

Christmas Sunday

Wise Men and a Child King (Matthew 2:1-12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 25, 2016

Introduction

- ❖ This morning's text is definitely familiar to most of us. We hear this passage recited around this time every year. We sing carols about the Magi visiting the Christ child. We put on reenactments. We see it displayed in every nativity scene. So you might think you already know what this passage is all about just by singing, "***We Three Kings of Orient Are***".
 - But the irony is that – while it's a good song that I in no way mean to disparage – **there probably were more than just three**. The Bible doesn't mention a number. That's just part of Christmas tradition based on the number of gifts mentioned in v11.
 - **And they weren't kings**. We're told they're wise men or literally *magi*. In those days, it was a term used for royal counselors. So they weren't kings themselves but worked for kings by providing wise counsel.
 - **And they weren't from the Orient**. If by that we're thinking Oriental, someone from East Asia. They were most likely from Babylon. From the Middle East.

- ❖ And just to burst your Christmas bubble even more, if your nativity scene at home has three wise men, sorry but that's "unbiblical". **In the sense, that the magi didn't arrive on the same night as the shepherds**. It's not like they took the next flight out of Babylon once they saw the star in the sky. That journey would've taken months. They probably didn't arrive until Jesus was already a year old.

- ❖ **My point is that our view and celebration of Christmas is heavily influenced by tradition that's not necessarily rooted in Scripture**. And most of it's harmless. So there's no need to crusade against these things – going around purging nativity scenes of their wise men. But my point is that we should take the time to carefully study a familiar text like ours because you'll be surprised at what's being taught at the very heart.
 - **For example, I'm going to propose that, according to this text, Christmas is not just about miracles – it's about missions**. Global missions. It's about the nations hearing the clarion call to come and bow down and worship the King of kings.
 - That means we look at this passage not just as a traditional Christmas story. Not just as an account of God's plan of salvation carried out in the historical past. But as a foretaste of a plan, inaugurated 2000 years ago in ancient lands, but a plan that continues in our day, that spreads across the globe, and will see its consummation in the (hopefully) not-so-distant future.

- ❖ So here's my take on this passage. **I think at the heart of this story is God's passion and plan for his Son to receive exceedingly glad worship from all the peoples of the earth**. Let me show you this in the text. We're going to see the Christ child do three things: 1) Drawing the peoples of the earth to himself. 2) Disturbing the peace of the powerful and learned. 3) Deserving of glad worship from us all.

Drawing the Peoples of the Earth to Himself

- ❖ Let's begin by seeing how Christ draws the nations, the Gentiles, all the peoples of the earth, to himself. **It's quite alarming if you take into account the widely-accepted theory that Matthew was writing to a primarily Jewish audience** – Christians with a Jewish heritage.
 - That explains why he begins the Gospel with a genealogy that trace Jesus' lineage back to their patriarch Abraham. And Matthew tirelessly cites OT prophecy over and over again to prove that Jesus is in fact Israel's Messiah (1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 3:1; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56; 27:9). He's their long-expected King.
 - So this text is meant to be a shock. Christian readers from a largely Jewish heritage should be surprised to encounter a birth narrative about their Messiah being rejected by Jewish authorities while being sought after by the Gentiles, by wise men from the east.

- ❖ **Now who exactly are these wise men?** We've already said they're literally *magi*. It's where we derive the word magic or magician. But while in some cases magi were simply miracle workers, here we're dealing with learned scholars serving in a royal court.
 - They were probably astronomers, or more accurately **astrologers**. They studied the movement of the cosmos and based their counsel on what the stars told them. **And their study of the stars led them to believe that a great leader had been recently born in the region of Judea.** So they traveled from the east (from Babylon).
 - That's all we really know of them. Again we don't know if it was just three. There's actually a tradition that dates back to the sixth century where the three are given the names Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar, and it's claimed they eventually become Christians and were baptized by the Apostle Thomas.
 - Believe what you will about that, but what we can say for sure is that they were Gentiles who saw something in the sky that led them to believe a great king among the Jews had been born.

- ❖ **Now what did they see?** That's been up for debate for centuries. Plenty of options have been proposed. Some say it was a **supernova** (a dying star that explodes and emits a brightness unmissable in a night sky). The famous astronomer Johannes Kepler theorized that the star was a **planetary alignment** of Jupiter and Saturn, which occurred in three times in 7BC. Another popular theory is that it was a **comet**, which would explain the way it rose and went before the magi and even rested over the town of Bethlehem.

