

**King Cakes: The Back Story**  
**The Tasty Pastry & the Magi**  
Matthew 2:1-11

**The Kingdom** is our theme for worship in 2009. The three-ring notebook available in the foyer includes a Bible reading plan for the year, an introduction to the Kingdom of God in the teachings of Jesus, and a sermon plan for 52 weeks. We will print notes and series brochures and will have two special events.

You have read about the Kingdom of God all your life. Jesus mentions it continually in his preaching and teaching. Do you know what the Kingdom of God is? Do you know where it is? Do you know when it is? Do you know who it is? Do you know how you fit in the Kingdom of God? Do you know what it has to do with conditions on earth in the here and now?

I hope that I have grown spiritually through almost 50 years of seeking to understand and follow the teachings of Jesus.

John Lupton will join us in March for a weekend of activities. He is a businessman turned minister who has committed his life to applying the teachings of Jesus in the poorest areas of Atlanta. Among the books he has written is "Theirs Is the Kingdom," stories about people on the margins of society. I hope that Lupton will help us understand the concern of Jesus for the poor and how the hurting and overlooked in our city connect to the Kingdom.

Later on in the year we will have a special teaching session about the future of the Kingdom—the promise of God's restoration for his people and his world.

### **Lord's Supper and Baptism**

**Intro:** (The Feast of Epiphany in the Eastern Orthodox Church is on January 6 but it celebrates the baptism of Jesus. Only twice in the earthly life of Jesus were the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit specifically mentioned together: at the baptism of Jesus and at his Transfiguration. The Feast of Epiphany is the third most important feast in Orthodox Christianity.)

The Western church celebrated Epiphany as the revelation of the deity of Christ as seen through the Magi. As related by Matthew, "three wise men from the east" visited the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. Tradition says this occurred on the twelfth day following his birth. An epiphany is a manifestation or revelation. January 6 became the day appointed by the Church to celebrate the revelation of Christ's divinity to mankind.

The western world's most influential preacher, St. Augustine, romanticized and embellished the story of the Epiphany. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the gift-bearing wise men became "kings," and Feast of the Epiphany, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, evolved into a major holiday imbued with royal associations. In some parts of Europe it is called "Three Kings Day." The Irish and the Comeaux's call it "little Christmas."

The idea that they were kings may come in part from references in Isaiah 60:3 (where kings will come to your brightness) and Psalm 72:10-12 where kings pay tribute to the Anointed One.

While the Twelfth Night customs that spread throughout Europe were subject to numerous variations, one element transcended virtually every culture that observed the holiday: the choice of a mock king for the occasion. The choice was always a matter of chance. Lots could be drawn or, in the most

widespread practice, a cake would be divided. The person who found a bean, or a coin, in his piece was the lucky king for the night. Sometimes the new king picked his own queen; sometimes chance chose her for him, and a pea secreted in the cake conferred the honor on its finder. Cake and King were linked for the coming year.

In France, the bean—la feve—eventually was replaced by a bean-sized baby Jesus; its discovery commemorated the discovery of Jesus' divinity by the Magi. Legend has it that the cakes were made in the shape of a ring and colorfully decorated to resemble a bejeweled crown--the king cake of New Orleans.

What about these kings? Tradition says they numbered three, one for each gift given to Jesus. Their traditional names are Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar and they are said to be the kings of Chaldea, Pamphylia, and Ethiopia respectively.

The Magi (singular Magus, from Latin, via [Greek μάγος](#)) were an [Iranian](#) tribe from ancient [Media](#), who were responsible for religious and funerary practices of the [ancient Iranian peoples](#). Later they accepted the [Zoroastrian](#) religion. In English, the term magus may refer to a [shaman](#), [sorcerer](#) or [wizard](#) (Simon in Acts 8). From it we get the English words [magic](#) and [magician](#).

The Kingdom of God is not simply about the physical children of Abraham. It is much bigger than that. From the beginning Abraham was promised that through his seed ALL THE NATIONS of the earth would be blessed.

The temple itself was never to be simply a worship center for Israel. It was to be called a house of prayer FOR ALL NATIONS, as Jesus said when he cleansed it.

