

**The World Shows Up
December 30, 2007**

Matt 2:1-12

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I.

If you can speak of a human being as a gift, at the center of the wise men story is a gift like no other. And it is interesting to reflect upon how different characters in this story respond to Jesus.

First, we have the magi, or wise men, themselves, who have come from the east, seeking to worship the “king of the Jews.” They have seen his star and have followed it for hundreds of miles until they could follow it no more. When the magi finally find Jesus in Bethlehem they pay him homage, and they give him the most lavish gifts of their day.

In contrast to these men, we meet Herod, who feels so politically threatened by Jesus that he wants to kill him. Jesus isn’t even out of diapers yet, and he’s already evoking this sort of response.

II.

The sad truth of this story is that although we picture ourselves as the wise men and women, we all have varying degrees of Herod in us. As human beings, we are a mixed bag when it comes to the presence of Jesus; we are often divided about our need for a Savior, and it is rare when we willingly bow down to any authority we haven’t chosen ourselves.

Let us pray as we begin to look at this amazing event again this morning.

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III.

We’re not sure what type of wise men showed up at Joseph’s and Mary’s house that day, but I think it’s safe to say that they were of the truth-seeking variety.

A lot has been made of their visit because it demonstrates that God’s good news of salvation has come for the whole world. The promise made to Abraham in the book of Genesis to be a blessing to all of the nations on earth, now in this story begins to find its fulfillment. And that’s what we celebrate when we read the story of these wise men—the good news of Jesus

is for the whole world, and one day the whole world will be given an invitation to claim his Lordship.

IV.

We need to be careful we don't over-romanticize this story, of course. The wise men did the right thing when they finally caught up with Jesus by worshiping him, but it is no surprise that all Jerusalem was frightened of the wise men when they stopped to ask for directions. Although noble figures in our minds (I can just see them dressed purple robes with gold and jeweled crowns on their heads) they were an unlikely crew to be invited to the birth of Israel's Savior.

The word "magi" is the root for our word "magician" so they may have been fortunetellers or astrologers for all we know, asking questions like, "*Are you a Pieces or a Gemini?*" The scribes and priests would have been wary of these foreigners not just because they were strangers from a far off land, but because they knew how harshly God viewed sorcery and worship of the stars.

But the fact that the wise men may have been unlikely guests at the birthday party of Jesus should be good news for you and me. If such unlikely characters can find their way to Jesus, that should give those of us who don't feel overly spiritual or religious much of the time confidence that we can find our savior too.

V.

It's interesting there are no angels in this story, no mystical experiences that they have along the way, no heavenly hosts singing to them, and no one seems to be talking to God. It's just a group of guys who are seeking someone they have determined is worthy of their adoration.

Like the wise men, we may get lost along the way. We may lose sight of the star we are following. We may have to ask for help and get directions. But we can get there if we really want to find the Savior and a King.

In the words of Simone Weil, "*Christ prefers that we seek the truth even more than him. Because if we seek the truth honestly, we will not have gone far before we fall back into his arms.*" Some of us will get to those arms in a short period of time and through extraordinary means, or

even supernatural means. Others will wander into the arms as the Holy Spirit guides us, step-by-step, through the basic truths we have been given.

VI.

Notice how different this is from the approach people often take today. Many people expect God to come looking for them, to explain himself to them, to prove who he is to them, and give them gifts. But the wise men sought out Jesus, not for what they could get, but for who they believed he was. Wouldn't it be great if we came to worship every Sunday with no less than that same sort of attitude, a desire to give our gifts to Jesus, our gifts of song, of prayer, of fellowship, of money, for the sole reason that he is worthy to receive them.

VII.

In contrast to these seekers who wanted to pay homage to Jesus because of his worthiness, we meet Herod the Great who wants to kill Jesus because he poses a threat to his own power and control. In this way, Herod was the anti-Savior.

Any student of history will tell you what a ruthless and power-crazed ruler Herod had become by this point in his life. He had already killed one of his wives, three of his sons, and his mother-in-law, out of his paranoia that they might usurp his rule. Caesar Augustus was so taken back by Herod's murderous ways that he said, "*I'd rather be a pig than one of Herod's sons.*" So it is no surprise that when Herod heard of the magi's questions, he was deeply frightened because of the political threat Jesus posed to him.

