

Whom do they seek? The Wise Men seek the King of the Jews. These mysterious figures from the east captivate the imagination and curiosity. They are generally thought to be from modern day Iraq or Iran, perhaps Saudi Arabia. Their profession is equally interesting. The term "Wise Men" described those who occupied a wide range of professions. They could be simple sorcerers, those who dabbled in the occult. The other common name for these men, "magi," is the source of our word "magic" and "magician." But the title was also used for scholarly astronomers, the scientists of the ancient world, who in some civilizations were at the top of society as advisors to kings.

In any case the Wise Men are Gentiles. But they see a sign in the heavens, giving some credence to the idea they are students of the stars, and they go to Jerusalem seeking "**he who has been born king of the Jews.**" From their studies and knowledge they at least know that a great one has been born. They seek the kingly ruler of the tribe of Judah, as was promised by the patriarch Jacob before his death in Egypt (Gen 49:8-12). They seek the star who would come from Jacob, the scepter of Israel, the one who would come and defeat all of the enemies of God's people once and for all, as prophesied by Balaam in the book of Numbers, who, like the Wise Men, came from the east and is shrouded in mystery and intrigue (Num 24:15-19).

Whom do they seek? The King of the Jews. So they go to Jerusalem. It makes sense. Jerusalem is the city of the Kings of Judah, has been ever since the days of David. And who do they meet? Herod, the king. Notice, never once is Herod called "the King of the Jews" in the Bible. That's certainly the title he claimed for himself. But he is an imposter. He's an Edomite, a descendant not of Jacob, but of Jacob's twin brother Esau. Though they made peace with one another in this life, Jacob and Esau's descendants engaged in constant strife with one another. Herod's also a Roman citizen. Despite his supposed conversion to the religion of Israel, building a magnificent temple that was perhaps the jewel of all ancient buildings, he also had no qualms about building a temple dedicated to the worship of his close friend, Caesar Augustus, Emperor of Rome.

In addition to his political and architectural genius, Herod was a ruthless tyrant. His obsession with power went hand in hand with paranoia that led him to kill his favorite wife and at least two of his own sons. He so desired a fortress to protect himself that when neither of two mountains was tall enough to serve as the base of his fortress, he had workers cart the rock and dirt from the top of the one to place on top of the other. Herod seeks no king. The things of this world, power, pleasure, comfort, and security are far too precious to him. And any news of a King of the Jews understandably brought trouble. Herod seeks no king. He desires no Messiah, no Anointed One of God, for Herod is his own god. Sadly, Jerusalem does not seek this King either. Did you hear it in the Gospel? It's not only Herod who is troubled, it is also "**all Jerusalem with him.**" The city of prophets and kings hears that wise men from the east have come seeking the birth of their king, and they are troubled. It's the same word used to describe the disciples when they see Jesus walking on the water during a storm and they think He's a ghost (Matt 14:26).

They seek no King. Rather news of His arrival brings terror, high anxiety, discomfort. They want no Messiah. Even if the news from the shepherds of Bethlehem that went out had not gotten to them, if the astounding events which surrounded Mary's ritual purification, the words of Simeon concerning the Child, had managed to go unnoticed in the temple by the chief priests and scribes, Herod knows that this king is the Christ. And the priests are ready with Micah's prophecy. They hear what the Wise Men seek, and they know right where to look. The King is in Bethlehem, that is where the ruler who will shepherd the people of Israel is. The tragedy of this day is that the priests and scribes who knew all this do not head off to Bethlehem themselves. They do not seek their King.

The wonder of this day is that though Micah speaks only of the ruler of Judah, and the shepherd, the ruler of Israel, these Gentiles go. By all rights these foreign professors of the stars have no place, no right to go. But where nature pointed to some magnificent event, where creation testifies to the Creator, God reveals Himself in His Word. The Wise Men were directed to the Scriptures. There it is laid out pure and simple, no need for speculation or guessing. No need to ask "Where is He?" The Scriptures tell the Wise Men and they tell us, not only of the promise of the eternal, heavenly King, but also where to find Him. And if Micah does not make it clear that He has come for all, Isaiah does: "**nations shall come to your light...they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from afar...**"

The Wise Men set off in faith, not for the one whose destiny is controlled by the stars, but the one who Himself created and governs the heavens, for if the sky itself must announce His birth, His coming has to be for all. They seek and they find the one whom they adore and worship. It is Mary's Son, the child with human flesh before whom they fall on their faces and worship as God. Here we see the true sense in which they are wise. They adore Him with faith, the true and highest worship, the living trust of the heart that lays hold of Him, that receives Him as not just the King of the Jews but the Savior and God of the world. So also we. We know where to find Him. No longer in Mary's lap, but where He has promised to be. Faith seeks the Christ here, in His Word and Sacrament. We receive Him as King and God, come for us. If Christmas is the day on which we praise God for fulfilling His promises to Israel of old, Epiphany is when we praise Him for revealing His Son to all the world, showing forth the Seed of Abraham in whom all the nations of the earth are blessed (Gen 12:3).

From the Wise Men's faith comes confession of who He is, and gifts, the very best they have to offer, bestowed in love for Him. The gold confesses Him as King. Frankincense, the base ingredient of what Jews could only burn in temple of the God of Israel declares that this Child on Mary's lap is God. And myrrh, that bitter resin, proclaims even then how it is that He is the Savior of the world: through His bitter Passion. So we too confess what we believe, not just in word but in deed and in offering gifts. You confess the Creed here as your public confession of faith, and you confess that same faith in public, to your friends and family, who like the Wise Men, may seek what they do not fully understand, who are lost in the guesses of man's limited knowledge or who are caught up in superstition if not outright idolatry. You share God's Word with them, which points them to the One who promises to call all to Himself.

And like the Wise Men, from your faith proceeds gifts of thanks and praise to Him. What God has given you, who He has made you, are real treasures. And you offer them in faith and love to Him. Such offerings of all that we are and what we have does cost us something, even as it cost the Wise Men something, the gifts they gave were their treasures, the most prized things they had. And yet this gives clearest witness and praise to the One in whom we believe.

The title King of the Jews comes up again. It is the title by which the Roman soldiers mock Him in His suffering. It is the charge by which He is identified on His cross. It is there the King reigns. It is there you behold your King. Not in the splendor of jewel-encrusted gold, but in torn flesh and flowing blood. It is there, in His agony and death that He is offered myrrh once again, mixed with wine to numb His pain, and yet He refuses it. For as the ransom for many, not just His people Israel, but the Gentiles, you and I, He endures the suffering of all of God's wrath for sin without relief (Mk 15:23). And having done so perfectly, it is 75 pounds of myrrh and aloe that are wrapped in the linen about His body in death (Jn 19:39). Here again we see the beauty of the offering of love to the Savior even in death. It is on the basis of His suffering and death that our prayers are brought before the Father in heaven by our Great High Priest, who offered Himself as the burnt sacrifice for our sin, and in whom you are far more pleasing to the Father than the sweetest incense.

Whom do you seek? The One who has come for you, who has come even for those who are ignorant of Him, who do not want Him and reject Him, and He still comes to call them. You seek a Lord who has already come to you, in flesh and blood like yours, to redeem yours, and who comes even now, not in terrific glory, but to rule in grace and to shepherd you with His Word, who receives in joy the fruits of your faith, and who opens your mouth to speak of Him to others.