

Theme: In a surprising twist, the news about Jesus unmasked three responses still common today: Herod's hostile fear, the religious leader's complacent indifference, and the Magi's joyful worship.

I. Intro - The Steward of Gondor

- A. A key scene in The Lord of the Rings - background
- B. Gandalf comes to the steward of Gondor for aid
- C. He was only a steward, but now the king has come
- D. The steward refuses to help since that ends his reign
- E. Others seem indifferent to what is happening
- F. We see something similar in today's text - and in my life!

II. Surprising New Scene and Characters

- A. A surprising shift of scenes in the narrative

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem...⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. Matthew 2:1, 7

 - 1. The scene shifts to Bethlehem and Jerusalem
 - a. We had not been told where the events happened
 - b. We now come to Bethlehem and Jerusalem
 - c. Both of the cities are important, as we shall see
 - 2. The scene shifts forward in time
 - a. Matthew just says it is 'after' Jesus' birth
 - b. Most scholars think it is up to 2 years later
 - c. Herod finds out when the star appeared
 - d. This determines his orders in v16 - 2 years old

B. Surprising new characters

1. The Magi (mainly next week)

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

- a. We have often thought of the Magi as 'kings.'
- b. The Greek word μάγος (Magi) means wise men, who were priests and astronomers/astrologers
- c. We will discuss them more next week - for now, it is important to see that their studies of writings and the skies have led them to come to Jerusalem

2. King Herod

"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."³ When **King Herod** heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. Matthew 2:2-3

- a. The wise men are looking for a new king of the Jews who has been born
- b. King Herod hears of this and is disturbed
- c. This is Herod the Great, who lived from 72-4 BC
 - 1. Jesus was NOT born in 0 AD but probably in 6-8 BC
 - 2. A monk who calculated the dates many centuries later miscalculated the calendar
- d. Herod ruled under the Romans but was given a lot of latitude in Israel
- e. He is the one who built the Temple in Jerusalem that we read of in the New Testament
- f. Herod was a powerful but paranoid ruler who constantly feared anyone who might usurp him.

- g. This became even worse later in his life!
- h. He suspected and murdered his favorite wife, her mother, two of her sons, and his own eldest son!
- i. Emperor Augustus said it was safer to be Herod's pig (ὑῆς - hys) than his son (υἱός hyios)!
- j. No wonder all Jerusalem was 'disturbed' - anything could set Herod off, and others would pay!
- k. As we will see, he will live down to his reputation!

3. The priests and teachers of the law

When he had called together all the people's **chief priests and teachers of the law**, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. Matthew 2:4

- a. These were the religious leaders of Israel
- b. The priests worked in the Temple, and the teachers of the law devoted their lives to studying God's Word
- c. This is why Herod brings them - he wants to know where the Messiah was to be born.
- d. They tell him the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem

"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 be the shepherd of my people Israel." Matthew 2:5-6

 - 1. They quote Micah 5:2 to show it is Bethlehem
 - 2. Bethlehem is a very small but important town - it is where Rachel was buried, where Ruth met Boaz, and where King David was born!
 - 3. God has spoken that this is where the Messiah, the True Shepherd, would be born.

C. The plot thickens

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 make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." Matthew 2:7-8

- 1. Herod tells them to find the child and then come back to him so that he too may worship the Child.
- 2. But there are ominous notes here!
 - a. Anyone who knows Herod would be skeptical!
 - b. Herod wants to know when the star appeared - so he has an idea of the age of the Child!
- 3. What will happen?

III. Surprise Reactions

A. The Magi respond with joyful worship

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were **overjoyed**. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and **they bowed down and worshiped** him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. Matthew 2:9-11

- 1. When the Magi see the star again, they are filled with joy!
- 2. They are seeking to see Jesus!
- 3. When they see Him, they bow and worship!

