

Making Room

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Matthew 2

Prepared by Rev. Curtis A. Bronzan, ThM
curtis@gspc.org | 562/493.2553 x115

I. Introduction to this Study

This week we continue our advent series, Making Room, recalling the third line from the wonderful Christmas hymn, *Joy to the World*:

Joy to the World, the Lord is come,
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing...

We have thought together about Jesus' family lineage, through which God made room for the birth of His Son, and about devout believers within Jesus' religious tradition who made room to welcome Him as the promised Messiah.

This week I'd like to invite us to think about room that was made for those *outside* of the first-century Jewish religious tradition, and further, how we can make room for friends, family, and co-workers who are not followers of Jesus.

II. Connecting with One Another

When have you felt excluded or ostracized from a group or community? What did that feel like? How did you respond?

III. Study the Text

- a. If you have time before meeting with your small group, reflect upon Matthew 2.1-12.

What do you notice in these verses that you haven't noticed before? What questions do you have in reading this passage? What do you find here that's interesting or thought provoking?

- b. Read Matthew 2.1-2, noting that the same title is used for both Herod and Jesus. Notice also that the Magi intentionally journey to Jerusalem, the capital city. As members of a different culture, they assume that a new king would be born within the capital city, as royalty! What do you think Matthew is trying to communicate here in describing both Herod *and* Jesus as "king"? Is there a tension, even in verse 2!?

N.T. Wright asserts, "What [Matthew] tells us is political dynamite. Jesus, Matthew is saying, is the true king of the Jews, and old Herod is the false one, a usurper, an impostor... The house of Herod did not take kindly to the idea of anyone else claiming to be 'king of the Jews.'

Do you agree? Why or why not?

- c. Scripture and God-fearing Jews held in contempt those who practiced astrology (see Isaiah 47.13-15, Jeremiah 10.1-2, Daniel 2.10, 4.7). Why, then, do you think Matthew tells this story!?

- d. Ancient cultures believed that the world was interconnected, and as such, a major event on earth would be reflected in the heavens, and vice versa. Have you ever experienced something on earth that you believe communicated a heavenly truth?
- e. We now know that Haley's Comet appeared in 12-11 BC, though that is far too early to have gotten the Magi's attention. A more likely astrological phenomenon is the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, who crossed paths in 7 BC. Wright notes, "Since Jupiter was the 'royal' or kingly planet, and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was obvious: a new king of the Jews was about to be born." Another possibility is the appearance of the star Sirius, which rose at sunrise in the month of *Mesori* (on the Coptic calendar), between 5-2 BC. Especially since *Mesori* means "the birth of a prince," ancient astrologers may have indeed concluded there had been a birth of a great king.

Does hearing about such astrological events strengthen your faith in the account of Jesus' birth? Why or why not?

- f. Read Matthew 2.3-4. Herod was the descendant of an Idumean Jew, but was *not* the rightful heir to the throne of David. As such, he may have known about messianic prophecies in general, but without specifics (like the location of the coming Messiah's birth).

We can see, then, why Herod was disturbed at the arrival of the Magi. But why would "all Jerusalem" be concerned as well? Is this hyperbolic - or is Matthew seeking to communicate something about the citizen's willingness to "make room"?

- g. Bruce Barton questions, "How did these wise men know that the star represented the Messiah, the one who was *born King of the Jews*?" He then offers three possibilities:
 1. They could have been Jews who remained in Babylon after the Exile and knew the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah's coming.
 2. They may have been eastern astrologers who studied ancient manuscripts from around the world.
 3. They may have had a special message from God directing them to the Messiah.

Which seems the most probable to you? Why?

- h. Reread Matthew 2.3-4, and continue on through verse 8. William Barclay writes, "When Christ came the world was in an eagerness of expectation. Men were waiting for God and the desire for God was in their hearts. They had discovered that they could not build the golden age without God. It was to a waiting world that Jesus came; and, when he came, the ends of the earth were gathered at his cradle."

Do you see this desire for God in these verses? At the end of verse 8, who does it seem desires God?

- i. Read Matthew 2.9-12. It's common to hear that the Magi brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to symbolize the three offices of prophet, priest and king. While it makes for a nice sermon illustration, it's not quite true! On the contrary, N.T. Wright notes, these gifts "were the sort of things that people in the ancient world would think of as appropriate present to bring to kings, or even gods." What sorts of gifts do we bring those we value? What is the best gift you could bring to Jesus this Christmas?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. In the first century, Herod appointed himself King. Who does this in twenty first century culture today? How do we bow down to them?
- b. For the first readers of Matthew's gospel, it was shocking for Magi to worship at the feet of Jesus. What "outsider" group doing the same would shock us today?
- c. Bruce Barton writes, "Matthew made a significant point in highlighting the worship of these wise men (who were pagan astrologers, wise in the ways of science, diviners, and magicians) in contrast to the Jewish religious leaders who knew the Holy Scriptures and did not need to travel far to find their Messiah." What do you make of this quote? Are there ways that we, too, neglect worship of our Messiah during this season?
- d. There are three reactions to Jesus in this passage: Herod (whose pride and abuse of power prompts his hatred and hostility), the Chief Priests and Scribes (religious insiders who exhibit complete indifference), and the Magi (religious outsiders who offer adoring worship). Who are you most similar to this Christmas season?
- e. Who are you in relationship with this Christmas season that is not a Christian? How could you reflect the light of that star above Bethlehem to them?

V. Pray

- a. Thank God for the powerful testimony of the Magi, who traveled hundreds of miles through treacherous terrain at their own expense, to bow down at the feet of Jesus,
- b. Ask God to reveal to you the ways in which you could reveal the light of His love this Christmas,
- c. Pray for the mission of Good Shepherd, that we would continue to be and become disciples of Jesus Christ, who connect with God, grow in faith, and serve in love.