

The Wise Men: Matthew 2:1-12

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A couple weeks ago I was looking back through the Christmas Eve sermons I've done in the past, and Sunday sermons I've preached leading up to Christmas, and I realized that one of the passages I haven't preached on yet is the story of the wise men in Matthew 2. So that's what I want us to look at this evening.

I'll read the passage, and pray, and then I just have 3 simple thoughts for us to consider from this story, 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. 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 Ceasar 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.

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 through this star, to these magi in the east. God was revealing to them that the king of the Jews had been born. So these guys came to Jerusalem, naturally, the capital city, to inquire further.

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.

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 14 tells us of another divine intervention. 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 very briefly is that this is a story of Gentiles being drawn to Jesus. They 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 at Jesus' birth we see this group of Gentiles come and worship. 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 . . ."

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.

Another interesting thing here 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. 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.

Joy in Worship

Thirdly, 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. They 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. (Jesus would have been several months old by this time, possibly a year and a half or slightly more, based on what the wise men told Herod about the timing of the star and Herod's decision to eliminate the baby boys who were 2 years old and younger.) So imagine Mary and Joseph, with Jesus sitting on Joseph'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. And it 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.

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, your ideas about a future career. 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 evening, 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 evening 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.

Hopefully, every one of us this evening 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. Let us rejoice exceedingly with great joy, and fall down and worship him.