

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.”^[a]

³ When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Christ would be born.

⁵ “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet:

⁶ **And you, Bethlehem,** in the land of Judah,
are by no means **least among the rulers of Judah:**

**Because out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.**”^[b]

⁷ Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him.”^[c]

⁹ After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him.^[d] Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route.

Close

You’ve probably heard the saying, “Close only counts with horse shoes and hand grenades.” In other words, it’s not good enough unless it’s done right. That’s true even when you can’t see it from my house. When I built cabinets dimensions had to be close. We even had to measure doors to make sure a cabinet could fit through the opening to where it would be installed. I learned the hard way on that one. The cabinet had to fit. I had to be dead on when it came to timing (as I referred to on New Year’s). But not everything in this world has to be so precise. We’ll settle for close enough and let the wood butcher hack away at the wall behind the box. You’ll never see it anyway.

In our lesson we find leaders who are greatly disturbed by the Magi and it’s not that they weren’t close. They’re too close. They’re disturbing Herod, the people, and that could really upset the order of things. They didn’t want the Christ to interfere with life and the Magi wouldn’t settle for close enough, drop their gifts and go home, they had to find him. They needed to know more.

In the same way we come to Christ and we need to know more, (That’s what Epiphany is all about, getting to know who this Christ is and why he is such a great gift) we get closer, but then there are times when it may feel as if God is too close. Especially when we find out this new King has expectations for those who claim to be part of his kingdom. Too close. No, these very commands and expectations are fulfilled in his son who has come near to us. We’re not off the hook. We’re forgiven by the God who came near to us.

The Magi, they were close, so close, and yet still so lost without further knowledge. Matthew writes, “*Behold... Magi came!*” Any Jew would have questioned, “Magi?!” Are you sure they’re not Hebrews, pious Jews from among God’s chosen people? These are the unclean rivals of Rome: Gentiles. In the OT and in Jewish literature, magi aren’t even considered “wise” in the sense of learned in matters of significance (Gibbs 124). No one would expect

Magi to come in search of the Christ child whose birth was prophesied in Holy Scripture. Jew would have first seen, “Pagan” These magi are the least likely candidates for the faith.

They go to the most logical location for a king to be born, Jerusalem, the capital city. Although Matthew includes one story after another, some time has passed between the manger and the magi. The Magi never arrived at the manger and they may not have made it to Bethlehem either. They ask Herod, *“Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? We have come to worship him.”* Herod knows who they are looking for and rather than rejoicing, “Praise the Lord!” he’s troubled and all of Jerusalem with him.

Troubled may be a bit of an understatement. The same word is used when Jesus walks out on the Sea of Galilee to his disciples and when they see him walking on the water in the middle of the night, they are more than troubled, they are terrified. Here are the Magi and it’s not just three men bringing gifts but this is a caravan. They need more information. We don’t know how God revealed to them the birth of a king but they don’t seem to understand who Jesus is. They bring gifts the usual gifts for royalty. They do not fully understand the significance of the child they are searching for.

They were close, but still so far away. They need help and that’s what they find in Scripture and a star. While Jesus was born in Bethlehem we’re not told the Magi ever made it to Bethlehem. Instead we are told a star led them to the place where the child was, which could have been back in Nazareth. They needed help, so close, but they needed help.

We’re close. In Acts 17:27 we read – *“God placed us at our specific time and place in this world so that men might seek him, though he is not far from any one of us.”* God’s not far, but close only counts in horseshoes and being close isn’t good enough. We too need God to reveal himself to us. Yet often we’ll go looking in all the wrong places where God has not revealed himself. Sure we can learn something about God from nature: powerful, angry, but we cannot learn what God has done for creation. But we don’t just look at creation, we’ll search for him in all things great and beautiful. We’ll search for him in large numbers, church growth practices, or even a worship band where we can find God in our emotions. You’d be close but close only counts where precision and accuracy does not matter. .

