

GraceCity Advent Study

Home



Week #3

December 7-December 13, 2020

“Finding Home in the Journey” (Matthew 2:1-11)

As you likely recognized in the last study, our associations with home are far more tied to feelings than a physical place. Here are some common themes that may have been brought up in your discussions.

Security: Home is the abiding place of the affections. The Latin root word for home is the same word we use for human being, person, and people. At its very core, home is not just where your heart is, but the hearts of those you love and trust.

Belonging: Your spiritual home is the place where you feel that you belong, usually because your ideas or attitudes are the same of those of the people who live there.

Familiarity: A comfortable or usual setting, a congenial environment.

Harmony: A feeling of being relaxed and comfortable—at ease.

In the focus text for this week, Matthew 2:1-11, the Magi leave their home country on a journey to find Jesus. Contrast that with King Herod, who felt none of these feelings of home in his own kingdom.

Preparation:

Consider the journeys you have taken, whether they involved travel or not. What did you do? What did you feel? How did that journey impact how you lived from that point forward?

Read: Matthew 2:1-11

Notes/Definitions:

Herod the Great, as he is known, was the first king in a rather infamous dynasty. He came to power in 37 BC at a time when Rome was still sorting out political factions which had arisen following the assassination of Julius Caesar. Herod was a deeply insecure ruler—his title was “king of the Jews” but what dogged him his entire life was the fact that he was not an ethnic Jew. He had descended from the Edomites, a people with whom Israel had been enemies for centuries. The rebuilding of the temple was nothing but a political gesture to win favor with the Jews—in fact, Herod’s every act of generosity was a scheme to win political allies. He was proud and arrogant, and while the Jews may have grudgingly given him credit for the temple, they despised him and never accepted him as one of their own.

The Chief Priests and the Scribes were the guardians of religious life in Israel. The Jews had spent centuries under the rulership of various empires—Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and finally Rome. It was thought that the survival of the Jewish religion depended on their ability to keep Gentile influence out of their closed community. With that in mind the Pharisees, with their pious dedication to God’s Law, had started out well as shepherds of their flock. But as time went by, with the temptations of power being what they are—and human nature being what it is, they’d become more interested in their application and interpretation of the law than in caring for the people under their religious authority. By the time of Jesus, the Pharisees had become an apostate form of Judaism. The most scathing rebuke Jesus gives is in Matthew 23 when he accuses these very religious leaders of self-righteousness, false religion, legalism, injustice, and hypocrisy.

This study has been developed for personal reflection and group discussion. To participate in the conversation, join a GraceCity small group. For more information on times and locations, email smallgroups@gracecitybaltimore.org.

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The Magi were Middle Eastern astrologers, well versed in science, mathematics, and philosophy. No one knows for sure, but it's likely they were descendants of the wise men who served along with the prophet Daniel during the days of the Babylonian empire. The wise men in the book of Daniel would have had access to the Hebrew Scriptures which foretold of a coming king. One such passage was Numbers 24:17 which said in part that *a star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel*. This knowledge was passed down from generation to generation until that day when the Magi in Matthew 2 saw that unusually bright star in the sky. The Magi were steeped in superstition, but God used that star to draw them to the truth. These men, of whom there were probably a lot more than three, had the power to be kingmakers.

Jesus needs no introduction! His was a common name, *Yeshua* in the Hebrew—this is derived from the word meaning "to rescue or deliver."

All of this is essential to understanding what's going on in these first 3 verses. You have Herod, whom Mark Antony had named "king of the Jews"; he was an insecure, hotheaded king—and you have these Magi, kingmakers, from rival empires coming to Jerusalem asking where the real king of the Jews was. Herod could not and would not have this. In his own mind, at least, he was the monarch of all he surveyed and there was no room in his life for another king. In Jesus, this child born in Bethlehem, Herod saw a threat to his security. He had no interest whatsoever in the kind of security only Jesus could give him.

Questions:

1. Matthew 2:1 tells us Jesus was born *during the time of King Herod*. What do you know about this time in history, with respect to the nation of Israel? How long had it been since they had last heard a prophetic word from God?

The intertestamental period between the ministry of Malachi to the coming of John the Baptist was around 400 years.

2. See Matthew 2:2. What draws the wise men to take such a journey, far away from everything they knew?
3. Why did the wise men's question trouble Herod? We see that *he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him*. What does this indicate about Herod's power and influence? For those not from this country, has anyone ever lived under a despotic ruler?
4. Who did Herod consult, and how did these people know the answer?

See Micah 5:2-4. How might the people of Jesus's day have interpreted verse 4? Remember that home could be synonymous with "living securely."

5. How would you describe the attitude of the religious leaders? Where would you say they found their security, belonging, and familiarity? How did this prove to be a snare, and what lesson can we take from this?
6. Think back to before you came to faith. Was there a time when you had the right information about the person and work of Jesus but didn't respond to it? What kept you from doing so?

7. Read Matthew 19:29. The reality is that some people reject the gospel because doing so might require leaving behind all that's secure and familiar (home). What does Jesus promise here? What do you cling tightest to?

Matthew 19:29 (NIV) – "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."

This admonition comes right after Jesus' instruction to the rich young ruler to sell all of his possessions and give it to the poor in Matthew 19:21-22.

8. In Matthew 2:7, why did Herod summon the wise men in secret? Based on what we know, what words would summarize Herod's attitude towards Jesus? Where do you think this came from?
9. From verses 10-11, what is the attitude of the wise men and what do they do? How can we do likewise?

Where Herod's attitude is antagonism and the religious leaders are largely apathetic, the Magi show adoration.

- *They seek the Lord albeit with the limited information they have.*
- *They assume a posture of humility and submission (keep in mind these are wealthy and powerful men bowing in the presence of a child.)*
- *They give the best of what they have.*

10. What is the significance of the gifts the wise men bring?

Gold was a gift worthy of a king—it symbolized kingship.

Frankincense was one of the highest quality oils. Often used in the Levitical offerings, it had the aura of deity.

Myrrh was a medicinal and cosmetic spice but most often used in burial. It was applied to the body of Jesus, as seen in John 19:39-40.

11. If the wise men had stayed home, what would they have missed? What was Herod missing despite being home?

By finding the values of home—security, belonging, familiarity, harmony—in God and the family of God, we are freed to fulfill his purpose anywhere and everywhere.

12. Looking ahead to Matthew 2:12, the Magi return to their home country, albeit by another route. Having been on this journey, how might the home they returned to feel differently? Reflect again on your personal journeys.

Closing Prayer:

Glorify God for His omnipresence and omniscience. There is no where we can go to get away from the presence and knowledge of God! Thank God for the journeys of your life—yes, even the journey that is 2020—and those allies with whom you do life together. Be still for a minute to listen for where God may be calling you. Confess the times we've clung to an idol, something we weren't willing to give up to follow God. Pray for the boldness to continually seek Jesus and bring others along the way.