

Wise Men Worship the Newborn King: Matthew 2:1-12

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Sunday, December 20th, 2015

It's almost Christmas! We've been anticipating it for several weeks in this sermon series, and now it's almost here. We've been studying the passages in Matthew and Luke that tell us about Jesus' birth, and the events leading up to that and following. The past couple weeks we were in Luke, considering the narrative of Jesus' birth, specifically, and then the angels announcing His birth to the shepherds.

Today, and on Christmas Eve, and next Sunday, we'll conclude this sermon series by looking at Matthew chapter 2. For today, the wise men. On Christmas Eve, the flight to Egypt. And next Sunday, the story of Herod's wrath and then Joseph and Mary and Jesus returning to Nazareth.

This morning I have 3 simple thoughts for us to consider from this story of the wise men, and then at the end, a question for each of us to ponder.

God's Sovereignty over these Events

The first thing I want us to consider in this story is God's sovereignty over these events. Just think of God's oversight of every detail here. First of all, there's the prophecy from Micah 5:2, quoted in verse 6 of our text. It had been prophesied long beforehand that this great shepherd would come from Bethlehem. But we know from the account in Luke that Mary didn't live in Bethlehem. She lived in Nazareth. And she is the one God chose to be the mother of Jesus. So how was the prophecy going to be fulfilled?

This is a mind-boggling thing to think about—the providence of God over the big and small events of history, and how they all fit together in God's plan of salvation. We talked about this 2 weeks ago in the story of Jesus' birth, and this passage brings it to mind again—the amazing providence of God. If we were to think about it for awhile, I'm sure we could come up with various ways that Mary could have ended up in Bethlehem to give birth to Jesus. But how is it that she ended up there? It was because of a census. As Luke 2 says, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered [all the world, there, referring to all the Roman empire]. . . . And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the

city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.”

Isn't this fascinating to think about? And isn't it amazing to think about God's sovereignty over these things? God certainly could have found simpler ways to get Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. He could have found ways to make this happen that would have involved far less people. But this shows us something of the magnitude and scope of God's providence. He rules over nations. He rules over kings. He ordained that Ceasar Augustus would call for this census, and that was His means of getting Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

And then think of God's sovereignty in getting the word out about this birth. He sent angels to tell the shepherds, as we read in Luke. And here in Matthew, we read of a very different group of individuals who were also made aware of this.

Verse 1 doesn't specify how much time has elapsed after Jesus' birth. It just says, "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem . . ." But we know from the context that up to 2 years has passed. We see in verse 7 that Herod found out from the wise men when the star had appeared. And then later in the chapter, as we're going to look at more on Christmas Eve and next Sunday, we find out that Herod calls for the male children in Bethlehem to be killed, all the male children 2 years old or younger. Verse 16 tells us that the 2 year old age was "according to the time that [Herod] had ascertained from the wise men."

We also notice in verse 11 that when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem, they entered the *house* where the child and his mother were. This indicates a more permanent dwelling place than what they had on the night of Jesus' birth. Mary and Joseph have made a home for themselves in Bethlehem, and have been there now maybe 18 months to 2 years.

Think about that the next time you look at a manger scene where there's typically shepherds and wise men all gathered around the infant Jesus lying in a manger. I'm not saying you have to redo your nativity scenes, but just understand that the shepherds and the wise men weren't there all at the same time.

I still like our nativities the way they are. They remind us of these various pieces of the story. We have a couple nativities at home. One is the Fischer-Price "Little People" nativity set. We've probably lost some of the pieces over the years, but there's an angel and sheep and a shepherd and a donkey and Mary and Joseph

and baby Jesus in a manger and wise men with their gifts and a camel. And there's a little stable with a place for the angel to sit on top of it, and if you press the angel down then the star lights up and it plays "Away in a Manger." And our 2 year old loves to press that button. So much so, in fact, that sometimes we need to put it out of his reach. It starts to push our buttons.