This breadth of vision concerning the Kingdom of God was not understood by the Jews of Jesus day. They still were looking for the warrior-Messiah who would deliver Israel and establish her independence from Rome.

We want to begin this year by acknowledging the universal truth of Jesus the Lord. He is the king of kings and the Lord of lords. The kingdoms of this world will soon become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. And he will reign forever.

This message, together with the next two, will examine Matthew 2 and the coming of the Magi. Today the Magi are the focus. Next week I want us to look at King Herod and how the kings of this earth relate from the beginning to King Jesus. The third Sunday we will take a look at the infant king, the refuge king, the disguised and hidden king, Jesus, growing up in the sticks of Nazareth, with none suspecting who he really is.

### **I. Give Your Heart to the World:** *Magi from the east came to Jerusalem (Matthew 2:1).*

A. Every follower of Jesus should have a faith view that encompasses the nations. God loved the world in this way—he gave his one and only son to the nations. We ought to love the world in this same way—giving our sons and daughters to the nations who need Jesus.

1. Our giving is motivated by love, just as God's giving was motivated by love.
2. Our giving addresses true need, just as Jesus addressed the needs of the people.

B. These Three Kings Are Gentiles. They are not the children of Abraham. They are included in the Nativity events because they indicate and represent the nations of the world for whom the Messiah came.

C. His name is Immanuel which means “God with us.” The “us” of this name is not simply the Jews. It includes people from every tribe, tongue and nation. We have always included ourselves in this name because he is our Savior and we are his people even though we, like the Magi, are Gentiles.

## **II. Keep Your Eye Upon the Eastern Sky:** *We saw his star in the east (Matthew 2:2).*

\*\*\*We were watching the moon, lying on her back, and Venus, serving as the fulcrum for her pendulum swings in the western sky over the Gulf of Mexico. What God is up to in Jesus is cosmic and universal.

A. All scientists, take note. Those who enjoy learning about the earth, the stars, the heavens, take note. The Star over Bethlehem is a disturbance in the heavens. It is a universal and heavenly announcement of the birth of the Messiah. The Star is a complement to the Scriptures. The prophets said that the birth would take place in Bethlehem. The star designates the place but it also announces the time of the birth.

## **III. Kneel Down Before Him:** *and have come to worship him (Matthew 2:2)*

A. Jews did not kneel down before anyone including kings. They stubbornly refused to bow to human dignitaries, as did our Baptist ancestors. They would not kneel before the king.

B. The Magi came to Worship King Jesus, not what you would normally do with a royal baby as a Jew.

C. This is an indication of the Divinity of Jesus. His name, Jesus, means “one who saves.” He is our Savior, and we worship him. This is the natural response to the one who has given his all for us and rescued us from our sins.

## **IV. Beware of Traitors:** *As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him (Matthew 2:8).*

A. Herod was treacherous. He pretended to care about the newborn child because he wanted to worship. But he actually wanted to kill him as he did with all people, family and friends, who challenged his authority and power.

B. Traitors come in all shapes and sizes including political, intellectual, and philosophical. We are followers of Jesus. We believe that he is the One and Only Son of God, the Messiah, and the Savior of the World. We do not falter or fade from this position because it is

1. the truth that liberates us to move beyond our failures and shame into a life that is empowered by the Spirit
2. the truth that inspires us to move into our world armed with the love of God

C. God will warn you when you are being waylaid by those whose allegiance is elsewhere.

1. The Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. Zachariah, John’s father, had a vision. Joseph had a dream (Matthew 1:20). God used dreams to orchestrate and oversee the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. These dreams are the intervention of God’s word in their lives. The Magi are informed not only by the heavens but by the Spirit of God.

2. We can make alliances in this world to achieve common goals with those who do not know Christ. Many people are working for good and justice in the world, not just followers of Jesus. This is evidence that God’s word has gone out and that people are made in his image. It is evidence that a universal moral law governs not only human history but this universe.

**Conclusion:** Let's not become like the Jews of Jesus day, caring only for our little circle and losing sight of our world. They were called to a greater calling, and they refused it. We must fulfill our calling to the nations.