

WHERE WOULD WE BE?

Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas is now over, but it reminds me of what it used to be like to see some of the favorite Christmas programs. My family always liked to see the “Charlie Brown Christmas,” but you had to keep your eyes open. If you didn’t know the exact night and time the TV network would show it, you were out of luck until the next year. I thought it was amazing as a young father to get the special on VCR. Then you could show it whenever you wanted. And there were no commercials! But you still had to go to the store and buy it. Now, even though people can pay for it online, you can probably just find it on You-tube without any cost. It might not have the quality of what you’d pay for, but it is a lot better than what we saw on black and white in 1965. And if you want to stop and get something to eat or go to the bathroom, you can pause it or see it over again. But what would it be like if we were in front of the camera or on stage? What characters would we be? Where would we be in the movie or play?

In the story in Matthew 2 the people “on stage” are the Magi (who are popularly known as “the Wisemen,”) King Herod, Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. We know little about the Magi. The word “Magi” is Persian, so it is assumed that they came from near modern day Iran. Magi were astrologers who watched the stars. Scholars have all kinds of theories about what they actually saw. The famous astronomer, Johannes Kepler, who discovered a mathematical explanation of the motion of the planets, was also a devout Lutheran. He thought they saw a supernova. Whatever, these Magi followed the star to the land of Palestine looking for one who was born king of the Jews.

Herod we know a lot about. He was not really a Jew, but he was a friend of Caesar Augustus. Caesar gave him control over the land of Palestine to rule as king of the Jews. To win the Jew’s allegiance, Herod built a magnificent temple in Jerusalem, one of the great wonders of the ancient world. He also built for himself fine palaces all over the land. But he also was brutal and paranoid that everyone was plotting to kill him. He even killed most of the members of his family. This caused Augustus to say of him, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son.”

Mary and Joseph we know about from the Christmas story. Our text says they are in a house. Jesus has already been born, and they have found a permanent house since his birth in a manger. And Matthew tells us Jesus was no longer an infant, but a toddler.

We know that Mary has already been picked by God to be the mother of the Messiah, God’s chosen Savior. Joseph has been picked to take care of her and be the child’s guardian. But can we find ourselves in the role of one of the Magi? We know they were seeking one born king of the Jews. Would we be seeking him? Herod is also seeking Jesus, but unlike the Magi who want to bring gifts to him and worship him, Herod wants to kill him. Herod sees Jesus as a threat. If Jesus is born king of the Jews, then Herod cannot have that title. Would we be with Herod? We don’t usually see Jesus as a threat, so I doubt whether we can identify with Herod. But there are other people in the story, people whose names we don’t even know. There are the

people who are indifferent to the news of Jesus' birth. Perhaps His birth is just a momentary curiosity to them. There have been lots of supposed "Messiahs." These people are busy taking care of business, earning a living, and taking care of their families. They might not mind watching the events take place, but they don't want to be "on stage" and be participants in what is happening. Can we identify with them?

Often it seems easier for us to just be spectators when it comes to God's plans. It is nice to hear the story of Christmas, but just as long as I don't have to get involved. I want peace on earth, but just so long as it isn't something that will involve any great changes in my life. After all, who of us has time to get involved as the Magi did? A parent adjusted her schedule to get off early on Wednesdays so she can get her son to confirmation. When we think of the notes and marks on our daily calendars, who has time to do what the Magi did—to stop everything and seek Jesus?

In a play the characters don't determine what they do. The script is written for them. The playwright has determined what will happen. And in the story of the Magi we know the script was written by God. He put the star there. He got Mary pregnant with His Son. And He made sure this story was included in Holy Scriptures.

The Magi came to worship Jesus. But why are they in the "script"? We know why we need Mary and Joseph in the "script." You need a mother for a child and someone to take care of both of them. 30 years later when Jesus begins His ministry no one seems to remember the visit from the Magi. So why are they in the story?

We know the Magi tell Herod of Jesus' birth. Herod then seeks to kill Jesus. Warned by God, Joseph flees with the family to Egypt. Then after Herod dies, Joseph and the family return. When this happens Matthew tells us this fulfills what the prophet Hosea had said when he proclaimed, "Out of Egypt I will call My Son." In fact Matthew shows us that all these events about the Magi and Jesus' birth are a retelling of the story of the Exodus in the Old Testament. The Magi, Herod, Joseph, Mary, and all the rest follow God's script to make totally certain to you and me that Jesus is really who He says He is—God's Son, our Savior.

God's script doesn't end there. He also has Jesus die on the cross and rise on Easter. And now He has in the script a part for you and me to play. The Old Testament lesson this morning tells us that nations will come to see God's glory. And it is the foreign, Gentile Magi who come to see Jesus. We see that Jesus is not just for Jews, but for all people including you and me. In our second lesson Paul talks about that role:

His (God's) intent was that now, through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to His eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Church—that's you and me—is to be the tool that God uses to show forth His will today, just as He did through the Magi, Herod, Mary, and Joseph. We are not merely spectators in the

story of Jesus. God has a part in the story for each of us. But what part do we have? Are we to be the Magi, Herod, Mary or Joseph?

Was the first Christmas rehearsed? Did Mary and Joseph have a chance to practice their lines? Did the Magi make a “test run”? Did Herod want a part in God’s “script”? Neither do we know ahead of time how events are going to turn in our lives. God doesn’t have each moment preprogrammed for us. But what He shows us in the story of the Magi is that He can use the events in our lives to show forth His love to others.

So where are we in the “script”? We are on stage. God can use us to bring His salvation to others. That isn’t just something that happens on Sunday mornings when we are intentionally thinking about God. It happens in every moment of our lives. When we work and use the abilities God has given to us, we are seeking Him as much as the Magi did. When we listen to someone who has a problem, when we stop what we want to do to offer to help someone else, when we think of how to love someone else rather than please “me”, then we are being His Church—bringing about God’s salvation to others.

So where are we in God’s play? Right where we are in our homes, families, jobs, and communities, right where He can work through us. Let the “play” go on—in Christ Jesus our Lord.