

Christmas 2017

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.
(Isaiah 9:2 ESV)*

*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.
(Micah 5:2 ESV)*

*And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold,
I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.
(Luke 2:10 ESV)*

*“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”
(Luke 2:14 ESV)*

They Fell Down And Worshipped Him

December 31st 2017

Matthew 2:1-12

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Introduction:

Good morning and Merry Christmas! This is Christmas Sunday – technically, though for most of us it feels like the Sunday after Christmas; but Christmas Sunday is always the Sunday AFTER December 25th. But whether you feel like this is Christmas Sunday or the Sunday after doesn't really matter because the story we are going to read this morning isn't really a story about the birth of Jesus anyway. It's a story about something that happened shortly after so one way or another, it is the perfect text for us to be looking at today. Open your Bibles please to Matthew 2:1-12, that's on page 807 in your pew Bibles.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

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, 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. (Matthew 2:1–12 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

I thought about calling this sermon “Adventures In Missing The Point” – because for one reason or another this passage has spawned all kinds of odd speculation in the early church and again in our day. If you have an internet connection then you probably have seen a sermon or a video about something that this story is really not about so let’s just take a minute and clear up a few things.

What This Story Is Not About:

1. The star

Every year at this time a new video shows up in my Facebook feed by some amateur astronomer claiming to have figured out the mystery of the star of Bethlehem. I’ve read through several of them, let me save you time – nobody knows what was going on with that star. Pretty much every respectable commentary on Matthew will include some version of this disclaimer:

Many attempts have been made to explain the phenomenon of the star, such as that there was a conjunction of planets or the explosion of a supernova or the appearance of a comet, but none carries conviction.¹

Despite what you may have heard on the interweb - we really don’t know what was going on with that star but that’s ok because this story is not about the star.

Its is also not about the gifts

¹Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 36.

2. The gifts

Some of the early church fathers went way too deep into allegorical readings of the Bible and so they thought each gift represented something different. Some of them thought that the gold represented royalty, the incense divinity and the myrrh the Passion and death of Christ – but that is almost certainly false. D.A. Carson offers a much simpler explanation:

“The three gifts were simply expensive and not uncommon presents and may have helped finance the trip to Egypt.”²

This was before money and gift cards and these were valuable commodities that were easy to exchange. There was probably nothing more to it than that.

This story is not about the star and it is not about the gifts.

So what in the world is it doing in your Bible? Matthew doesn't give us 1 verse on the actual details of Jesus' birth but he gives us 12 verses about the visit of the Magi – why is that? Why is this story in your Bible?

Why Is This Story In Your Bible?

I think there are at least two reasons. First of all, I think it is there:

1. To show that the birth of Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy

It is generally agreed that Matthew wrote his Gospel primarily as an appeal to the Jewish people. We've been working our way through the Gospel of Mark which scholars generally agree is an appeal to Gentile people – who you are writing to necessarily influences what you decide to include. Mark doesn't even bother with a birth narrative. He doesn't mention shepherds, donkeys, mangers, stars or Magi – he skips right to the message and the meaning – but Matthew wants to show that Jesus was born in accordance with the Jewish prophecies in the Old Testament. That's important to him because he knew it was important to the Jewish people.

² D.A. Carson, *Matthew 1-12 The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 89.

He was there in John 7 when Jesus was speaking to the crowds during one of the festivals in Jerusalem and the authorities sent some guards to arrest Jesus but after listening to him preach they went back to their bosses empty handed and they got an earful.

The Pharisees answered them, “Have you also been deceived? Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed.” Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, “Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?” They replied, “Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee.” (John 7:47–52 ESV)

You see the Jewish authorities were prepared to dismiss Jesus out of hand because they knew that he grew up in Nazareth – and no prophecy in the Old Testament mentioned the Messiah arising out of Nazareth. But what they didn’t know was that Jesus wasn’t actually born in Nazareth – he was born in Bethlehem – just as the prophecies said.