- ❖ **But regardless of what was emitting that light, why did the magi assume it was the Messiah's star?** Did you notice in v2 that they say, "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star*". His star. Why did they think it was *his* star?
 - It's because, in ancient astrology, the steady state of the cosmos represented a divinely settled order. So any new and unexpected astronomical event was interpreted as an act of God (or the gods) breaking into the settled order to do something new.

- ❖ So for example, when Julius Caesar died in 44BC, the most remarkable thing happened. A supernova appeared in the sky above his funeral pyre, and obviously his supporters interpreted that to mean he ascended to join the pantheon of gods in heaven. **Suffice it to say, there was an existing belief that the appearance of stars (or other heavenly bodies) signaled either the birth or death of great kings or leaders.**
 - Now couple that with the likelihood that these Babylonian scholars were familiar with Jewish scripture and prophecy. Remember, because of the exile, there was a large Jewish community in ancient Babylon. **So it would be no surprise for these learned scholars to be aware of the messianic expectations of the Jews – which, as a matter of fact, included a rising star.**
 - In **Number 24:17**, Balaam was hired by the Moabites to pronounce a curse upon Israel. Three times he tried to curse but each time the LORD compelled him to issue a blessing instead. He goes on to prophesy about a vision of the Almighty. He says, *“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel”*.

- ❖ That star/scepter was widely recognized to be Israel's Messiah. Yet even so, Balaam could barely make it out. It was fuzzy. But the magi could see. They could see the star clearly. **His star – the Messiah's star, the King's star – shone so brightly in the dark night sky.** Drawing them. Calling them. Compelling them to come.
 - This was to fulfill another prophecy in the OT. This one from **Isaiah 60:1-3**, *“¹Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. ²For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. ³And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”*
 - It's clear that God's intent was never to keep the Light of the World under a bushel. It was never just for one nation, for one people group. It was always meant to shine far and wide. To shine to the ends of the earth. **The Light of the World was always meant to be shared with the whole world.**

- ❖ This conviction lies at the heart of Christian missions. This is what it means to be missional. **It means having a heart that longs to see – not just more people coming to Jesus in number – but more peoples coming to Jesus in kind.** The missional heart longs to see all nations, all tribes, and all tongues around the throne of the Lamb. Why? Because he's worthy of global praise. Jesus is no tribal deity, so his worship can't be limited to one language, one nationality, or one culture. Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth. And his Father's passion and plan is for every knee to bow and *every tongue* to confess this.
 - **Clearly this is so important to God that he will literally move the heavens to make it happen.** He'll move the stars in order to move more peoples of the earth (different people groups) into an orbit of praise around his Son.

- ❖ So the question we're left with is simple: How important is that to us? Do we share the same heart, a missional heart? **What are we willing to move in ways that help draw the nations to Jesus? Are we willing to make adjustments in the way we do church that lower the barrier to drawing more peoples (and different peoples) to Christ?**
 - And are some of us willing to literally move to bring the Light of the World to the peoples of the earth? We can't sit back and wait for more magi to come. **The Church can't just wait for the nations to flock to the Light of the World.**
 - If we read on in Matthew's Gospel, in chapter 5:14, Jesus calls his disciples "*the light of the world*". I take that to mean we now have job to do – to take the light of the gospel of Christ to the nations, to the ends of the earth.