VIII.

But before we get too critical of Herod, which by all accounts he thoroughly deserves, we may want to stop and consider ways that we, too, allow our own agendas or attitudes to prevent us from accepting how God wants to show up in our own lives. For Herod, God showed up in the person of Jesus and he saw him as a political threat. But how many times has God showed up for us in something that didn't want, such as job loss, or a family member getting sick, or some other hardship, and it never even entered our minds that the very thing that we considered a threat to our happiness, could actually be God's provision to draw us into closer fellowship with him? We

tend to see things through such blinders, good and bad, pleasurable and irritating, desirable and undesirable, that sometimes our blinders prevent us from seeing the way God wants to show up in our lives.

We may not be as obsessed with power and control as Herod was, or we may not be as murderous or paranoid, but all of us, resist giving up the control we pretend to have over our circumstances. Many of us hold on so tightly to our preferences that even if Jesus himself showed up, we just might reject him if he doesn't fit into the metaphorical manger we've made for him.

IX.

I believe this is why some people search endlessly for a better life without ever bowing to Jesus. The fascinating part of this story to me is that the religious people know exactly where the Messiah is supposed to be born. According to the prophet Micah, who they quote, the priests and scribes say, he's supposed to be born in Bethlehem. They knew this all along.

Here, the wise men from the east are searching diligently for the one worthy of adoration, while those *who know where he is* miss his arrival because they don't want him to be the answer to their search.

X.

Like the scribes and the priests, we live in a culture that has become so accustomed to searching for things that it is easy for people to overlook the basic fact of Christmas—God has searched us out and found us in the person of Jesus. It's a done deal. We have become so accustomed to searching, that we disregard one blessing after another without understanding that those blessings come from the hand of God, himself, and are meant to lead us into a worshiping relationship with him.

The message we need at Christmas is to stop looking long enough to bow our knees before the newborn King. Like the wise men, we need to know when to stop searching, and just bring our gifts and worship.

XI.

I got to tell you that that the 5 o'clock service on Christmas Eve was a tour de force of Geneva's young musical talent. It brought the message of when to stop searching home like no other. Eileen O'Hern, who many of

you know as our soprano soloist, designed the service from scratch. All she had was blank page to work with, and wow, did she design a masterpiece.

As the service went on, a manger literally began to appear underneath the shadow of the cross. Throughout the service, people carried planks of wood, one-by-one and placed them in a wood frame made by two-by-fours on the chancel. At first, you couldn't tell what the frame was suppose to be, or the outline of a stable that surrounded it, but as the service drew to a close, a star was placed on the roof above the completed manger, and a beautiful choir of singers from kindergarten through college filled the chancel and sang, *"Come to Bethlehem and see / Him whose birth the angels sing; / Come adore on bended knee / Christ the Lord, the newborn King."*

It was a beautiful crescendo to a beautiful service. And it demonstrated why the wise men are called "wise." They new when to stop searching and accept that God had come for them in the person of Jesus.

XII.

What if the one who created you visited you and told you in no uncertain terms that he loved you, and that he wouldn't allow you to go through anything that ultimately he wouldn't conquer himself?

What if you were a scientist or a Nobel laureate and all of your learning only pointed out the fact that you knew so little about what was really important in life? What would you do if you could meet a person who would tell you the mysteries of the universe?

Or what if you had a deep sense of your unworthiness, and no matter how hard you tried, no matter what sort of self-help program you enrolled in, you were always breaking your promises to people and hurting the ones you love most. What if in all of that, you heard, *"Your sins are forgiven! I love you. Nothing will every change my love for you"* **What would you do?**

My guess is that you might just fall down and worship him.

XIII.

There was a line from Christmas Eve that went something like this, *"While some people say 'Jesus is the reason for the season,' I say we are*

the reason for the season. The season is for us... to experience the love of God through his gift of Jesus.”

There are many questions that Christmas does not answer. But as we begin a new year, I want to encourage us to commit ourselves to the answers that Christmas does bring. Because once you accept that God’s gift of Jesus is for us,—everything else in life will find its center. Amen.