So Matthew wants that on the record and so he jams a couple of Old Testament prophecies together in verse 6 to give us the context:

““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.”” (Matthew 2:6 ESV)

That comes mostly from Micah 5:2 with a little bit of 2 Samuel 5:2 thrown in for good measure. Matthew wanted it on record that the wise men found Jesus in Bethlehem – not in Nazareth - in accordance with the Scriptures. If all we had was Luke’s account then the only witnesses that could attest to Jesus being born in the City of David would have been his parents and some shepherds – and shepherds were generally barred from giving legal testimony. So Matthew wants this little bit of history nailed down and that is one of the main reasons that this story is in your Bible.

But he sees more in the visit of the Magi than just the provision of useful witnesses – he also sees a further fulfilment of prophecy. Not only did they witness to the fulfilment of a prophecy – they were the fulfilment of a prophecy.

In Isaiah 60:3 the Bible says:

And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60:3 ESV)

Matthew saw the coming of these distinguished visitors as an early fulfilment of this Old Testament prophecy. Whether these wise men were actual “kings” or not he doesn’t say and it doesn’t really matter. They are royal guests from distant nations and in that sense they begin to fulfil the words of Isaiah 60:3 and that is what Matthew wants us to see. More specifically that is what Matthew wanted the Jewish people to see. So many of them rejected Jesus after so little investigation. They heard he was from Nazareth and so they stopped looking. Had they looked just a little deeper they would have seen the truth.

And that leads us to the second reason that this story is in your Bible; it is there:

2. To show the contrast between the welcome of the Gentiles and the hostility of the Jews

The Magi have come from a long way away. They have incurred great expense. They faced dangers, privations and hardships in order to find the child who is born King of the Jews – and yet his own people have ignored him completely. All of the Gospel writers reflect upon this at some point or another. John gets to it right away, he says:

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. (John 1:11 ESV)

We are supposed to see this and wonder over it. The Jews had access to the Scriptures. They knew the prophecies. They had thousands of years of experience in reading the Bible – and yet they couldn’t be bothered to investigate this child born in the City of David who was Christ the Lord.

The wise men told them what they were looking for. They said:

“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” (Matthew 2:2–5 ESV)

The wise men told a room full of Jewish people that they had reason to believe that the Christ had been born in Bethlehem – and guess what? Not a single Jewish scholar, priest or scribe went with

them to Bethlehem to investigate.

Doesn't that blow your mind?

Not one scribe was sent to interview Joseph and Mary. Herod sent assassins but not a single priest or scholar.

That is supposed to blow your mind.

That was supposed to shame the Jewish people – Matthew meant it to.

He is asking them: How could you not care about this? How could you be so set in your ways – so fixed in your expectations – so rigid in your interpretations that you didn't even bother to make the 5 mile journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to investigate?

How is it that a bunch of Gentile scholars from Babylon would walk hundreds of miles over weeks and months to look further into these things but you won't walk down the street to see a child who just might be the Saviour of the world?

What is wrong with you?

That is the question that Matthew is asking.

Why were the Magi so early and so delighted to see what you never did? Look at what the wise men say when they arrive in Jerusalem:

“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 2:2 ESV)

Boom! They don't even need the rest of the Gospel! Already in Matthew 2:2 they know who he is and they know how to respond. He is the Messiah and we should worship him. They got there early whereas most of the Jewish leaders never got there at all.

Fast forward to Matthew 27. Jesus has been falsely arrested, falsely accused and falsely convicted. Matthew 27:37 says this:

And over his head they put the charge against him, which read, “This is Jesus, the King of the Jews.” 38 Then two robbers were crucified with him, one on the right and one on the left. 39 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” 41 So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 42 “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” (Matthew 27:37–43 ESV)

Are you seeing the irony? The gentile Magi identified him as the King of the Jews in chapter 2 – the scribes, chief priests and elders of the Jews still don’t see it in chapter 27 – even after Pilate makes a sign and nails it over his head as he hangs upon the cross – **STILL THEY WILL NOT SEE WHO HE IS** and they will not respond as they should.

