

12.31.23 –

Sermon Series: The Chosen One: Gifts, Escape, and Heaven Come Down

Sermon Title: Themes of the Magi” – Matthew 2:1-12

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This is always an interesting time, the week between Christmas and New Years Day. In just a few more days we'll get into the swing of the New Year and kids will be back in school... We've had the big celebration of Christmas, and then we experience a bit of the letdown... But, here's the issue... the letdown, is a product of our culture... You see, for centuries, many traditions of the Church have viewed Christmas as a feast time... that lasts for days... the long wait of Advent, culminates in the feast of Christmas... we are in the feast of Christmas now...

Our culture, and it's no doubt related to commercialization and marketing, has led us to have all of our Christmas feasting BEFORE the event... So, we decorate in November, and buy our trees the day after thanksgiving... and then Christmas comes and its over... And, look... I'm not saying don't do those things... It's just something to be aware of it... Because there is a cultural understanding of Christmas... And there is a Christian, biblical understanding of Christmas. One is full of nostalgia and sentiment, and holiday cheer... *The other is actually, rugged, violent, desperate, and world-changing...*

Today, and in the first two Sundays of January, we're going to look at the results of Christmas... God has become a Man... and that has alarming effects on the world, and as we'll see today... the effects are felt almost immediately. Much of the Cultural Christmas expressions we celebrate are pointing to the effects of Christmas... A day of peace on earth... of renewed hope personally, and in the world...

I used to host a book club that met for over 10 years, and every December we would have a Dickens Christmas party- and we would read various selections of Dickens' work, and of course we would end with a reading from A Christmas Carol... and this paragraph has become perhaps my favorite passage from a Christmas Carol, it's not well known... but it communicates the depth of change that has taken place in the heart of Ebenezer Scrooge-

“He went to the church, and walked about the streets, and watched the people hurrying to and fro, and patted the children on the head, and questioned beggars, and looked down into the kitchens of homes, and up to the windows, and found that everything could yield him pleasure. He had never dreamed of any walk, that anything, could give him so much happiness.” (p. 119)

Something has happened to Scrooge that has deeply affected him and the change has begun to set in... Of course, that story points to the real story of Christmas, where God became a Man... where real, lasting change has come into the world— change that can bring real pleasure and happiness... the kind that is greater than nostalgia or sentiment... the kind that is rooted in the Christ Child Himself.

Today, we encounter the magi—these mysterious, foreign, “wise men” that come searching for the Christ child... Who were they? Why is this part of the story? What were they really looking for?

I want us to look at three themes of the Magi- 1. The Gentile Theme, 2. The Contrast Theme, and 3. The Astronomical Theme.... And then I want to end with a couple of ideas for the New Year for you and me.

1. The Gentile Theme –

Matthew does a couple of things for us in the beginning verses of chapter 2- he of course tells us WHERE Jesus has been born- in Bethlehem, and this is very important because it clearly links the birth of Jesus to the fulfillment of prophecy... Micah 5:2, a passage we hear a lot in Advent leading up to Christmas- says that out of Bethlehem, the Ruler of Israel would come...

Micah's prediction comes 700 years or so earlier, and so Matthew is communicating that God's plan for Salvation that has been in motion for millennia is being fulfilled.

Bethlehem has a long history in Israel. It's the place where Jacob buried his beloved wife Rachel, when she gave birth to Benjamin, and it was here that David, Benjamin's descendent was born... and then Micah tells us that a great Descendent of David's would one day be born in Bethlehem as well.

It's not just important WHERE Jesus was born however... it's also important WHEN He was born... because WHEN Jesus is born, there is a king in charge of Bethlehem and surrounding region, Judea... The Romans are in charge... but Matthew tells us Herod, a Half-Jew, Half Idumean was appointed by the Roman Senate to rule over this region.... And, the birth of Jesus... in Bethlehem, during the reign of Herod... rattles the cages of everyone in the area...

And it begins with Gentiles... foreigners.... Who travel from the East, to Bethlehem...

Now, who were these guys? This is the first question we have to wade through- because there are centuries of legend and myth attached to them. Were they kings? Were they "wise men?" Were there 3 of them? There is nothing to suggest that there were only three of them, except that there were three gifts given... which we'll see in a moment... Most scholars agree that these were most likely a type of astronomer, or magician who read the stars... maybe even from a tribe of magi in the east, from Persia, or Arabia...

