

December 26, 2021 Answers Matthew 2:13-23

Matthew does a lot more than just tell us the story of the Magi's searching for, finding, and worshipping the infant Jesus. And it is important to say a word about their gifts before we leave them. They told Herod, who was a puppet king of Judea, installed and supported by the Romans, that they had come seeking the baby born to be King of the Jews. They said they wanted to worship him. They kneel before the holy infant. They prostrate themselves as one does before God. And they present their offerings, the gold, the incense, the myrrh. And we all need to remember, the fundamental details of worship are fulfilled by the Wise Men. They come into HIS presence. They kneel, acknowledging their submission to HIM. And they present their offerings.

Matthew also is the one who tells us the Magi leave, and they do not go back to Herod, they do not report the location of the child. In fact there is an implication here that they perhaps flee for their own lives. Herod was a vicious man. He did not leave loose ends. And Matthew tells us that the wonders surrounding the birth of Jesus do not end with the arrival of the Wise Men some two years after the baby was born. They now dream dreams filled with revelation. The Magi disappear in the response to a dream that is a warning, to keep the child safe, and to disappear themselves into the sands of the desert. They go. Herod has to figure out the exact location of the child himself. And when he cannot, the blood flows.

And immediately there are a raft of other questions that arise. Why did the baby boys have to die? How was it that Jesus and the family escaped? Where did they go? And why? And how did Jesus come to live in Nazareth of all places? In fact you may remember that one of the disciples asked the question when invited to go and see Jesus the man, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Questions, questions, questions.

The death of the young children, boys born in Bethlehem, why did they have to die? Well, obviously they didn't have to. And they didn't die because it was the will of God. They died because Herod was the sinful, malicious, power hungry, mad man he was. They died because Herod gave the order. And there is no indication he consulted with anyone about it. He did not know where Jesus was precisely, and he did not know the baby's name. He did not know the family. So he used a shotgun approach. He had asked when the star had first appeared...approximately 2 years before the Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem. So he ordered the death of babies in Bethlehem that were boys, 2 years old and under. History refers to the event as "the slaughter of the innocents."

Some may ask why did God allow it? HE does not prevent us from doing what is sinful. HE did not cause it. HE did not inspire the hellish plan. HE did remove Jesus from the line of fire.

An angel of the Lord, a messenger of God appeared to Joseph in a dream, even as a messenger of God had

appeared to the Magi. Here is a point at which Joseph has experience. He gets up. He gets Mary up. They bundle up the basics of their lives and they take their first born son to Egypt. And two things happen. When the slaughter of the children takes place, Jesus is gone. Jesus is safe. As Joseph was safe in Egypt from those brothers who meant to do him harm centuries before. And God's plan of saving us from our sins, continues to unfold. Even more significantly, when the time is right, the prophecy concerning the Messiah in Hosea 11:1 is fulfilled...."When Israel was a child I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son."

So Jesus, as a toddler is taken to Egypt, and when that Herod dies, Joseph has another encounter with God's messenger in a dream, which is why we tend to say "things happen in threes!" And he obeys the angel and gathers his goods, his wife and the child and they return to what was once Israel. Joseph has a moment of panic when he discovers in the normal way people learn stuff...through human contact and experience,...another member of the Herod family is serving as Rome's puppet king. And Joseph had good reason to be afraid for his child. So, he took the family to the Galilee region and he found work in that quiet, backwater called Nazareth. And Matthew tells us, did Jesus teach him this? I cannot say. But another word of prophecy was believed by Matthew to have been fulfilled. What Matthew is clearly telling us, is that it was not by chance Joseph settled the family in Nazareth, but the leading of God, and at HIS direction.

Something else to remember. I mentioned to my daughter that this portion was on the agenda for the day after Christmas. Her immediate joyful response was, "O you are going to talk about refugees!" They are so often in the news. People who flee their homes in search of safety taking only what they can carry, and depending on the goodwill of other nations. They accept uncertainty as the price of potential safety, and a better existence than they had at home. The baby Jesus, Joseph and Mary, were indeed refugees. They went to Egypt and found a measure of safety until they could return. We do well when we give refugees a new home in our country. We minister to some of the most needy and desperate in the world. And you know what Jesus said...when you do it to them, you do it to me! Jesus was a refugee when his parents took him to Egypt.

There is one more detail I need to mention before we leave the details that surrounded Jesus birth and the way HE wound up being a resident of the Galilee region, having been born in Bethlehem. It is not a fair assessment to say that Jesus ministry was the only part of the Gospels that contains claims of signs, wonders, and miracles of God. The disciples testify in the writing and keeping of the Gospel records. As John tells us plainly, they are not the replete account of what Jesus did, or the circumstances that surrounded his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. But these are the facts about every stage of Jesus life: there were wonders, miracles, signs of God's presence around HIM, in HIM, and those affected by HIM, and those who loved HIM as their kin. There is no part of

the story of Jesus that does not invite us into the realm of faith in the God who redeems.

When I was a teenager I heard Johnny Mathis sing, “It’s the most wonderful time of the year.” I know others sang the song as well. People still use the phrase, “there’s magic in the air” in the attempt to describe what is special about Christmas. Jesus was born into a world where life was hard, and life was cheap. It was normal, in Jesus time, to pass dead bodies left to rot in the sun, on the road, and on Roman crosses. Disease then as now was for many a death sentence. The history in the Gospels is that the world experienced a sea change when Jesus was born, when Jesus was a child, a man, who ministered to others. There is no part of HIS life in which people did not meet God and discover details that proclaimed that life is bigger than the realm of man, governed by logic, and human senses. God is present in the details if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. In the Bible! In every day experience. God’s grace touches us, changes us, and renews us. God’s grace in Jesus saves us and makes us new. That is why there is a Spirit of hope abroad at Christmas. Jesus is the reason for the season. And it is God who has given us life.

Let us pray;

For the gift of life and life eternal in Christ Jesus we give thanks. For the experience of your season of birth, we praise your name. Help us that we might be touched by you in the manner in which we live each day. Help us to be kinder and more gentle in our relationships with others. Open our eyes to

real ways we can help those who are in need who cross our paths. May your generosity be mirrored in what we do. Grant that we may be worthy of the name of Jesus, in whom we profess our faith. Amen