

A Christmas Celebration
The Royal Authority and Glorious
Majesty of the Name

“Meet the Magi”

Advent Series
PBC 2023

Texts: Matthew 2:1-12; Micah 5:2-5a; 2 Samuel 5:2

Matthew 2:1-12

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ “ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ” ⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days. ³ Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴ And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. ⁵ And he shall be their peace.

2 Samuel 5:2

In times past, when Saul was king over us, it was you who led out and brought in Israel. And the LORD said to you, ‘You shall be shepherd of my people Israel, and you shall be prince over Israel.’ ”

Introduction:

- During the Advent season leading up to and following Christmas Day, it has been a longstanding tradition to sing Carols that celebrate different aspects of the birth of Christ that are recorded in the familiar story told by Matthew or Luke.
 - O Come, O Come Emmanuel (Matthew 1:23)
 - Silent Night (Luke 2:8)
 - O Holy Night (Luke 2:8)
 - Angels We Have Heard on High (Luke 2:10-14)
 - Hark the Herald Angels Sing (Luke 2:10-14)
 - Joy to the World (Luke 2:10)
 - It Came Upon a Midnight Clear (Luke 2:8)
 - Away in a Manger (Luke 2:7)
 - O Little Town of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:1-7)
- Our text this morning is the basis for the first Christmas carol written by an American in America! And it was written oddly enough by a Music Professor for a Christmas Pageant he was putting on for the Seminary where he taught in 1857.
- When John H. Hopkins wrote the carol “We Three Kings” he had no idea that it would end up appearing in almost every Christmas pageant from that day forward – many of you at some point in your youth found yourself marching across a church platform or school stage wrapped up in your dad’s bathrobe wearing a cardboard crown lovingly made by your mom depicting one or the other of these ancient kings.
- While this carol has made the account before us unforgettably familiar – it has also at the same time obscured some important details in the text . . . not the least of which are that these men were not kings but magi; and there were probably significantly more than three of them who came to Bethlehem 2000 years ago.
- If we have been paying attention to Matthew’s telling of the story, we have noted that he has carefully structured the dramatic story

of Jesus' birth into 5 major acts designed to point out important theological realities God was bringing about through the birth of His Son, Jesus the Messiah.

1. Act 1 (1:1-17) reveals the significance of this amazing birth – it is a royal birth; a covenant birth; and a messianic birth! Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham has finally arrived.
2. Act 2 (1:18-23) focuses our attention on the miraculous means, the theological significance, and the Divine intention of the incarnation and birth of the Son of God come to dwell with us (Immanuel).
3. **Act 3 (2:1-12) points to the royal overtones and global rule of the One who is the rightful King of Israel by birth and not by political appointment or by human strength and crafty schemes.**
4. Act 4 (2:13-18) reveals that this born King of Israel will become the representative for the entire nation of Israel rendering obedience to God and fulfilling Israel's mission to the nations.
5. Act 5 (2:19-23) culminates by presenting Jesus the Messiah as the new Moses who will lead His people on a new Exodus into the glorious Kingdom God will establish through and for Him.

- Thus far in our Advent series, we have looked at the **“Beauty and Wonder”** as well as the **“Power and Glory”** of the names Matthew ascribes to Jesus in these chapters.
- This morning we want to examine the **“Royal Authority and Glorious Majesty”** of these names which Matthew highlights in the third act of his drama in which we witness the surprising arrival, joyful adoration, and personal devotion the Magi render to the infant Jesus in the little town of Bethlehem.
- Perhaps the best way for us to understand this part of Matthew's story is to ask Matthew to guide us through the narrative so we don't inadvertently miss anything he wants to show us in this text.
- So, let's start where Matthew begins:

I. **A Surprising Location: Matt. 2:1**

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem,

- This section begins with a report that the miraculous birth predicted by the prophets, recorded in the genealogy, and announced by the Angel of the Lord has in fact happened just as God promised.
- However, there is an important detail that Matthew wants to make sure we don't miss . . . the location of the birth.
- When we left Joseph at the end of Act 2 in Matthew's Christmas drama, he was in his hometown of Nazareth, struggling to figure out what to do about the shocking, life-altering circumstances that had disrupted his life, shattered his plans, and threatened his good name.
- But that is not the biggest problem in the that Matthew wants us to wrestle with – the bigger problem is that Joseph and Mary are in the wrong town at the wrong end of the country far away from where the prophets announced Messiah would be born. Somehow Matthew must get Joseph to Bethlehem in time for Messiah to be born, not just from the right line and at the right time, but in the right location – Bethlehem of Judah!
- And if that were not enough, the right people have to move from where they are to where they should be in the drama . . . and since God is writing the script, how will He get all the players in this drama to their proper places on the stage, so they are at the right geographic spot at the exact right time to play their part?
- And what Matthew reveals is that ***God's divine providence was at work on earth and in heaven*** to bring all the players to the right place at the right time.

