

Epiphany C
Matthew 2:1-12

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Dear wise men and women, powerful people,

What do you think about the answer “I don’t know”? When my kids give it to me when I’ve asked them why they did something, I’m not too fond of it. But when you truly don’t know an answer – I would so much prefer you telling me that than trying to make something up and see if I buy it. No matter how you feel about “I don’t know”s, you’re going to have some when you look at the Gospel lesson before us.

For instance, do you know how many magi there were? I don’t know. A lot of people talk about three, but that might just be because there were three types of gifts. Do you know the names of any of these magi? I don’t know. A priest in Egypt called them Gaspar, Melchior and Balthasar 500 years after they showed up, but I don’t know if that’s right. Do you know where they were from? Some say Arabia or Babylon or Persia. Truth is, all it says is “the East” – the area where the sun rises from from the perspective of the Jews. What did Joseph’s house look like? What time of year was it? What really was that star? People talk about all these things, but the truth is, the real answer to all those questions is the same. Say it with me: “I don’t know.”

But I just called you wise men and women, so that answer doesn’t seem to fit. You must know something. What do we *know* about this story? Well, the Holy Spirit through John’s pen reminds us why every story is here: (John 20) **“These words are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”**

So ultimately, the question we have to ask of this story is – what does it tell us about our relationship with God? What does it tell us about faith?

The answer? The thing this story causes you to know: **The Mighty Bow**, the powerful ones, the wise ones bow. We see that through this whole thing. Reading Matthew 2, it has to strike you that there are some pretty powerful people in this story – King Herod the Great, who built whole cities for his recreation, an amphitheater that could hold mock naval battles that still stands, and the highlight of it all – that glorious temple in Jerusalem. And Herod ruled with an iron fist. When he spoke – people trembled – that much our text tells us.

Then there are those chief priests and teachers of the law. They could influence that Jewish mob pretty effectively and get just about anything they wanted done. Remember Good Friday?

And of course, the ones this story is named after – the magi. Like we said, we don’t know much about them. They only appear here in Scripture. But they had wealth – just looking at what they brought. They had education that certainly would have set them apart from the commoners – studying even the Jewish Torah quite a ways outside of Israel. They had titles that would have put them at least in the court of whatever empire of which they were a part. They would have been the trusted advisors, the inner circle for the king.

Lots of powerful people here – but all acting very differently. So, it begs the question – who’s right? Who has the power of the truth, the might of right? You’ve got Herod plotting for a way to protect his own power, wanting to cut off any threat to his rule, like he had when he killed his wife, or three of his sons, or as we’ll see later, all the innocent babies in Bethlehem. You’ve got the chief priests using their power to fulfill their duties of advising the king and then going back to get busy following their laws and procedures and ceremonies that kept the mobs obedient to them because they had “the look”.

And then there are the magi – who give up their spot at their king’s right hand, their positions of power, and they go on a journey. They put aside all the busyness of their day to day life of achieving status – and followed a star, really, followed a promise.

Literally, they said, “Where is the king of the Jews who has been born? We saw his star in its rising and have come to bow down to him.” They were holding on to a promise 1400 years old –

recorded by Moses, but spoken by Balaam, the prophet who was hired to curse Israel. God had turned his words into this blessing, this promise for Israel of a King descended through them who would crush the head of their enemies. Let me read those words of that promise for you: **Numbers 24:17 "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."** Whether these magi learned of God's promises in their magi training that had been influenced by a former "chief of the magi" named Daniel, or whether they had come into contact with them in another way – they trusted. They were looking for that star to rise out of Jacob. They were watching and waiting for God to fulfill his promise, and when he did, they couldn't help but bow down. The mighty bowed. They laid down all their importance, all their tasks, all their responsibilities and income and even their comfort and convenience, and they made that brutal trek – just to bow down, to worship the one who came to fill the promise. How could they not? They knew what it meant.

OK, so three different pictures of power. Which one is real power? Let me explain it this way: When I was a kid, my cousin and I would play the "uncle" game. Now, understand, he was older, bigger, and stronger than I am, but I was determined. Do you know that game? You lock hands and try to inflict enough pain on the other by squeezing and twisting and pressing and pushing to get them to give up, to say "uncle". I don't remember beating him all that often, but I do remember some of those battles going on a long time. I could take a lot of pain just so I didn't have to give in. But then, when my cousin was gone and I wanted to play the game with my younger, smaller, *weaker* brother, it seemed he would scream "uncle" before our hands even touched. At the time, I thought in both of those matches, I was showing power, I was strong, I was right. Looking back, I think my little brother was the wise one, the one with the power of wisdom.

So, where is your power? Are you a Herod, or a chief priest, or one of the magi? There are times when you are Herod, aren't there? ...pretty proud of your accomplishments, satisfied with your status – but ambitious – willing to do "what it takes" to keep your power, your pride. And sometimes that means you treat others as less important than you. Sometimes that means you say things that benefit no one but your own frustration. Sometimes that means you lash out at someone else because YOU are stressed. That's how Herod treated power – and it didn't go too well for him. Always seeking his worth in his power – he killed everyone close to him so they weren't a threat, and to solidify his memory, he arrested prominent citizens and commanded that they be executed when he died so that there would be great mourning at his passing. Selfish power ends up revealing how little power we really have – especially when looking at the grave.

Or are there days when you are the chief priests? ... looking for your power, your acceptance, your worth in how you accomplish whatever the tasks are you've told yourself need to be done. Do you miss what is truly important for the sake of ritual, or schedule, or busyness? Look at how that worked for them. They were face to face with the opportunity to see the fulfillment of all the promises their religion (which was their life) had been looking for. And they sent those wise men off to follow the star because they were looking for something else.

Yes, there are days, moments, stages, when you and I both act like those power-seekers in our text. But praise God, he has shown us real power, power that doesn't have its source in us – but which is so valuable and powerful we leave all our power behind and seek it – like the magi. This morning, you've left behind your overtime and your work, you've left behind your "family fun time" or your alone time, you've left behind your titles and importance and status, and have come here – to an Elementary School cafeteria, here, to a meeting of a non-profit organization, here, to a bunch of people that are quite a bit different than you – you have come here, because you know that here, you have the opportunity to see the promise fulfilled, to hear the promise fulfilled, to taste and to sing the promise fulfilled. The thing you've been waiting for – real power – power over sin and death and everything that fights against us – power over guilt and fear and hate – the thing you need more than

any other – is here – in a form so unassuming, so simple – in His Word. Your sins are forgiven. Your Savior came.

The real power in this text is not in any of those men, not Herod, not the chief priests, not even in the magi. Although they looked like something, they couldn't help but bow down – just like the mighty Queen of Sheba with all her caravan and wealth in our Old Testament Lesson could only bow in awe of God's blessings on his people, and the great apostle Paul had to admit he was worthless for the job, and all kings in the Psalm must bow – so wise men bow. Our text says: **“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.”**

They humbled themselves because He humbled himself for us. God, the One who fills heaven and earth and holds the stars in his hands was held, covered, protected by that girl named Mary. God kept his promise of humbling himself to step into our race to save us. That infant came to take our place, to suffer the pain we deserve for refusing to say uncle, to take the punishment our pride deserves and the sacrifice our selfishness earned. That infant was and is our Savior. God bowed to us to save us from ourselves.

And when we realize that, we too will be bringing our best gifts. All that mattered to us before is nothing – no reason to hold on to it for ourselves. We can't help but bow and set it all at his feet. That's what this text teaches us. Wise men bow. It is God who is our strength.

In Christ,

Amen.