They saw something in the stars... something in the skies that moved them... compelled them, to head west to Judea and seek out the meaning of what they were seeing.... They think, as they tell Herod, that someone great, a King even, had been born...

Think for a moment about these men—however many there were, their traveling party... with seemingly so little to go on... they head out to endure all the dangers of travel in the ancient world... all the uncertainties... *because they saw something in the sky that compelled them...* And not only did they go... but they went with costly gifts?

I don't think we give these men enough credit in the story... Was it faith that moved them? Was it the Holy Spirit that led them? They come to worship, and adore a King they believe to be the King of the Jews... they come in wonder and awe, and celebrate Him with gifts... Michael Green, *the great bible commentator says this is one of the Great Surprises of the gospels... but God is a God of surprises... those who think they can predict how God will act, are mistaken...*

Here, magi from the east come to Jesus... Gentiles... People OUTSIDE of God's covenant with His people Israel... except all throughout the story of Israel, we have heard of a day that is coming when people of all nations will come to honor the true King of kings...

When Matthew writes his gospel, years after the death and resurrection of Jesus... Gentiles are beginning to flood into the church.... They are believing, when most of Matthew's Jewish friends did not...

And so, he writes of the moment where Gentiles from afar... sought out the Christ Child, with wonder and awe leading them... and worshipped Him as the King of the Jews. For Matthew, it's a fulfillment of the words of Isaiah 60 – *"Nations will come to Your light, and kings to the brightness of Your dawn..."*

And this begins, in earnest... with the Magi... And today... looks like you and me... People of all tribes and tongues... from all corners of the world... coming with wonder and we to worship the Christ Child...the King of kings... the fact that you and I sit here today... compelled to worship...led by the Spirit to worship... we could also say... it the work of the God of surprises... That I would be included in this, is astonishing...

2. The Contrast Theme

Word begins to spread that these travelers have arrived and they're searching for an important birth... Herod, the king hears about this and it causes an immediate stir... he gathers everyone together... What is going on out there? So his scribes and chief priests come together, and he asks... Hey, where is the Christ Child supposed to be born?? Is it really Bethlehem, and they all answer... yes... and they quote Micah 5:2 to him...

So, Herod says, bring those wise men... bring those travelers I want to talk with them... and he kind of commissions them... hey, if you can find this Child... go for it... and let me know where He is, *"so I might go and worship Him too."*

There are a couple of contrasts to make here- and we will see them even more strongly next week... But first, we have Herod and Jesus... Herod, is the king of Judea, but remember, he's put there by the Romans... he's backed by the Romans- by the oppressors of Israel... there is aggression and cruelty in his reign... there is hatred and fear...

Contrast that with God in the flesh... in the form of a Child.... Herod's way is of hatred... Jesus' way is of love, of vulnerability, which will ultimately show itself on the cross. History tells us that Herod was 33 when he was inaugurated... and of course, Jesus was 33 when He died... Again the contrast is striking!

But think also of the contrast between the Magi, and the Jewish Priests... The Magi leave everything to search out the Christ child... they bring gifts... they seek to worship Him... The priests, are seemingly indifferent... unmoved...

They've been told of these reports- they've even said, yes, it is Bethlehem that He is to be born... YET.... They didn't go to greet Him. They didn't go to see if the news was true... instead, it's their apathy that shows... And sadly, their apathy... combines with the hatred of Herod... and the results are what we will look at next week together.

Herod contrasted with Jesus... The oppressor vs. the oppressed. Hate vs. Love. The Magi contrasted with the Priests... Fervent worship vs. apathy...

The coming of Jesus into the world CREATES the contrast... He divides. At the very start of Jesus' life there are two camps of people forming... those who welcome Him, those who believe... and those who oppose and hate Him. And this would only continue throughout Jesus' life.

3. The Astronomical Theme

In the ancient world, the study of the skies and heavens was very important to many cultures... It was a way that they could see order in the universe. The way the stars and planets moved and orbited provided a sense of order... So, when something OUTSIDE of that order took place, the ancients believed something remarkable was happening in the world... Some type of change was taking place... sometimes a political change...

One example of this, became attached to the death of Julius Ceasar in 44 B.C.... where a NOVA – a new star was seen in the sky above his funeral pyre... And many believed that Ceasar had gone to join the pantheon of the gods... So stars and great men were attached...

Many have tried to study and research what exactly the Magi saw when they saw the star of Bethlehem, or the Christmas Star, the Christ star... Was it a comet? Was it two planets being seen together at the same time? I don't know exactly; the Bible doesn't say specifically... that's above my scientific abilities...

