

Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12

January 2

Merry Christmas everyone! I hope it has been a wonderful holiday for you all. Let's get straight to the burning question. Did you receive that gift that you really wanted? I did. I got a meat grinder. I'm pretty excited about it. I mean, I got a few awesome gifts, but that was the one I was really hoping for.

Anybody still waiting on a gift? Maybe it's still being shipped, or it's stuck in the supply chain, or you are returning something and then getting what you *really* wanted. Have you ever forgotten about a gift and then like weeks, months down the road you find it or remember it? How good does that feel? It's a bit of a delayed Christmas!

When I was a kid we had a massive snow storm - the kind where sledding and snowball fights and snow forts were all but a foregone conclusion - and we really wanted to go sledding. So we got our winter clothes on and then started searching for something that might work as a sled. We had one of those old-timey wooden sleds with the rails and it never really worked. So we were pulling out scraps of cardboard and sheet trays and whatever we could find.

My parents noticed us scrounging around for a make-shift sled and they say, "why don't you guys use those new sleds we got you for Christmas?" "We didn't get any sleds for Christmas." "Yes you did, we bought three of them...did you not get them."

A bit more searching and we discovered 3 bright plastic toboggan-style sleds tucked away neatly in a garment bag in the hall closet. Those presents were hid a little too well and my parents forgot about them until Christmas was long gone.

And of course, how exciting to get that wonderful gift and reminder of the fun we had on Christmas.

I know it's barely been a week since we celebrated Christmas. You might still have your tree up and your twinkle lights going and wrapping paper scraps haven't even been picked up for recycling. So when we read the story of the magi, or the wise men, or the three kings, it seems very fitting for the season, but them showing up to visit the baby Jesus would have probably been more like finding sleds in July than having your Christmas turkey on January 2. They have almost nothing to do with the day Jesus was born, and are more like a delayed gift that brings back the joy of Christmas long after it's passed.

Let's look at this passage together:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem **2** and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

6

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;

for out of you will come a ruler

who will shepherd my people Israel.'^[b]"

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place

where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Ok, let's dive in straight away. There's a lot going on here and I'm boiling it down to 4 lessons. Or maybe we'll call them take-aways from this text. The first is:

Lesson 1: People earnestly seeking Jesus often get recruited to his mission.

The magi, traditionally referred to as Wise Men, but more literally, magicians, were both astronomers and astrologers. In the ancient world these two things were not separate. In other words, not only did they study the location and movement of the stars, but they would also be trying to derive meaning from their findings.

What they actually witnessed, concerning the star of Jesus, is anyone's guess. One of the best guesses is that the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction with each other three times in 7 BC. Since Jupiter was the 'royal' or kingly planet, and Saturn was sometimes thought to represent the Jews, the conclusion was obvious: a new king of the Jews was about to be born.

But don't read into that too much, again, that's just an educated guess.

The point I want to make is that the magi were seekers. And though they maybe didn't truly understand what they'd found, they were then woven into the greater narrative of God's work of redemption simply because they were looking for Him. They were even recruited in a specific way to protect Mary & Joseph and Jesus.

I think this is a common theme for anyone who is seeking God. Those who set their minds on God can find Him and can find themselves woven into his narrative and recruited for the work of the Kingdom. Seek and ye shall find!

And as abruptly as they appear in our story they are gone. Just like that. They show up with gifts, worship the new king, confound the rival political leader, and then just vanish like a Deus Ex Machina in the story of how Jesus escaped his enemies, fled to Egypt and returned to begin his ministry.

But if we examine this more closely, and consider why Matthew included this in his retelling of Jesus' life, we discover a specific literary intent.

Lesson 2: The Story of The Magi is communicating a broader signal about the kind of King Jesus would be.

Let's talk about gifts mentioned in the text. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Worst baby gifts of all time. Imagine a toddler's birthday party during the gift opening time after little Timmy opens a toy piano, some stuffed animals, and some bedtime stories, he gets to your gift and inside is a wad of cash, a scented candle, and a jar of essential oils. You might not get asked back to another one of those parties.

Anyway, while these might not have been great baby gifts, their inclusion in the story tells us something about who the Magi believed Jesus to be, and it tells us who Matthew, the author of the Gospel believed Jesus to be.

The gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh would have been extremely valuable. Not gifts for a baby, but gifts for a king. Even gifts for one who was believed to be some kind of deity or god. It's clear who the magi believed they were meeting, and the gifts, collectively, make this point fairly obviously.

Separately, the gifts signal something deeper about who Jesus was or at least the kind of King he would be. It means something historically and spiritually that Matthew describes these gifts, specifically. Had we been Matthew's intended audience - a first century Jew - we would have recognized this foreshadowing - this signal about Jesus' journey from manger to tomb.

A great help for us today is the song we just sang: "We Three Kings"

2. Born a King on Bethlehem plain,
Gold I bring to crown Him again,

Frankincense to offer have I,
Incense owns a Deity nigh:

Myrrh is mine; its bitter perfume
Breathes a life of gathering gloom;—
Sorrowing, sighing,
Bleeding, dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.

Another, more modern song that I find handles this content really well is from a song called Gift To The Magi by Christopher Kincade.