4. Though He is just a toddler born to poor parents, they see Who He is - the King!

5. The right reaction from the least likely people!

B. Herod responds with hostile fear!

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. Matthew 2:16

1. Herod is fearful of any who would usurp his reign!
2. Herod knew he was not the legitimate King of Israel: he was not Jewish, much less from David's line!
3. This leads him to a murderous rage, ordering all boys two years and under to be killed.
4. This was probably 20 or 30 young boys who were wickedly slaughtered because of Herod's paranoia and rage.
5. This is a terrible incident, but it is included in the Christmas story because it is real history and because it is indicative of how humans have responded from Cain, to Herod, to today.
6. Herod, the supposed king of the Jews, is acting like Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus - but this time Joseph has to take Mary and Jesus down to Egypt to protect them from Herod! (More in After Hours).

C. The religious leaders respond with complacent indifference!

1. These men had devoted their lives to supposedly studying the Word of God and leading the people to worship God.

2. They knew exactly where to expect the Messiah to be born - a mere 6 miles away!

3. They heard the words of the Wise Men along with the rest of Jerusalem - yet they did not even bother to go see if there was anything to the report!

4. Herod was afraid that Jesus would usurp his crown, and later the religious leaders would show the same fearful hostility to Jesus, but here they simply yawn and go back to their religious activity!

5. While the Magi will travel hundreds of miles across difficult terrain laden with costly gifts, these religious leaders will not even spend an afternoon to take a short journey to Bethlehem to see if the Messiah has actually come!

6. Herod responds with fearful hostility and rage, but these men are simply too preoccupied with their own agendas to even investigate Who Jesus is!

IV. Applying the Word

A. How do I react and respond to Jesus?

1. Herod, the religious leaders, and the Magi were real people who actually had these reactions
2. But they are also a pattern for how people today react and respond to Jesus!
3. Do I respond to King Jesus with fear?
 - a. We should not be naive - there are those who hate Jesus and the ways of God's Kingdom!
 - b. They may well respond to Christians with rage as well.
 - c. But there may also be some of Herod in my heart!

- d. I may fear what following Jesus will cost!
 - e. We don't want to give up our little kingdom!
 - f. I may not order the slaughter of dozens of babies, but I will go to great lengths to keep a hold of the rule of my own life!
 - g. There is no question - Jesus and I can't both be ruler of my life!
 - h. There is also no question that the attempt to keep control of my own life leads to endless pain for me and others around me!
 - i. Bowing before Jesus the King will undoubtedly require me to submit to things I may find hard - but refusing it will lead to unforgiveness, broken relationships, and increasingly destructive behavior!
 - j. Is my heart displaying signs of being like Herod?
4. Do I respond like the religious leaders with complacent indifference?
- a. Some simply ignore Jesus!
 - b. There is no overt fear or hostility, just quiet complacency, viewing Jesus as irrelevant.
 - c. Such people think there are more important things in life - they will fit Jesus in when they can!
 - d. But this is utterly irrational! Jesus is not merely some little child - He is the King of the Universe Who deserves and demands our ultimate loyalty and worship.
 - e. Furthermore, the heart can not stay in this place with regard to Jesus - as He presses upon us, such people will turn to fear and hostility - just like happened with the religious leaders!
 - f. Is my heart displaying signs of being like the religious leaders?

5. Do I respond like the Magi with joyful worship?
- a. This is the only proper and rational response!
 - b. Notice both of the words in this response!
 - c. They responded with acts of worship!
 - 1. Worship is seen in outward response to Jesus!
 - 2. They gave themselves and their gifts to Him.
 - d. They responded with joy!
 - 1. Joy shows that my heart is properly oriented
 - 2. If I do not sense joy at the thought of Jesus, this is an early warning sign or potential danger!
 - 3. As we behold Him each day and gather with His people for worship each week, it will cause joy to arise in our hearts - which will fuel worship!

B. The Table of Joy

- 1. This Table allows us to repent of fear and complacency
- 2. This Table reminds us of the reason for joy!
- 3. This Table fuels our joy and worship!

Surprise Reactions

Matthew 2:1-18

December 14, 2025

Communion

Romans 15:13

Teaching keywords: Advent and Christmas; biblical characters; sin; exile and return; joy; prophecy (Old Testament)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east 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 Christ 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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

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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.” Matthew 2:1-18