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The Epiphany of Our Lord – Matthew 2:1-12 – How Great Is Our King?!
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For a nominal fee, you too can name a star and give the brightest gift in the galaxy. That's the claim made by the International Star Registry, which has sent certificates to more than three million people detailing information about their unique star and where to look for it in the cosmos. And this isn't just meant for regular folks like you and me, either – stars have even been assigned to famous astronauts, celebrities, dignitaries, even kings and queens and other royalty around the world. You can have your own personal star, just like some of the most important people on earth – I mean, how great is a gift like that?!

Well with all due respect, I will say that I'm not so sure. After all, all the really bright, well-known stars are already named and assigned. It's not like you're getting the north star or the big dipper or any of the other constellations you might actually know how to find in the night sky. And if it's not one of those famous stars, are you really going to be able to see or appreciate it? Do you have the special equipment or know-how to even locate it or enjoy it in any meaningful way? Now if you feel differently than I do about this, by all means, don't let me deter you. But I'm just not sure I'm convinced that a gift like having your own star named after you is really as great as the International Star Registry would have us believe.

That is, unless your star is like the one in our Gospel lesson for today, and it's so bright and unique that it draws people from hundreds of miles around to see it. That was the case for the newborn King of the Jews – this was *his* star, and nobody else's; the one that led right to him and all the blessings that God would give the world through him. Oh sure, you'll find the names of kings on the International Star Registry, but how great is our King?! So great that he didn't point to his star; his star pointed to him, and it's been doing the same ever since then for us and for everyone who believes in him.

And if you really want to know how great our King is, you just have to compare him to some of the main players in our story for today. The first people we meet are these Magi from the east – these superstitious astrologers who probably came from Babylon or Persia, modern-day Iraq or Iran. It was their job to watch the heavens for signs of important political or historical happenings here on earth, so it's not that surprising for them to associate the appearance of a special star with the birth of a great king. But what was surprising was that *these* Magi would actually come looking for *this* King of the Jews, in order to *worship* him.

See, in the ancient world, religion was a localized thing. Each different nation had their own gods, and those gods were thought to really only have jurisdiction in those lands. The Egyptians had their gods, the Assyrians had their gods, and so on with the Babylonians and Persians and Greeks and Romans and the Norse – they all had their own gods who only held sway over their own lands and their own people. But the truth is, gods that are limited to only one certain place and people really aren't all that great.

So what these foreign Magi were doing was very out of character for religious practice in that day. But when they came to *worship* the King of the Jews, they were showing just how great he really is. He isn't just a king to be honored; he is God to be worshiped! And if they came from distant lands to do it, then he isn't just King of the Jews; he is King of the Gentiles, too – the King of All Peoples and All Nations! He is so much greater than that ancient conception of gods and kings – He is *our* God and *our* King, even here on the other side of the world after all this time, and he is still worth worshiping just like the Magi did. They came to him across all that distance, not because they were expected to, but because they were *overjoyed* to with grateful hearts of faith – so let's also come here to God's house for worship with that same faith-filled eagerness and joy! When the Magi came, they showed baby Jesus how much he meant to them by bringing him their treasures – so let's also give God our best efforts and offerings willingly and generously! And when afterwards the Magi were warned not to go back to Herod, they listened to God and followed his Word, regardless of the troubles they may have faced for it – so let's have that same solid dedication to hearing and obeying God's Word, no matter how the rest of the world reacts, because that's the kind of awe-inspired attitude and worship that says: how great is our King?!

But you know, it wasn't just the Magi that teach us that here. These Jewish religious leaders teach us something about this King's greatness, too. See, whereas other nations might have thought that their gods were only powerful in their own land and among their own people, the Jews knew better. They knew their God was the true God of all heaven and earth – but the problem was, they didn't want to share him. They tried to keep him to themselves because they didn't think anybody else was worthy of him, and when people *did* want to come to God, they made it all about *their* works instead of *his* grace. That's maybe one of the reasons why nobody was too quick to jump up and help these foreign Magi when they came looking to worship the King of the Jews.

