place. Most Biblical scholars think the Wise Men show up a few weeks or months after the birth of Jesus. Maybe Mary, Joseph and the baby have moved from the stable to a house.

No matter the location, the Wise Men's overwhelming joy moves into a display of adoration and worship as they kneel down before Jesus. We are told that they offer him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew does not explain why the Wise Men share these particular gifts. We all know what gold is but the other two gifts are less familiar to our 21st century ears. Frankincense and myrrh are sweet smelling gum resins. As time passed and Christians saw the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus the understanding of these gifts developed. The gold is presented to Jesus because he becomes "King of Kings." The Wise Men share the frankincense, which is used in worship services, to acknowledge Jesus as Son of God. Finally, the myrrh anticipates the sacrificial death of Jesus as myrrh is used in the embalming process. The gifts of the Wise Men foreshadow the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Finally, those of you who know your church calendars (which makes you rare indeed) know that this gospel lesson is coming three days early. It is the gospel lesson for the Day of Epiphany which comes just after the twelve days of Christmas which is January 6th. As Chuck told us, in our Chuck Knows Church video, Epiphany is celebration of the manifestation of divine nature of Jesus to the Gentiles as represented by the Wise Men. We celebrate it on Sunday morning because it is hard to get folk out for worship on the true Epiphany Day that falls

on a Wednesday this year. Let's close with one more trivia question. How does the Epiphany story about the Wise Men, which is at the beginning of the gospel tie in with the Great Commission which at the end of the gospel of Matthew? They each declare that Jesus came for all humanity which includes you and me. Matthew 28:19 reads, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Jesus is for you, me, the Wise Men and people of every nation. Amen.