So when you see the angel and the shepherds and Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus in a manger and wise men with their gifts, just remember that those things didn't all happen at once. The shepherds saw the angel, and then they saw the infant Jesus. The wise men saw the star, and then they saw the toddler Jesus. He would have been 18 months to 2 years old by the time the wise men arrived in Bethlehem. Jesus would have been sitting on his mother's knee or standing by her side.

I can't explain to you what's going on with the star. I don't claim to understand this. But somehow, God was communicating supernaturally through this star, to these magi in the east. God was revealing to them that the king of the Jews had been born. These learned men were familiar with Jewish prophecies. They were also attentive to the stars in the sky. And they recognized that something was happening that presented an opportunity of a lifetime. So they set out on this journey.

We're not told exactly where they came from. It just says from the east. If they came from around Babylon, along the trade route which followed the Euphrates River, it would have been about a 900 mile trek, which means it could have been a few months probably from the time they first saw the star until they got to Jerusalem.¹ And they would have been traveling through the very places we see on the news so much today: Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and then into Israel.

Well, eventually they arrived in Jerusalem, which would have been the natural place for them to begin their inquiries. It was the capital city. They ended up talking to Herod, who was the Roman authority over Israel and Judah. Herod was a nasty guy. He had a lust for power, and he was suspicious of anyone who posed a threat to his authority. He even put to death some of his own relatives, including a wife and sons. He cared more about his position of power than anything else. That's why, later in Matthew 2, we read of Herod putting to death the babies of Bethlehem, because he wanted to make sure this supposed king of the Jews would not survive.

¹ Michael Wilkins, Matthew, NIVAC, page 94.

What a display of pride—for someone to think they can thwart God’s plans and reverse the prophecies of God’s Word. It says in verses 3-4 that Herod gathered “the chief priests and scribes” and asked them where the Christ was to be born. And they quoted Micah 5:2—Bethlehem. So Herod knew the prophecy. But he was still determined to thwart God’s plan. Herod is shaking his fist in God’s face and saying, “I don’t care what you say You’re going to do. I’m not going to let it happen. I’m going to have my own way.”

And then we see how manipulative and cunning Herod could be (vv. 7-8). What a wicked lie! Herod didn’t want to worship this newborn King. He wanted to kill Him! But again, think of God’s sovereignty over these events, in that Herod trusted these men to return to Jerusalem and tell him where the child was. Herod didn’t send any spies to follow the wise men. He didn’t send an assassin to take care of this threat right away. He trusted in his ability to deceive. He trusted that these magi would come back with the information he needed, and he could deal with it then.

So the magi went on their way. And after finding the baby, verse 12 tells us of another divine intervention. Read vs. 12. God was overseeing all of this. He had ordained all of it to happen just as it did. Prophecies were fulfilled. Even Herod, wicked as he was, played right into the plan. He helped the wise men on their way. He could not thwart God’s plans. Instead, God thwarted Herod’s plans by redirecting the magi and then warning Joseph to flee to Egypt with Mary and Jesus.

Gentiles Drawn to Jesus

The second observation I want to make is that this is a story of Gentiles being drawn to Jesus. These wise men were not Jews, not from Israel. They travelled some distance from the east in order to come and worship this king of the Jews.

And, by the way, there were probably more than 3 of these guys. Since there were three gifts mentioned, it has been assumed that there were 3 wise men. But it’s more likely that it was a larger group, and possibly with soldiers or guards accompanying them. So if you’re picturing 3 guys on camels slowly making their way across the desert, it’s probably a more accurate picture to envision an extensive entourage of prominent, wealthy figures flanked by their servants and guards. They would have made quite a scene as they entered Jerusalem, and then they would have been an even bigger deal in little Bethlehem.

So we see this group of Gentiles come and worship this very young King. And this anticipates the Great Commission at the very end of Matthew's gospel, where Jesus tells His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of *all nations* (all the Gentiles), baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ."

Understand this . . . our God is a missionary God. He seeks sinners to save. He draws people to His Son. He irresistibly attracts people to worship Jesus. That's what we see happening with these wise men. And that's what is happening here in Pittsburgh and throughout the world as the Gospel continues to go forth.