But what's even worse is that it seems like the Jewish religious teachers couldn't have cared less when they did come. The Magi came searching for

the King of the Jews – you’d think that would have gotten their attention! – even Herod recognized that the Magi were describing the Messiah who was to be born, and those religious teachers themselves even quoted the prophet Micah pinpointing the place of Jesus’ birth, and yet they didn’t even bother to follow along or to follow up. I mean, what did that say about how much the Jews thought of their God? If they didn’t think that God could love the rest of the world enough to want to save them, if they thought they could do a better job of saving themselves than he could, if news of God fulfilling his oldest, greatest promise of salvation for his people wasn’t enough to even get them to investigate any further – then no matter how much they might have claimed otherwise, they must not have thought he was actually all that great.

But the real truth is that God really *is* that great and more – way *too* great, in fact, for our works to ever make us worthy of anything before God, except his punishment both now and forever. We are sinners, we are imperfect, and no matter what the Jews or anyone else might think, that disqualifies us from anything good with God on our own merits. But God is *SO* great that even our own human selfishness or self-righteousness or spiritual apathy didn’t stop him from sending his Son to redeem us. What makes our King so great is that he knew that we couldn’t save ourselves, he knew that we wouldn’t come to him on our own, so instead *he* came to *us* as a baby in Bethlehem! He didn’t try to keep us away, like the Jews did; no, he loved the whole world so much that he reached out to save anyone and everyone who trusts in him as their Savior from sin! And that Gospel promise is right here in his Word for all of us in every time and place to behold and believe – so let’s not be careless with it like we see here. Let’s love it, let’s learn it, let’s share it, let’s follow it every day, because this is the true star that guides our lives and eternities to Jesus! His love for us is greater than the Jews ever conceived or that we could ever possibly have deserved. I mean, how great is our King?!

But really, in this lesson, the most obvious display of our King’s greatness comes in contrast to the other king in the story, the one that history has dubbed King Herod “the Great.” He got that name because he was a skilled strategist and a prolific builder, but that nickname certainly didn’t come from the people he ruled. Herod’s people hated him and resented him because he was ruthless, paranoid, vengeful – really everything a *truly* great king should not be. Herod was so worried about protecting his own power that he was willing to imprison and kill just about anyone to do it – including some of the most well-respected and beloved members of the community, and even his own wife and sons. In fact, it was King Herod “the Great” who just after this time slaughtered all those babies in Bethlehem in the name of protecting his

throne against this newborn King of the Jews. That’s the kind of guy he was. That’s why all Jerusalem was disturbed when Herod was disturbed!

But Jesus? He came to be a greater King than Herod could ever hope to be. That’s why Micah’s prophecy said about Jesus’ birthplace: “*You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.*” Lots of rulers came and went in the history of Judah and in the history of the world, and all too many of them acted just like King Herod with fear tactics and bloodshed for anyone who didn’t fall in line. But one ruler would come who would stand out from all the others and be worthy of the task. One ruler would come who would be a shepherd after God’s own heart. One ruler would come who would guide and lead and love God’s people physically and spiritually, now and forever, in just the way they needed, in just the way that was truly best for them. And that ruler was Jesus.

See, Jesus is our perfect Shepherd-King because he provides our souls with the very best food and drink in his Word. He guides our lives along safe paths that keep us close to him and headed toward our heavenly home. He laid down his life for us and took it up again so that we could live with him forever. And every time we feel confused or threatened or sad or exhausted, he is there to pick us up on his shoulders and carry us right where we need to go. How great is our King, that even though he is a ruler greater than all the others, he didn’t flaunt it just to make himself look better, like so many other worldly rulers do. He didn’t force *us* to serve *him*; rather, *he* humbled himself to serve *us*. And he still serves us every day by the way he cares for us, protects us, leads us, guides us, blesses us, and saves us so that one day we can join him in his heavenly kingdom.

How great is our King – with Jesus, that’s not a question. That’s an exclamation! He is a King great enough to have his own star lead the Magi right to him, great enough to have all the Scriptures center on him, great enough that he didn’t have to *demand* our worship like Herod did – no, he *deserves* our worship fully and freely like no one else possibly could. He is the King not just of Jews or Gentiles, but of all nations and all peoples. He is the King whose love for us was so great that he lived, died, and rose again to win us a place in his kingdom forever. How great is our King? So great that he deserves even better from us than gold, frankincense, myrrh, or even an international star registry certificate. He deserves the greatest gift we have to give: our believing, loving hearts, so today and every day, friends, let’s give them to him. Amen.