I have a beloved nativity scene that I purchased thirty years ago in Naples, Italy. It is hand carved and hand painted, intricate in detail, and it is very special to me—but it is Biblically inaccurate. So, also, are centuries of Christian artwork, most religious Christmas cards, and countless Christmas pageants with costumed children.

What all of these do, you see--my nativity scene, the artwork, the Christmas Cards and Christmas pageants--is that they compress Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus and Luke’s account into a single tableau: Mary and Joseph kneeling by the manger bed, shepherds with their lambs at one side of the scene, wise men with their gifts at
the other side, and a heavenly host of angels hovering about.

It is a traditionalized, sentimental scene of something that never actually was, not in that way. And on the one hand I don’t really mind—I love my nativity scene, love Christmas cards and Christmas pageants, but when you take two gospel accounts and smash them together into one, somebody is going to lose their voice—in most cases, I think it’s Matthew’s account that gets silenced, so that the magi become bit players at the manger scene instead of having their own, distinct story.

To get to their story, however, we need to peel back a few layers of what we may think we know. Firstly, though we just sang the hymn “We Three Kings,” we don’t know that
there were three nor that they were kings. The number comes from the gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh…tradition has simply assumed that three named gifts means that there were three visitors from the East, and the costly nature of the gifts led to the assumption that the magi were royalty. Religious folklore has even gone so far as to name the kings—Balthasar from Arabia, Melchior from Persia, and Gaspar from India…but none of that is in the text either. So, if much of what we presume to know or much of our depiction of the magi is from tradition and not the text…then perhaps we might give voice to Matthew today, and hear just what Matthew’s account has to tell us or to teach us.

“In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to
Jerusalem asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.”

The Greek word for wise men here is magi. Magi were often understood to be priestly scholars from the region of Persia or present-day Iran, who had expertise in the study of the stars, the interpretation of dreams, and various other mysterious arts. We may recall that many ancient cultures looked to the stars for signs and portents—including the birth of important figures—and so these magi believe from their study of the skies that they have discerned the birth of a child who will be king of the Jews. They journey to Jerusalem to pay him their respects.
One item of note is that the magi are neither of Jewish heritage nor of the Jewish faith, so from the earliest point of Matthew’s gospel we see God’s activity among the Gentiles. In fact, it is these foreigners who are the first to discern the presence of the messiah. There is something of a sermon in that realization alone—whenever we begin to believe that we possess a superior understanding of God’s nature, God’s will, or God’s activity to that of other faiths, we might recall that Matthew begins with people whom the Jews would have considered outsiders or foreigners or pagans discerning a truth that the Jews themselves have not yet discerned. God’s people have missed their messiah—and the “outsiders” discern him and come to seek him.
Their seeking brings them to Jerusalem—where else would one look for a king than in the seat of power? If you hope to find a king, go to where the palace is. So, the wise men travel to Jerusalem and begin asking around.

Now imagine, for a moment, the response of King Herod when the magi arrive on the scene. These foreign dignitaries, learned philosophers of wealth and status, arrive in the capital city with their entourage and begin making inquiries about the child who has been born king of the Jews. Simply put, kings do not like rival claims to their authority—the wise men have not come to pay respects to Herod, but to another, which amounts to a DISRESPECT of Herod—of his legitimacy, of his authority, of his claim to the throne or his fitness to hold office if you will.
Herod’s first response is fear. There is a line from Shakespeare’s Henry IV: “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” It speaks of the constant worries of kingship—the responsibilities, the demands, but also the threats to one’s power. History records Herod as a paranoid and brutal king—he executed two of his own sons, Alexander and Aristobulus, whom he suspected of plotting against him to take his throne. So, when the wise men come seeking another king, Herod takes their presence as a destabilizing threat.

He first calls for all of his chief priests and his scribes—his own wise men, as it were—to find out what they know—is there any truth or any confirmation that they see to what the magi claim to have discerned? Where is the messiah
supposedly to be born? His priests and scholars cite a passage from Micah chapter 5: But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Then Herod calls secretly for the wise men—not publicly because he presumably does not wish to lend any public legitimacy to their quest—and he picks their brains to determine anything, EVERYTHING that they might know. When exactly did this star, this omen, this purported portent of which they speak, appear. And then he feigns interest in their mission: “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”
I can recall even as a child hearing the implied menace in those words—they don’t ring true—why would a king leave the corridors of power to go to a backwater like Bethlehem and worship a child who wears his title: king of the Jews? My child-self wanted to cry out and warn them—don’t listen, it’s a trick, it’s a trap!

So, the wise men go, and indeed they find the child and they kneel and worship him with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. William Herzog writes, “Traditional Christian interpretation has read these gifts as foreshadowing the child’s life. Gold is fitting for royalty and frankincense for priestly duties, and myrrh points to the prophet’s death he would suffer.”

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After worshipping the messiah, the wise men, having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, slip out the back door. “They left for their own country by another road,” Matthew writes.

From here the story takes on an urgency—there is no time to lose, because presumably a king as paranoid as Herod would have had the wise men followed. An angel, the Greek word for messenger, appeared to Joseph in a dream: “Get up, take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him. Joseph arises from sleep and flees in the night with mother and child to Egypt, the child born king of the Jews now made a refugee. And the henchmen of the king arrive too late.
“When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated,” Matthew writes, “and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.’”

A vengeful act by a paranoid king—as well as an attempt to kill the fugitive messiah as he had intended all along…if you don’t know which child is the one called king of the Jews, kill any child that might be a candidate for the title.

Small wonder that we don’t wish to hear the story of the magi in its fullness—it is a terrible and a terrifying story. But it is also a revelation of who Jesus is.
The wise men come to find a king and they look where one looks for kings—among the powerful, the wealthy, the privileged, the elite. But the one they look for is not to be found there.

He is not to be found among the insiders but among the outsiders, not among the wealthy and the powerful but among the very poor and powerless upon whom his ministry will be focused.

Why does Matthew’s gospel begin with foreigners coming in search of the messiah? Well an astute reader of Matthew will note Matthew’s continual cross referencing of scripture and of the prophets throughout his gospel.

Matthew’s account of the magi is similarly rooted in prophetic scripture. Jewish tradition expected the arrival of the messiah, God’s ultimate redemption of Israel, to set in
motion a pilgrimage of the nations to the God of Israel as a part of the eschatological events, the transformation of the world.

And the visit of the magi offers explicit fulfillment to two prophetic texts from Isaiah

The first, from Isaiah chapter 2 speaks of the nations drawing nigh:

In days to come
    the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
    and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
3 Many peoples shall come and say,
    “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
    to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
    and that we may walk in his paths.”
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
    and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
4 He shall judge between the nations,
    and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
    and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.

And in these words, from Isaiah 60, you will hear an even more familiar ring:

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

4 Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses’ arms.

5 Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.

6 A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

Matthew wants his readers to understand with absolute clarity that Jesus is the Messiah they have long sought and that all of scripture and centuries of expectation find their fulfillment in him. And Matthew further wants us to
recognize that the kingdom of the messiah will not find its fulfillment in the pursuits of wealth, of power, of military might, or of any earthly authority. If we also would worship him—and worship him rightly…then we like the Magi must search for him beyond the corridors of power and in the midst of the overlooked, the powerless and the poor.

Thanks be to God. Amen