What an exciting thing to think about, the sovereignty of God over all things, the commission He gives to us to proclaim this Good News of His Son to all the nations, and the abundant evidence we have (even from Jesus' birth, and throughout the history of the church, and in our world today) that God is drawing the nations to worship His Son.

I think of those of you who are regularly doing street evangelism, and you're able to talk to people from different places and backgrounds who are studying and working here in Pittsburgh. And those who are involved in Bible studies with international students and visiting scholars from other countries. What amazing opportunities we have in this city and region to be part of God's plans to draw people to Himself.

I think also of church-planting efforts in this area. Ken Cordray who planted Living Faith Community Church a few years ago and is working diligently, not only to establish a thriving church in the West hills, but to establish a church that will plant other churches in the area. And I think of Rob Maine's vision at Renaissance Church in the Highland Park area, and Josh Tancodo's labors in Brentwood with Redeeming Grace Church. And there are others. God is doing some exciting things here in this region. Not that any of these ventures are easy. It's very slow progress. But God is bringing people to Pittsburgh who want to be involved in Gospel work, and He's initiating new churches in areas where people need to hear the Good news.

We, as a church, want to be part of this movement to see Gospel-centered churches springing up in more and more places around this region. And integrally connected with this passion for local church-planting is a passion for church-planting in other parts of the world, in places where there is very little access to the Bible,

where there is a desperate need for strong Gospel-centered churches. There are people who need the Gospel all over the world, and we want to be connected with the things God is doing all over the world, exalting His Son and compelling people to worship Him. In places like the Middle East, and Kenya, and South Africa, and Romania, and South America.

What happened with the wise men is still happening today in so many places around the globe, including our own city. Let's have our eyes open and our hearts eager to respond and take risks so that we can have a front row seat for the some of the amazing things God is doing.

Another interesting thing here in this passage is the implicit indictment on the Jewish religious leaders. These wise men from the east—these Gentiles—were so eager to find the king of the Jews so they could worship Him. But did you notice the response, or lack of response, by the chief priests and scribes? They assembled when Herod called for them, and they could easily answer the question asked of them. They knew the prophecy. They knew that Bethlehem was the place where the Messiah was to be born. But there's no indication that they had any interest in going to see the king of the Jews. Doesn't that seem odd? They were Jews. You would think that, of all people, they would want to see their king. But it was the Gentiles from the east who came with eagerness and excitement to find this baby.

Dan Doriani, in his commentary on Matthew, says that "Sometimes those who most know the faith in the mind know it least in the heart. They should have joined the Magi and traveled to Bethlehem."²

Let's take our cues from the wise men. And let's hear the rebuke that comes in the apathy of these religious leaders. Head knowledge is worthless if it doesn't produce a desire to praise Jesus, if it doesn't set you on a path of searching for Him and falling down to worship Him.

Joy in Worship

And that leads to our third and final point . . . Let's consider these wise men and their joyful worship. Look at how emphatic verse 10 is. "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." That's a lot of joy. Matthew piled together these words to try to get across to his readers just how excited and happy these magi were.

² Doriani, Matthew, page 31.

We've seen some great examples of worship in these Scripture passages about Jesus' birth. Luke 1 records Mary's song of praise (the Magnificat). "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." There's also Zachariah's song of praise (the Benedictus). "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people . . ." And last week we saw how the shepherds responded in worship. The angel proclaimed to them good news of great joy, and they responded to that revelation with worship and witness, with praise and proclamation. They were "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

And now we see the wise men joyfully worshipping this newborn King. The wise men were not just going through the motions here. It's not like they merely felt some duty to travel for months and find this child. They had an intense desire to do this. And they experienced great delight when their journey finally led them to the One they had been seeking. (v.11a) This would have been a very humble and humbling act—to fall down on the ground and worship a young child. Imagine Jesus sitting on Mary's knee, or maybe just learning to walk—and this group of wealthy, prominent men from a distant land come to the house and fall on the ground to worship this little boy.