What matters for us... is that whatever they saw... drew them... compelled them to make this pilgrimage, this journey to see the one born King of the Jews.... The star led them to where Jesus was.

And when they arrive... whenever that was... sometime after Jesus' birth... They come with their gifts... gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And what interesting gifts they were...

Gold- a royal gift, for a king... A King in this case, who was a Child before them, in child's clothes. Frankincense... used by the priests in the temple for worship constantly... and here before them was the Christ Child who would become the Ultimate Priest between God and man. And myrrh... the most curious of gifts... a substance used to embalm the dead.... The King and Priest... who would become the Sacrifice... born to die....

These gifts brought by the Magi reveal who Jesus was... what He came to do... and what the cost would be.

These wise men... these Gentiles from afar... compelled by faith? Compelled by the star... moved by the Spirit of God? Filled with wonder...

Fall down in front of the Christ Child to worship Him in awe and wonder... A picture of what is to come on that great and final day... when all the kings of the world, filled with wonder when every knee will bow and worship Jesus as King. It begins with the Magi.

Now, a few ideas for us as we begin a new year, 2024—a few ideas for how we can re-engage wonder, like the Magi... in a time when we are so given to spiritual apathy like the priests...

The Magi are compelled... and at the feet of the Christ Child... they worship...

This is the posture of the follower of Jesus.... Compelled by God's Spirit...

we go to Jesus... and in wonder at Who He is, and what He has done for us...

we worship.... This is the posture of the Christian life.

And, so as we begin a new year... and the tasks of the new year will quickly be in front of us on our plates... The new goals. The new tasks... The new ideas...

How can we be people who are continually filled with wonder when we think about Jesus?

Let me give you just three, quick suggestions that might help us re-engage the wonder as the new year begins...

1. If you have been a Christian for a good amount of time- more than likely you have friends and people who have been a part of that journey... God moves us all around, and sometimes we lose contact, and new relationships begin, and that's all fine...

But one of the things that I have often found to be spiritually reinvigorating is to connect with old believing friend... Maybe someone you used to go to church with... maybe someone you came to faith with... maybe God took you in different paths... I've found that when I've picked up the phone, or got together for coffee with that person... we find ourselves talking about all the Lord has done for us over the years... we recount the past... God's faithfulness to us... we see the changes He's made in each of us...

I think this can be a simple, wonderful thing to do that will help you reengage the wonder at how God has been faithful to you over the years.

2. Consider taking a spiritual retreat – There are times when we need to get away... and perhaps the beginning of the new year, when we have our calendars out and we're in planning mode... we make the effort to plan a weekend, a few days, something... where you are specifically taking time to get away and spend time with the Lord.

Focused, spiritual retreat... Perhaps it's to a place that has its own physical wonder about it... that leads you to a spiritual wonder as you contemplate your place in the world, and how God is caring for you even amidst His wonderful creation... Maybe you've never done this before... and before we get to far into the new year, it would be worth thinking about and scheduling.

3. And finally, from the wonderful retreat... to embracing the mundane...

Spiritual retreats are very useful... connecting with past believing friends is wonderful... But, much of the Christian life is embracing the mundane... The everydayness of our lives... the daily prayer... the daily Bible reading... the community and fellowship with one another.

What happens, is that as these things become part of the fabric of our lives... when we allow for the ordinariness of church every Sunday morning to shape us... the mundane has a way of being a gateway for wonder...

It's as if we're constantly priming the pump... ready to be overwhelmed by wonder and awe at Who Jesus is and what He is doing in us.

Christmas is the perfect way to begin a new season, a new Christian year... a new calendar year... and it affords us the opportunity to reengage with God in a way that is driven by wonder and worship at the feet of Jesus...

God With Us – Eugene Peterson

“Wonder is the only adequate launching pad for exploring this fullness, this wholeness, of human life. Once a year, each Christmas, for a few days at least, we and millions of our neighbors turn aside from our preoccupations with life reduced to biology or economics or psychology and join together in a community of wonder. The wonder keeps us open-eyed, expectant, alive to life that is always more than we can account for, that always exceeds our calculations, that is always beyond anything we can make.”

So, let's not be like the priests whose apathy leads them to miss the opportunity... let us be like the magi, compelled to follow Jesus and worship Him in a fresh way, and let Him truly, truly lead us wherever He will this year.

Let's Pray.