

SCRIPTURE READING FOR JANUARY 8, 2023 @ CAPC OAKLAND

LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

Matthew is one of the four gospels written to tell the life-story and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. It was most likely composed between AD 80 and 90 with the help of the gospel of Mark (they often tell stories with verbatim word-choices). Matthew wishes to emphasize that the Jewish tradition should not be lost in a church that was increasingly becoming gentile. He was probably a male Jew, standing on the margin between traditional and non-traditional Jewish values, and familiar with technical legal aspects of scripture being debated in his time. The author seeks to bridge between Jewish and Gentile culture and understandings of Jesus and his teaching. Only Matthew and Luke tell the birth story of Jesus. And Matthew alone tells this story of the Magi and their gifts.

magi from the east:: Magi weren't kings or wise men but known originally as members of the Persian priestly class who served political rulers. (*We see and hear this from writers of the ancient world such as Herodotus, Pliny, Seneca and Tacitus.*) Magi served kings with astrological insight with which they claimed supernatural knowledge, wisdom of signs, and even magic. They could both advise and confirm the plans and desires of a king, and also, challenge and upset them. They appear elsewhere in the Bible too, as astrologers and interpreters of dreams with King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 2:2-10. The EAST was not considered a good place by the Israelites, but rather a space of the gentiles, low-born, heathen, not associated with the knowledge of Yahweh. Curiously, it's the Magi who observe what anyone could observe according to the story, but they alone see and act upon what they observe.

time of King Herod:: The Herods were a political dynasty that ruled during the life of Jesus. This story is referring to Herod the Great who ruled from 37BC-4 BC. He was known as a strict Roman loyalist and one who mounted large-scale building projects to signal to his Roman superiors the importance of his Jewish kingdom. In terms of personality, he was known as a moody, cruel, and sometimes violent ruler, one who often imprisoned or executed even members of his own family.

we observed his star:: In most of the Hebrew Bible, it's repeated that God, and not the stars, is the one to be trusted (See Exodus 7-9 and Isaiah 47:12-15). In other epic stories of the ancient world (and Roman history) stars and comets are sources of revelation and guidance. In the *Aeneid*, which tells the story of the genesis of Rome, Aeneas is guided by a star to the site on which

Matthew 2:1-12 NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

¹ In the **time of King Herod**, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, *magi from the east* came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For *we observed his star in the east* and have come to **pay him homage**."

³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all JERUSALEM with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In BETHLEHEM of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah, for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and **pay him homage**."

⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and **paid him homage**. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of *gold, frankincense, and myrrh*. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, **THEY LEFT FOR THEIR OWN COUNTRY BY ANOTHER ROAD**

Mark 8:22-26
NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

²² They [the disciples and Jesus] came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to [Jesus] and begged him to touch him. ²³ He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village, and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?"

²⁴ And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees, walking."

²⁵ Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again, and he looked intently, and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. ²⁶ Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do NOT EVEN Go INTO THE VILLAGE."

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & EXAMEN:

- What engaged you, enraged you, or surprised you in these texts?
- What is the meaning of the story of the visit of the Magi? Why would only Matthew tell it? What is he saying in telling that story?
- What does it mean that the Magi are told to go home by a different road?
- The blind man had to be touched twice by Jesus to fully recover his sight. He's then told to go home but not through the village that has known him for his life and with his disability. What does that mean?
- What invitation do you hear the Spirit of God speaking to you – or to us, as a church – to act, speak, be or change through this word of scripture?

LANGUAGE NOTES & TEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

... Rome was to be built. And stars and heavenly phenomena were associated with the birth of significant figures: teachers and wonder-workers such as Apollonius of Tynan and emperors such as Augustus, Tiberius and Nero. Here God reveals something to the Magi through nature that the Jewish religious leaders know in scripture but cannot see.

JERUSALEM | BETHLEHEM:: Jerusalem was the capital city in terms of political power, religious institutions and social structure. Elsewhere Matthew calls it the "city of the great King" (5:35); "the holy city" (4:5 and 27:53). Bethlehem by contrast is presented as apparently insignificant in contrast to the capital and the ways of human civilization; yet of great importance in God's vision. The quote in verse 6 comes from Micah 5:2, situated in the larger context of Micah 4:1-5:15 in which the prophet anticipates that all peoples of the earth – Jews and Gentiles – will walk in God's way (4:1-4). Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures (in particular in Psalm 72, 2 Samuel 5:2, & Ezekiel 34) the shepherd is used as the symbol or metaphor for God's desired and good ruler of the people. Jesus even uses it in Matthew 18:12–14 and John 10:11-18 ["I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. ... I know my sheep and my sheep know me"]

gold, frankincense, and myrrh:: These gifts are mentioned in Isaiah 60 that talks of the coming of Gentiles as a signal of the restoration of God's wholeness manifested in justice, flocks, silver, gold and wealth. For long Christian reading of this text associates the gifts with the kingship of Jesus (*gold*); his divinity or spiritual authority (*frankincense* – a type of incense used in worship) and his redeeming crucifixion death (*myrrh* was an herb used in the embalming of the dead). The Magi give to Jesus what they have.

warned in a dream:: it's ironic that the Magi who were known for interpreting the dreams of others, hear are spoken to by God through their own dreams.

Mark is thought to be the first of the gospels written down and later used to help compose Matthew and Luke.

to touch him:: physical touch was a symbol of the extension of healing power in the Hebrew Scriptures and the ancient pagan world.

put saliva on his eyes:: This seems gross to us. Saliva in the ancient world was thought to be a container of a person's essence and strength, so it would be like a healing balm.

"Do NOT EVEN Go INTO THE VILLAGE." :: The man is healed, able to see again, and told to return to his home, but by a different way, not through the village that has long known him as blind and thus considered dependent or handicapped.