That communicates something very powerful about the identity of this Son. He is no ordinary boy. He was to be the Savior of the world. He is God in the flesh who lived a perfect life and died on the cross and rose on the third day. He is worthy of our worship. This also shows us something profound about worship. Worship is humbling. It brings even the wealthiest and most privileged people in the world to their knees before their Savior. When we bow before Jesus, we are all in the same place. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor. It doesn't matter what your education is, or what your career is, or where you're from. It doesn't matter if you're a lowly shepherd or a prominent wise man. In front of Jesus, none of that matters. All of those things just fade away when Jesus captivates our attention and our allegiance.

And another thing that happens in the midst of joyful worship is joyful giving. (v. 11b) These were expensive gifts. They were fitting gifts to be offered by such men. They were fitting gifts to be offered to a king. And, again, this was not mere duty for these magi. This was a joyful occasion. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and they seemed to recognize that.

Kids, I hope this Christmas you will not only experience the excitement of receiving presents. I hope you will experience the excitement of giving. Of course you're going to be excited to see what you're going to get for Christmas. There's nothing wrong

with that. I'm excited to see what I'm going to get! But I hope you'll discover in life—I hope God will make this real to you—that there are things far greater than getting presents. Jesus said it's more blessed to give than to receive (Acts 20:35). And that is true! I hope you will come to know the truth of that. It is a joy to give to others.

Our 2 year old, Micah, is good for sermon illustrations. He found a penny the other day. Who knows where he got it. His favorite pastime, I think, is just wondering around the house grabbing things from one room and dropping them in another room. It drives us crazy sometimes. Wherever he found this penny, he held on to it for quite a while. And then he started talking to me about who he wanted to give it to. He mentioned giving it to Milaina or Annalyse. He mentioned giving it to Noah. And then he said he wanted to give it to Jesus. And I said, "That's great, Micah. It's great to give presents to Jesus, like the wise men did." And then Micah asked if it was a picture of Jesus on the penny. And I said, "No, that's Abraham Lincoln."

I do hope that Micah, and all of us, will experience the joy of giving. And most of all, I hope you will come to know the joy of giving gifts to Jesus, like these wise men did. To open the treasure of your life, and offer to Him everything that you are—your hopes for the future, your talents and abilities. Offer all of that to Jesus, saying, "It's yours. I want my life to be about You. I want my life to show the world how great You are." There's nothing that will bring you more happiness than that—in this life and forever.

A Question

I want to close with a question for all of us to ponder as we think about the story of the wise men. The question is: who do you most identify with in this story? Are you like Herod (who hated Jesus), the religious leaders (who were apathetic), or the wise men (who were passionate about finding Jesus and worshipping Him)?

Herod was troubled by the idea of the Messiah because it was a threat to his autonomy, his authority, his power and prerogative. Maybe some of you are not Christians who are here this morning, and maybe you can identify a bit with Herod's sentiment. Not that you're out to hurt anybody. But when you think about the Christian faith you have a similar fear. You feel threatened by the idea of needing to submit to Jesus. You want to do what you want to do, and you don't want anyone else telling you what you should do. You don't want to answer to anyone. I pray that you will repent of that prideful attitude and realize the joy

of humble obedience to the most gracious Master. In the end, this is not giving up anything, but gaining everything.

Or maybe some here this morning are apathetic religious folks, like the chief priests and scribes. You know quite a bit about the Bible, but there's no passion to worship Jesus. That is equally prideful and misguided, and equally in need of repentance and forgiveness. Cry out to Jesus, admitting your cold-hearted attitude toward Him. Plead with Him to reveal Himself to you and to revive your heart to praise Him.

Hopefully, every one of us this morning can come to experience the wonder and the joy that these wise men experienced. I hope we will each bow to the king of the Jews, the baby born in Bethlehem who would grow up and go to the cross for us, and in so doing, give us the greatest gift imaginable—the forgiveness of our sins. Let us rejoice exceedingly with great joy, and fall down and worship him.