A. God Moved on Earth to get Joseph to Bethlehem (2:1)

- 750 years prior, through the Prophet Micah, God announced the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2-4).

- The problem confronting Matthew's readers is how will God get Joseph to Bethlehem in time for Mary to give birth to Jesus?
- The answer is surprising . . . many months earlier, God providentially moved Caesar Augustus to send out a decree that the entire Roman world would be taxed (Luke 2:1).
- As part of that massive, empire wide effort, every individual had to report to the town of his birth to be registered on the appropriate tax roll. Because Joseph was of the house and line of David, he and Mary had to report to David's City to be taxed.
- And David's City was not where you might expect it to be . . . it was not the city of Jerusalem where David ruled but the humble, quiet, obscure town of his birth . . . Bethlehem.
- And so while the world waited in silence, God was at work moving and shaping the events of the most powerful kingdom on earth, Rome, to get one humble carpenter and his pregnant wife from Nazareth to Bethlehem.
- But God was not just working on earth guiding and directing the heart of the Emperor of Rome, He was also providentially at work in the heavens doing the same thing with the stars.

B. *God Moved in the Heavens to get the Magi to Bethlehem (2:2)*

Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

- Matthew records the arrival of a group of wise men (magi) who had traveled from the East, most likely Babylon or Persia.
- What prompted their difficult and dangerous journey was the sudden appearance of a star in the constellations of the heavens they could see in their land.
- ***We don't know*** what this "star" was exactly – some argue it was a new star; others a comet; some believe it was an unusual planetary alignment; some believe it was an angel; and some believe it was a particular manifestation of the Shekinah glory of God as it had appeared in the Pillar of Fire that guided Israel in Exodus. ***But we do know three things:***

1. In the world of these Magi, the appearance of a star like this signaled the birth of an important world ruler.
 2. The “star” moved in unusual ways that were not typical for planetary object.
 3. The appearance, movement, and function of this “star” were supernaturally orchestrated by God – in other words, the star was no ordinary star; it had an extraordinary function – to bring these Magi to a particular town (Bethlehem) at a particular time in history (the birth of the King of Kings)!
- God was at work guiding the events on earth and in the heavens to bring the right people to the right place so they could worship Jesus.
 - And perhaps that is what God is doing in your life today . . . He is using the events of providence, which make no sense to you, because He is seeking worshippers who will come Jesus and become His devoted followers.
 - Illustration – Darren at Carolina Triathlon

II. A Troubling Revelation: Matt. 2:2-3

Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;

- The arrival of the Magi created no small stir in the city of Jerusalem . . . starting with Herod, the most disturbed of all!
- Herod had a long and storied history in Israel. Born in in 70 BC; named as the “client-king” of Israel by Rom in 40 BC; Herod assumed power in 37 BC and had ruled with an iron fist for more than 30 years.
- In this act, Matthew wants us to see and recognize that Herod is acting as a king over God’s people (mentioned 3x).
- But . . . is Herod a legitimate king? And more importantly, what kind of a King is he? How is he ruling in God’s stead?

How is he advancing God's purposes? How is he leading and shepherding God's people over which he rules?

- And the answer to those questions is evident – Herod had a worldwide reputation for cruelty, savagery, treachery, and ruthless hostility to anyone and anything that stood in his way or threatened his right to be king!
- And the one thing that threatened Herod's kingship more than anything else was that he was not a "born king of the Jews" . . . in other words, he did not have a birthright to sit on David's throne.
- So, when the Magi arrive from the East laden with treasure announcing they have come to find and worship someone who had been born King of the Jews, Herod's world was rocked to its very roots.
- And if this were not enough . . . they were attaching immense significance to this individual since they had seen "**his** star" when it appeared in the sky over their country!
- The word "troubled" is a very strong term . . . it means to be deeply anxious, perturbed, and alarmed. And when Herod grew afraid and alarmed . . . he always reacted in anger in ways that affected and troubled those around him and under his rule (in this case, "all of Jerusalem with him").
- What was it about the birth of Jesus that threatened Herod? I would suggest that it was more than just the fact that a legitimate descendant of David had been born who had a right to David's throne . . . there were those in every generation of Israelites.
- I believe Herod knew that this descendant was unique . . . the baby that the Magi were seeking was the Messiah all of Israel had been waiting for . . . and though he didn't know much, Herod knew enough to know that this Messiah's mission was to deliver Israel from rulers like himself.