“We give this gold to your kingly throne
that we lay our lives before.
Incense to burn, our fragrance to stir
in the courts of our high priest and lord.
Anointing oil for a savior interred,
he will overcome death and the grave.
A babe, to a man, to a king, to a sacrifice,
the word of God walking in flesh.”

The gospels are deeply political - as much as they are spiritual. And Matthew's recounting of this story weaves those two things together as he contrasts Rome's puppet king, Herod, against the arrival of the new, true king, Jesus. But he also foreshadows the kind of king Jesus would be: God in the flesh, both human and divine, who will come to power by submitting to death, granting us the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. The gifts are symbolic of the Jesus that Matthew will devote the remainder of his Gospel to.

Lesson 3: Epiphany! Matthew is signaling that the Kingdom of Heaven is discoverable and available to everyone.

Perhaps the most notable thing about the Magi is that they don't have anything to do with the history of God's people. They just show up out of nowhere, astrologers from a distant land who have come to worship the new King of the Jews.

Again, Matthew is signaling something important in his version of the story. The new king of Israel would truly be a king of all nations and all people. This is what we're referring to when we say that it's Epiphany: the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi. The family of God was about to get a whole lot bigger! The Kingdom of heaven belonged even to those who shared no history or culture with God's chosen people. The King Jesus, the messiah, the savior, had come so that all people might be reconciled.

If I were to take a poll of everyone's favorite Christmas song, I doubt "We Three Kings" would even break the top 20.

"We Three Kings" was written in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins Jr. and, I find this interesting, was the first widely popular Christmas carol written in America. BUT, it was written for a Christmas pageant, not for corporate worship which totally makes sense to me. There are few points in the song where you might personally identify with the tone and perspective. The song tells a specific story about a certain encounter that mirrors a specific historic event. Even though we're here for corporate worship, it's not really a worship song (in a technical sense).

After reflecting on this text, however, I think I have a new appreciation for this song. If anyone in this story is someone we can identify with, it's probably the magi. We are the foreigners. We are the outsiders. We are the ones for whom the Kingdom of Heaven is now open because of the new King of Israel. When Jesus came to be King over all nations and all people, it made a way for you and I to know the wonderful blessings of God and to share in his eternal inheritance.

It turns out the "we" in "We Three Kings" is inclusive of us!

Lesson 4: What's NOT in the story is as important as what's in the story.

You may notice a few things missing from Matthew's original version of this story.

1. There's no mention of the number of magi. They also aren't referred to as kings or royalty.
2. They didn't visit baby Jesus when he was born. They didn't find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

A more accurate picture would be that the magi traveled as a larger caravan both because it was a long journey and because it would've been safer. There could have been three or even two, but there could have been twenty! They may have had traveling partners, spouses, families...who knows? They seem to arrive unannounced and randomly when Jesus is around two years old living with his parents in Bethlehem. There's 3 notable gifts that Matthew mentions, but there could have been more.

The actual story recorded in the scriptures is quite different than the one that gets told year after year in Christmas pageants and children's stories and nativity scenes. While it's helpful to have those things as a memorable way to pass on the story of God's gift to the world, I think each Christmas season, we also need reminders of the reality of the first Christmas.

The irony of our Christmas celebration is that it so poorly resembles how Jesus came to this world and how the story was first told in the gospels. It was lowly, almost a secret, told in a whisper, announced to shepherds, and celebrated by foreigners, and pondered in hearts and minds.

I love the Christmas season and I'm not suggesting we don't go on making a big deal out of the birth of our Savior. But we've built up for ourselves a new story and a new way to tell that story that's a bit more legend than it is concerned with the subtleties of the Gospel story. If our stories are grounded, then our faith will be too. If we operate too much in legend or myth or lala land, then our faith will be less relevant to the real grit and grind of daily life.

Nicole Nordamen released a song back in 2013 that's a reflection about Joseph and Mary as depicted in an outdoor nativity scene. You know the ones you see all over town in yards. I'd like to read for you some of the lyrics because they so beautifully capture the point I'm making here.

Frozen statues in the cold, washed in moonlight blue and gold.
Mary's babe in plastic cape, quiet wonder on her face.
Mary, you look so serene, far too pretty, much too clean.
We might think we know you well, but what stories would you tell?
Of all the dirt and dust and shame, every burning labor pain,
And as I turn to walk away, I hear you say...

I am real.
Don't turn me into memory or myth.
Let me be real. Real.
And I'll show you what it means to love like this.

To love like you don't even care about the hurry and the hussle,
Like you are unaware December comes with so much trouble
Cause you believe a baby came not in paintings or in plays
But every minute, every hour, every day.

When the story is real, the faith is real. While the legend of Christmas is exciting and fun and puts faith and joy into the spotlight, it's the real story of Jesus that our faith is founded on, and that's with us every hour of every day.

So let's bring this all together:

Epiphany is the Sunday where we look back to the origins of our inclusion into the greater narrative of God's redemptive story. That story culminates in the person of Jesus, God in human form, born to die so that we might live. And as we find ourselves included, we also find ourselves recruited both to the mission of Jesus, but also to be the story-tellers. We should do so with confidence, patience, and joy, knowing that God's story has become our own.