That is the contrast.

That’s the point.

And it begs the question: why do some people see who Jesus is and other people – despite every advantage – do not, can not and will not?

That is the question and I would like to spend a few minutes thinking about that with you today.

Why Do People Respond To Jesus The Way They Do?

Now I don’t think we can answer that question definitively but there are a couple of hints and clues in this story that I think we should notice. I think the first thing we would have to say is this:

1. It has nothing to do with proximity

Our best guess is that the Magi came from Babylon. The word that Matthew uses here is used in the Greek Old Testament only in the Book of Daniel – as for example in Daniel 2:2:

Then the king commanded that the magicians, the enchanters, the sorcerers, and the Chaldeans be summoned to tell the king his dreams. (Daniel 2:2 ESV)

We think the term meant something like “educated man”, “astrologer”, “wisdom keeper” and “dream interpreter”. Daniel was considered a Magi. He was educated, filled with the Spirit of God, able to interpret dreams – we see that in Daniel 2:13:

So the decree went out, and the wise men were about to be killed; and they sought Daniel and his companions, to kill them. (Daniel 2:13 ESV)

They were going to kill Daniel because a decree had gone out to kill all the wise men. Now you know how that story ends – Daniel interpreted the dream and was promoted to a position of great authority – which may account for the respect for Jewish writings that persisted in Babylon right up to the time of Christ.

But the point is, these people came from a long way away – in fact the road from Babylon to Jerusalem was nearly 1500 km in length – it was 1448 km in length to be precise. That’s a long way.

By comparison, do you know how far it was from Jerusalem to Bethlehem? Less than 10 km – a little over 5 miles - and yet, as we said, not one of the scribes or scholars in Jerusalem bothered to accompany the wise men on their way – so obviously how you respond to Jesus has nothing to do with proximity. Some people despise the good things of God that are right beneath their noses.

The second thing I think we can say with confidence is that:

2. It has nothing to do with advantages

I mentioned that a respect for Jewish writings persisted in Babylon right up to the time of Christ. Most scholars believe that this was how the Magi knew to look for a Jewish King. The sign in the stars gave them the timing but not the subject, for that they would have had to have access to parts of the Old Testament. D.A. Carson for example says:

“Apparently these men came to Bethlehem spurred on by astrological calculations. But they had probably built up

their expectations of a kingly figure by working through assorted Jewish books.”³

Those books would likely have included parts of the Old Testament – but almost certainly not the entire Old Testament. They probably had scrolls – some of the Books of Moses, maybe a few of the Psalms, maybe even Jeremiah – we know that Daniel had a copy of Jeremiah so maybe they had that. We don’t know, we just know they worked with what they had – they put the pieces together and they knew enough to come and look further for the child who was born King of the Jews.

The elders, scribes and Pharisees in Jerusalem – they had all the pieces in the world. They had the largest collection of Old Testament scrolls on planet earth but it didn’t help them in the end.

Jesus said to them one time:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life. (John 5:39–40 ESV)

The Magi had a few pieces and yet they came, they saw and they worshipped. The scribes and the Pharisees had all the pieces – they had the whole Bible and they studied it minutely and yet they refused to see the picture that was taking shape before their very eyes. They had access and opportunity – but not the will to see.

There is a heavy truth in there isn’t there? Sometimes we parents think that if we just get our kids to Sunday School and to Christian Camp and maybe to Christian school, then surely with all those advantages – surely with all that exposure they will see and know and believe.

But that isn’t the case. It isn’t about proximity or advantage at the end of the day.

So, what is it about?

Again I don’t think we can say anything definitive, but there are a few hints in the text. The first thing I think we can say is this:

³ D.A. Carson, *Matthew 1-12 The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 85.

3. It has a lot to do with attitude

Attitude is everything, right? That's what they say.

The Google on-line dictionary provides this definition of the word attitude:

“a settled way of thinking or feeling about someone or something, typically one that is reflected in a person's behavior.”⁴

I think that is a very useful definition. Attitude is a settled way of thinking – meaning that it isn't open to challenge. It is something that you've settled into from which you mean not to be moved.