- In other words, Herod knew that Messiah didn't just have a right to David's throne . . . he intended to rule the Kingdom over which Herod currently ruled.
- And this deeply disturbed Herod – it troubled his soul to the point that he determined to do anything to keep his throne safe from Messiah . . . even if it meant slaughtering all the infants in Bethlehem!
- Herod had no problem with all the other infants who were born of David's line at Bethlehem. However, he did have a problem with this particular infant because it meant the end of Herod's rule.
- And that is how many people feel about Jesus today. They are fine with a religious leader, a good teacher, and even a worker of miracles and a doer of good deeds. But as soon as Jesus is presented as a King who has authority over their personal lives or over the kingdom in which they live . . . they join Herod in their effort to keep Jesus in His proper place . . . in Bethlehem, well away from the center of power in their lives or in the world!
- And Matthew exposes the horrific lengths to which Herod was willing to go to hold on to his throne in the next two sections of this third act in his drama.

III. A Scriptural Confirmation: Matt. 2:4-6

*and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶ " 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are **by no means** least among the rulers of Judah; **for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.** ' "*

- Immediately upon realizing the significance of the news the Magi brought and recognizing that the "born King" they were seeking was most likely the Messiah prophesied by Israel's prophets, Herod gathered the religious leaders and Scriptural experts to inquire about **where** he was to be born!

- The chief priests and the scribes immediately responded with a specific location (Bethlehem) that had been predicted in a specific prophecy by Micah some 750 years earlier.
- There are two important adjustments they make to this prophecy that Matthew highlights:
- First, Bethlehem is no longer “least among the clans” . . . something monumental has occurred to elevate and exalt her status above all the cities of the world. Prior to this event, Bethlehem was an unremarkable town in Israel and totally unknown by all the other cities of the world. However, because of who had been born there, the whole world would come to know and recognized the exalted status God had given to this humble city! So . . . what had happened?
- Matthew adds a line from 2 Samuel 5:2 to Micah’s quote . . . “For from you will come a ruler ***who will shepherd my people, Israel.***” In this humble town would come Messiah . . . who would rule God’s people very differently than the tyrant Herod.
- As the Great Shepherd, He would rule them; as the Good Shepherd, He would serve them and give His life for them!
- This Scriptural confirmation and its amazing implications are stunning. But what is even more stunning than the incredible confirmation these religious leaders give to Herod is their response as spiritual leaders of Israel – they answer Herod, close up the scroll, and go back to whatever they were doing.
- What we expected them to do was to make their own joyful journey to Bethlehem (only five miles away . . . an hour’s walk) to greet the Messiah whose birth was being announced. But instead, they close up the scrolls and go about their “messiah-less” lives.
- And that is precisely the same danger that faces many of us this morning . . . we know all the theological truths about Messiah just as they did. We even can quote the same texts they quoted . . . but we can walk away with lives that are relatively unchanged and undisturbed by the Messiah who has come!

IV. A Deceptive Investigation: Matt. 2:7-8

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

- After exposing the apathy and indifference of the religious and spiritual leaders of Israel as they made a diligent search of the Scriptures to confirm the location of Messiah's birth, Matthew points next to the anger and antipathy of Herod's response that is well hidden under the cloak of respectability.
- Listen to His instruction . . . *"Seek diligently! Search exhaustively! Inquire carefully! Report back immediately!"*
- Herod asks the right questions about Jesus . . . *"What time did his star appear?"*
- Herod makes the right appeal about Jesus . . . *"Go and search diligently for the child and when you have found him . . . bring me word!"*
- Herod claims to have the right motive in seeking Jesus . . . *"that I too may come and worship him."*
- All of this sounds tremendously good! What has happened? Has the Scripture finally gripped the heart of this aged tyrant? He really does appear to want to come and worship Jesus!
- BUT . . . Matthew includes a detail to alert us that all this Messiah activity on Herod's part is outward show to cover his real intent . . . an intent that has nothing to do with worshipping Jesus but rather doing away with Jesus violently and ruthlessly. And that detail is found at the front part of these verses . . . *"Then (after the Priests and Scribes answered) Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star appeared."*

By this point in this third act of Matthew's Christmas Drama we have seen two important reactions or responses to the stunning news the Magi bring to Jerusalem.

- **First**, we have seen the anger and antagonism from Herod when he realized that Jesus had come to take his rightful place on the throne Herod currently occupied.
- **Second**, we have seen the apathy and indifference of the religious and spiritual leaders of Israel to the stunning news that their long-awaited Messiah had been born in Bethlehem, just an hour's walk away from Jerusalem.