But where God speaks to us most clearly, in Scripture, we’ll it’s just too close, too clear. God has given us his word and what he expects of those who live under him in his kingdom. If Jesus is King, then I’m not, too close for comfort? He’s too close when he tells us anything contrary to culture. He’s too close when he tells me to sober up, support my family. He’s too close when he speaks about sex and marriage. We behave like little Herod’s who reject that Word for us and our lives. We should be troubled or terrified. We know the one true God, who he is, what he expects, and what remains for those who rebel against him.

We’ll settle for close enough, find a church that keeps God at a distance. If they don’t have the sacraments, that doesn’t matter. They mix legalism and forget about the gospel motivation of sins forgiven, I already know that. They don’t agree with God’s Word in regard to fellowship, we’re all Christian. Pretty soon you could make a fairly strong argument as to why the Magi should have remained in Jerusalem, give Herod their gifts, and gone home. After all Herod and the teachers of the law aren’t much different. They know of the Christ, where to find him, but do nothing about it. That’s not even close.

Far too often Christians settle for something good enough rather than the truth. But close doesn’t count remember. And none of us come close to the perfection that God expects. We are still so far away and yet God has come near.

He revealed himself in this world. He came for those like the Magi. He included them in his plan for salvation. From the very beginning it wasn’t just about Israel and God’s people. They were to be a light to the nations (the spot light on God and his work, not themselves), a people pointing one and all to the one true God. When they didn’t work God sent a star that would point to the Christ. God guided them through scripture and a star even

though they were ignorant. The real star of the show is the star the one that led the magi to Jesus. The real hero of the story isn't the magi who would have returned to Herod and enabled him to kill the Christ, but the dream. The magi needed to know more and that is exactly what God did for them. He revealed to them his son while those wise enough to figure it out on their own missed out.

God has come near for one and all. In the story of the Good Shepherd we hear Jesus describe himself as one who leave behind the 99 in search of the one lost sheep. It's the same lesson here. That one sheep is worth it. The individual is important. Some might say it's foolish to follow such a shepherd who leaves behind the 99 for the sake of the one, but it is precisely because he goes after the one that makes it worth following him. He will come after us. He has.

He wants to be with his people but sin separates us from God so he made a way back to us. He came in humility as a little child, no war horses or chariots, nothing to fear. The Magi didn't fully understand who this child was when they came in search. They brought gifts fit for a king. When they found the child, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. They fell before the child and worshipped him. And Herod is dethroned. No longer does Matthew refer to Herod as king but simply Herod.

Jesus is King. What he came to accomplish would demonstrate the difference between Herod's Kingdom and his own. It would not be violent, ruled by fear of death, and terror. But it brings peace and joy, security and confidence that no matter what people may do to you are safe. There is nothing to fear here in this child and later this King would be crucified. There he will give his life for those who weren't close enough. There he forgives sins and brings us near to God. He then rose and rules this world for the good of his church.

Here in these Word we are reminded that God included us in his plan of salvation. He has individually come to us in Word and Sacrament. His Word serves as a spot light in a very dark place. It is our lamp that guides our way through this world. It is the record of times God has spoken to humanity. It is how God still speaks to us. Although we've tried to keep God at a distance, he comes close to us and tells us individually through baptism and Lord's Supper – this word includes you.

It's the value of the individual and it is because of that, Christianity has accomplished what no other religion has ever done. It brings kings low and raises up servants. It humbles and builds us – reminding us that there is nothing in us that was wise or beautiful that caused God to come to us, we weren't even close. It was his great love for us.

That's good news for all people. Because this same one who rose, rules. He is king. We serve him and live under him in his kingdom. We too serve as stars pointing people like the magi to Jesus. We guide people to the truth, pointing people to the child not to the men in search. Point people to Jesus who has even greater gifts to give than the anything we could give to him.

Close enough doesn't count. Too close. No it's just right. Near God, in his Word, return rejoicing knowing that God has made you a part of his people. His kingdom. His people.