

“Cherry-Picking Scripture” Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany (Observed) 2021

“Enquiring minds want to know.” That is a slogan of a well-known supermarket tabloid. It also describes the natural desire most humans have to satisfy their curiosity. Most of the time, this natural curiosity is a good thing. Down through the centuries, curiosity has led to a great many discoveries that helped humanity. On the other hand, unsatisfied curiosity has led some people to jump to false conclusions. Sometimes we use imagination to make things up when facts are in short supply.

The story of the wise men is one of those times when imagination sometimes fills in the missing information. For example: the Bible does not tell us how many wise men came to worship Jesus. The Bible tells of three gifts, but it does not actually tell of three wise men. We jump to the conclusion that there were three wise men because there were three gifts, but the idea of three wise men is really our imagination filling in the blanks.

Another place where imagination misleads us is the timing of the wise men’s visit. Many Christmas displays show the wise men kneeling with the shepherds on Christmas night. In fact, the Gospel we just heard ended with the wise men going home a different way because of Herod. If we were to read on, we would hear about God instructing Joseph to take Mary and the child to Egypt. Last Sunday’s Gospel tells of the purification of Mary and the presentation of Jesus in the temple. This clearly places Jesus in Jerusalem forty days after His birth. So, the wise

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men and the trip to Egypt had to take place at least forty days after Jesus was born. Herod ordered His death squads to take out the boys two years old and younger. So, Jesus was less than two years old when the wise men came.

The Bible doesn't even tell us that Jesus was still in Bethlehem when the wise men worshipped Him. Both Luke and Matthew tell us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but a lot can happen in forty days. Careful attention to the Gospel we just heard does not tell us that Jesus was still in Bethlehem when the wise men worshipped Him. It says, “Behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.” Could that have been Bethlehem? Sure! Could that have been another place? Maybe! We assume that, because Jesus was born in Bethlehem and because Herod would later send his death squads to Bethlehem, that Jesus was still in Bethlehem when the wise men found Him, but the text doesn't actually say that one way or the other.

Now, just because our traditions don't always agree with the Biblical facts, that doesn't mean we need to go around correcting all the manger scenes at Christmas. It just means that we should be aware that our holiday traditions don't always line up with the actual Biblical account. This is especially important if someone uses the inconsistencies of our traditions to attack the confession of our faith.

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The inconsistency between our traditions and the truth of the actual Biblical account are not harmful if we are careful to know the difference. On the other hand, there are inconsistencies that can be very dangerous. Herod demonstrates one of them in the Gospel we just heard.

Herod was very inconsistent in his use of the Holy Scriptures. He was willing to pick and choose what part of the Holy Scripture he would believe and what part he would ignore. Note that he asked where the Christ was to be born – he trusted that part of scripture. He was willing to trust the Holy Scriptures for that bit of information. At the same time, he was unwilling to trust the Holy Scriptures and believe in the Christ for his salvation. He was even willing to oppose the very prophecy that he trusted for the location of the Christ. He accepted some parts of the Holy Scriptures and ignored others. This turned out to be a very dangerous situation for the innocent baby boys of Bethlehem. Eventually, Herod sent his death squads to Bethlehem in order to eliminate the threat to his throne.

Herod’s attempt to destroy the Christ failed. God told the wise men to return home by a different way. God instructed Joseph to take Jesus to Egypt. In spite of all the suffering and carnage that Herod caused, the prophecy remained fulfilled. Eventually Herod died and is spending eternity suffering for his unwillingness to believe the entire Scriptures.

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Herod was an excellent example of something called “cherry picking” ... that is picking out favorite teachings of the Bible and ignoring the rest of the teachings of the Bible. He believed those passages that told of the location of the Christ, but he ignored the passages that spoke of the mission of the Christ and the benefits of believing the promise of God about the Christ.

How often do we “cherry pick” verses the way that Herod did? How often do we pay attention and meditate on the passages that we like and ignore the rest? How often do we take verses out of context and twist them to mean what we want them to mean?

For example: we all know and love John 3:16 as well we should, but do we go on to ignore John 3:18: Whoever believes in the Son is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. We love some of the words of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery: Jesus stood up and said to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said, “Neither do I condemn you; ...” We love that part, but what about the rest of Jesus words, “... go, and from now on sin no more.” What about the words that the Holy Spirit spoke through the Prophet Isaiah “We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.”

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Too often we have followed Herod’s example and twisted God’s holy words to our own liking. We take them out of context. We ignore the passages that bother us. We are arrogant enough to judge the Word of God instead of recognizing that the Word of God judges us.

Unlike Herod and scribes, the magi show us that even the most ordinary Christian will ever hunger for more and more of the divine truth and assurance that can only be found in the Word of God. The savior of all creation is God and man, begotten of the Father from eternity and born of the Virgin in the humility of Bethlehem. He came into the flesh to die in the flesh. With His death, He entrapped sin, death, and the devil. That cursed, evil trinity thought they had defeated Jesus, but they did not understand His true nature. For when Jesus lay in the grave, He declared: I am He who was before time began; then He exerted His power and left the grave behind. The total combined power of sin, death, and the devil was unable to hold Him.

If you would know the true God, you must begin in Bethlehem. Learn about the child born of the Virgin Mary. He is true man with flesh, blood, and bone like yours and mine, but without sin. As we learn about this child in the manger, the light will dawn. This Son of Mary is also the Son of God, begotten of the Father before all time. When you have laid hold of this child of Bethlehem, you have laid hold of God; when you pray to Him, you pray to God.

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So, will you follow the example of Herod, the chief priests and scribes? Are you arrogant enough to believe that you already know everything that God’s Word has to teach you? Do you think: “I’ve been confirmed ... I no longer need any education in the Bible”? Or will the Holy Spirit guide you in the way of the wise men? Even though they made mistakes, God watched over them. Even though they did not understand, the Holy Spirit led them, and they looked into the face of God.

The day will come when every one of us must look into the face of God. Those who reject God’s word will look into the stern face of their eternal judge. May God guide us by the star of His holy word to receive the blessings that strengthen us in both body and soul so that we will look into the face of our savior. Amen