But there is a third response, that of these Magi, which Matthew wants us to observe and imitate in our own hearts:

V. A Scandalous Adoration: Matt. 2:9-11

*After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ **When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.** ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.*

- In these verses a very important element of the story re-appears – ***“Behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.”***
- The re-appearance of this star caused the opposite response in them than Herod's anger and antipathy and a strikingly different response than the apathy and indifference of Priests and Scribes. These pagan Magi were filled with great joy to the point they rejoiced exceedingly (very strong and vivid expressions of joy)!
- So great was their joy, it prompted them to do three stunning things no one would ever expect pagan officials to do for a Jewish baby born in an obscure, humble town like Bethlehem.
- **First**, they fell down before him and gave him homage as a great King and supreme ruler.
- **Second**, they ascribe to him worship and honor fitting only to God (Matthew has already told us that Jesus is Immanuel).

- **Third**, they render gifts of devotion and dedication worthy of His status as King of Kings and Lord of Lord. They opened their treasures and gave to him gifts worthy of a great king!
 - These were the very same gifts that the Queen of Sheba presented to Solomon (1 Kings 10:2-10). These are the kinds of gifts God said the nations would bring to His Messiah (Psalm 77:10-15; Isaiah 60:3-6).
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- At this point . . . while these actions are amazing and encouraging . . . most of us would not consider them scandalous! So, what is it about what is going on here in this text that Matthew wants us to see as scandalous?
 - The scandal is not that homage is being rendered and worship offered to the infant born at Bethlehem but rather in who is rendering this joyful worship.
 - Who exactly are these Magi and why are they important to Matthew's story?
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1. They were Gentiles and not Jews – as Gentiles they respond to Messiah's birth far more appropriately than the political and religious leaders of His own people.
 2. They were not just Gentiles, they were Pagan, Unclean Magi - we meet "magi" elsewhere in the Scripture . . . and in every case, they are cast in a negative light. They are the "magicians and sorcerers" that opposed Moses before Pharoah (Exodus 7:11-12). They are the "magicians, enchanters, and sorcerers" that opposed Daniel (Daniel 2:1-30). We see two of them, Simon Magus who opposes Peter and John (Acts 8:9), and Elymas the Magician who opposed Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:6-8). In other words, they were the wizards, sorcerers, and astrologers of their day!
 3. They were abhorrent to God (Dt 18:10-12) and prohibited to God's people (Lev. 19:31; 20:6).

- ***And this is why their worship and adoration of Jesus is not just surprising . . . it is scandalous!***
- These are the very first Gentiles to come and offer worship and devotion to Jesus – AND – not only are they the first Gentile converts to worship and follow Jesus . . . they are the very first New Testament converts! **And they are great sinners!**
- But . . . we should not be surprised or shocked when we think back and remind ourselves that the first Gentile convert to join herself to Israel when they came into the promised land was the well-known prostitute, Rahab!
- *God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that through Him the world might be saved (John 3:16-17)!*
- And right at the beginning of the story . . . the worst gentile sinners imaginable are the first to pay homage, offer worship, and render gifts of devotion! Nor are they supposed to be the last . . . by the end Matthew Jesus stands on a mountain declaring His authority and authorizing His disciples to go to all the nations and bring more gentiles to worship Him!
- And just like God was providentially guiding and directing the steps and ways of these first gentile converts (*And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way. Mt 2:12*); through Jesus, God will providentially guide and direct the steps and ways of all future disciples as they go to the nations to make more disciples!

Conclusion: *Personal Application – How are we supposed to respond?*

First, each of us must honestly ascertain which of the three responses Matthew presents is our own response to Jesus. Are we hostile and opposed to His rule over our life? Are we apathetic and indifferent to His presence even though we are numbered among the religious and scripturally enlightened of our day? ***Or are we joyfully exuberant as we render glad worship to Him?*** In other words, are we in the place of Herod? Are we like the Religious leaders? Or are we like the Magi?

Second, what tangible expression of our devotion and worship do we bring regularly to the feet of Christ? The magi gave magnificent, sacrificial, and valuable gifts out of their treasures as an appropriate expression of their grateful devotion to be included as worshippers of Jesus. Do we do the same? Will we do the same?

Finally, God is immensely interested in bringing pagan sinners like these Magi to the feet of Jesus where they can experience the transforming power of His grace. He is so intent on this that He moved on earth and in Heaven to get people to Bethlehem to the cradle of Jesus.

Here is the real question for us this morning: Are we willing to do the same to bring sinners to the cross of Christ to experience the power of the gospel of His grace?