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- [About the Author](#)
- [Order](#)
- [About the Book](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Readers' Comments](#)
- [News & Events](#)
- [A Prayer for the Day](#)
- [Things To Shout Out!](#)
- [Things to Ponder](#)
- [My Favorite Quotes](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Home](#)

The Baby Wakes Up (Matthew 2:1-12)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Everybody loves a baby—especially when he's asleep! Aunts and uncles “ooh” and “aah.” Mom and Dad are so proud of showing him off. Maternal and paternal instincts rise so forcefully when mom and dad hold their newborn child. A sleeping child makes no demands whatsoever. He is just a bundle of joy to be held and caressed. But when that baby wakes up--oh, that's a different story. He cries and screams. He needs to be fed. His diapers need to be changed. He needs to be patted on the back when he finishes feeding. Unlike a sleeping baby, a baby wide awake places demands on us. This is when the “oohers” and “aahers” take a step back and let mom and dad do all the work.

Up to this point in the Christmas cycle, the baby Jesus has been asleep. But on this feast of the Epiphany, Jesus, in a sense, wakes up. The word “epiphany” means “a manifestation,” a revealing, a discovery. Today we celebrate the revelation of who Jesus really is: the savior of all people, not just of the Jews. He is the universal savior, the savior of the entire world.

The Gospel today (Matthew 2:1-12) revolves around two sets of people: Herod and the three astrologers from the East. Herod represents the Roman Empire, and also the Jewish establishment who are fearful of this newborn king. If Jesus is a king His rise to power will topple their place in the hierarchic structure of Jewish society. If this Jesus is destined to be a king, then He must be destroyed so that He will not take their privileged place in society.

On the other hand, there are the three astrologers, or kings, or magi (magicians) according to the names given them by the synoptic gospels. No other term is used to describe them; these three visitors are neither Jewish nor Roman. They represent all the other nations, east and west, for whom this Jesus has come as Savior. Unlike Herod and the leaders of Jewish society, notably the Scribes and Pharisees, who will pester Jesus throughout His entire life, the three visitors have an open mind. They are actively seeking someone whom they do not know, a person long predicted in civilization--not just in the writings of the Old Testament--who would be that universal savior.

A star guides them, and they placed great faith in it, the star that eventually led them to the manger in Bethlehem. Their gifts were worthy only of a king: gold as a sign of

royalty; frankincense, an aromatic incense burned only in the presence of a king; and myrrh, the mixture of aromatic herbs and spices with which a king was buried.

With which of these two groups do we identify? Herod and the Jewish leaders who see Jesus as a threat to the stability and comfortability? Or the three astrologers whose minds and hearts are ready to recognize the universal savior in whatever form, in whatever person or whatever culture or religion He may come? If we were honest, we would probably have to see these very different groups as vying for control within us. The message that this infant king will announce will call for a massive change in the values and priorities of those who will call themselves His disciples, including ourselves. Yet, like Herod, we resist those aspects of His message that we find personally difficult, challenging, or which would call for a change in us that people around us could not fail to notice; and we find that threatening.

We stand at the beginning of a new year, a time for making resolutions. One resolution we might consider is to move more from Herod to the three visitors; a resolution to soften our resistance to Jesus and be His disciples in fact and not just in word. It's a resolution to accept the fact that Jesus yearns to save us all, if only we would give Him the most precious gift of all. Not gold, frankincense or myrrh, but a gift far more precious: the gift of our whole self so completely to Christ that He will transform us into His very self, so that our "new self" can be a shining star that guides others to Him.

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