And it has a lot to do with feelings – feelings that are absorbed by and large from our surroundings.

You can see that in this story. The scribes and the Pharisees and the elders had all settled into their places and they didn't want to be moved. They say that very thing in John 11. After Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead the leaders decide that they will have to put Jesus to death – not because he isn't the Messiah, but because they know that if any more people believe in him – it will cost them their place in the world. They say:

If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation. (John 11:48 ESV)

We've SETTLED IN. We like where we've landed in this world and we do not wish to be moved.

Let me ask you a question, have you ever thought of the extent to which you have tailored your beliefs to suit your behaviour and your position in the world? Are there things that you are doing – benefits you have accumulated – behaviours you are indulging in – things that you have settled into that you don't want to give up – which have determined for you what you will and will not believe?

⁴ <https://www.google.ca/search?q=Dictionary#dobs=attitude>

Here is a funny little fact friends – behaviour often comes before belief.

We will distort the evidence and modify our own conclusions to support our settled feelings and to align with our chosen environment - count on it! We've doing it since Matthew chapter 2 – come on, we've been doing since Genesis chapter 2.

Our commitment to certain behaviours is a barrier to certain beliefs.

The Magi were willing to leave their place in order to follow the facts – the scribes and the Pharisees were not. They had settled in. They had prior commitments. And as a result they missed out on the miracle of Christmas. They didn't see – they wouldn't see – the child who was born of a virgin in the city of David who was Christ the Lord.

Attitude is everything.

The last word on this discussion I think should be this:

4. It has a lot to do with grace

In fact you could say it has everything to do with grace.

One of the things that I've learned over the years is that if you trace a person's testimony back far enough you will always arrive at the place of Sovereign grace.

Of course we notice that the Magi were seekers. Of course we admire their interest in the sacred writings. Of course we respect their attention to the signs of God in the heavens. Of course we celebrate their commitment and their resolve in making their way across the desert and through the hazards of Herod's court and all the way to Bethlehem in Judea – we admire what they did – and so we should and yet always when we trace back we discover that the greater emphasis ought to be on what God did.

God did at least two remarkable things that resulted in the journey of the Magi. First of all he arranged for them to have access to the Scriptures. Because of the exile there was a large Jewish

community in Babylon at the time of Christ. Because those Jews were separate from the temple they had become a people of the Book. Their focus was less on sacrifice and more on Scripture – by necessity and so the Magi had ready access to several of the prophecies concerning Jesus Christ. That was a God thing. It was God who put the Jews in Babylon. It was God who made them a people of the Book. And it was God who spoke those prophecies in the first place.

That was grace.

And then there was the star or the comet or the supernova or the brightness of two planets overlapping each other for a couple of weeks at a time – whatever the brightness was – God put it there with them in mind. Remember I said last week “placement is an indication of preference”. The grace of God in Bethlehem was for:

people He favors! (Luke 2:14 HCSB)

Placement is preference. God put a sign in a place that he knew they would be looking.

That is grace.

There is an old saying: there is only one way to God but there are many ways to Christ.

To that old saying I would add this: and they all begin with grace.

That gives me some encouragement and I need it after reading this story. Because I’m always telling my kids about their advantages. I’m always telling them what a privilege it is to have such ready access to the Bible and to the Gospel and here is this story telling me that proximity and advantage are not determinative with respect to who will believe and who will not. Some people will despise the gifts of God that are laid beneath their noses. Some people will have access and opportunity but not the will to see and believe. So what hope then is there for our children? What hope for our friends? Our loved ones and our neighbours?

The same hope that there was for us.

Grace.

God knows how to start a journey. God knows where to hide a book or shine a star. He knows how to spark an interest and how to move and gather a people from every tribe, tongue and nation.

God knows how to do that.

God delights to do that.

So there is hope; there is encouragement and there is cause for prayer. Let's do that; let's pray together now.