Disturbing the Peace of the Powerful and Learned

- ❖ That's our mission. And we can be confident that God will draw peoples to his Son. But we can also be sure that some will refuse to come. That leads us to our second point. We see the Christ child disturbing the peace of the powerful and learned.
 - We see this in Herod's reaction to the news that the wise men bring. Did you notice they asked, "*Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?*" Not who will one day grow up to be king. **No, they acknowledge that he's king at his birth. His rule has already begin.** Well Herod didn't like the sound of that. We're told in v3, "*When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him*". **That's because he knew his claim to the throne always stood on shaky ground.**
- ❖ **As King of the Jews, he wasn't even Jewish.** He was an Edomite (a descendant of Esau and not Jacob) who converted to Judaism, but the fact is he wasn't of the line of David. He was given his title and position by Roman decree from the Senate. **So when he hears about this descendant of the royal line, he sees the baby as a huge threat.** He's greatly troubled.
- ❖ The entire city is. **It's likely because they knew how brutal and paranoid Herod could be, and they feared how he'd react to another perceived threat.** Ancient historians (like Josephus) tell us how Herod murdered his two eldest sons out of paranoia and did the same you even his favorite wife (out of ten) and mother-in-law.
 - We're told that as he laid on his death bed, he plotted to have a stadium full of Jewish leaders executed on the day of his death. Why? Because he knew they were planning a celebration for the day he finally dies. So he wanted to give them a reason to mourn on that day. The plot was foiled, but it just demonstrates his cruelty.
- ❖ So in v4, he's desperate to consult his experts, the chief priests and scribes, and inquires of them where the Christ is to be born. **He wants to know the exact location of this newborn king.** They're able to point to Scripture. There are actually two verse references here, Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2 (just the last line). **But the main point is that Bethlehem, the ancient birthplace of David, is where this long-expected ruler will come.** It's not a very significant town except for the fact of these two prominent births.

- ❖ Herod goes on in v7 to summon the wise men to figure out when the star appeared in order to ascertain the approximate age of the child. And then he sends them to Bethlehem telling them to report back once you find the child so he can come and worship too.
 - But in the passage that follows ours, we learn of Herod's true intent. **Having approximated that the child is no more than two years old, he issues an unthinkable decree to kill all baby boys in Bethlehem two years and under.** He won't rest – he can't rest – until the threat to his status and power is destroyed.

- ❖ Friends, this is the effect that Christ has on people. From the very first Christmas, he's been dividing us by our differing reactions to him.
 - **Some people, like Herod, actually feel threatened by Jesus.** How so? For some they genuinely fear his coming with condemnation. They fear his wrath. **But usually when people feel threatened by Jesus it's because he threatens the very foundations upon which they've built up their identity and sense of worth.**
 - For Herod, he had built up his life and identity around his status and authoritative position as king. So a rival king with a better claim to the throne leads him to react with open hostility.

- ❖ For some of you, the foundation you've been building a life upon as been your **academics** – your identity as a good student. For others, it's been your **work and career**. You're building a life upon your accomplishments – a life that resembles your resume. For others, it's your **family**. Your identity is built on having the perfect marriage or the perfect kids. Some of you have building your identity around your **appearance**. Your self-worth is wrapped up in how others see you. And for those who've grown up in the church, our foundation has been our **religiosity**. Our identity is built on following all the rules, on being a good, moral person.

- ❖ **But seen in the light of Christ, we realize how fragile these foundations really are.** That's how even a Christ child (a baby) can be threatening. It's because he exposes the glaring weaknesses in the foundation of the life we're building.
 - **There's no person on earth, no object, no accomplishment, no dream or pursuit that will be able to support the weight if you try to build your life upon it.** You're trying to build a house on a foundation of sand instead of solid rock (Mt. 7:24-27).

- ❖ One day your foundation will fail you and shatter your identity. You'll be confused, bitter, and empty. Or you'll fail your foundation, leaving you riddled with guilt and shame. **Either way your foundation is just sand.**
 - Jesus is the only foundation upon we can confidently and securely build a life and identity. But until we're given eyes to see and believe this glorious truth, he'll look more like a threat. Obviously that's how Herod saw him.

- ❖ **But then there's a second reaction people have towards Christ, epitomized by the reaction of the priests and scribes.** If Herod felt threatened, these religious leaders felt indifferent. They could care less about the Christ.
 - Unlike the magi, they had full access to the Scriptures. They have clear knowledge of messianic prophecy. They knew full well where to find the Messiah. You'd think they would be camping out in the Bethlehem keeping watch 24/7. But no, they do nothing.

- ❖ Think about it. They knew the Scriptures front and back. They could answer any theological question and quote a minor prophet like Micah at the drop of a hat. So their indifference to the birth of the Christ has nothing to do with ignorance of mind – but hardness of heart.
 - That's convicting. **What we see here in our text is that indifference towards Jesus is fundamentally no different than open hostility towards Jesus.** Because you end up in the same boat. You're on the same side – against Christ. So take no comfort in the fact that you're not opposed to him. Take no comfort in the fact that you know a lot about Christ, that you know his Word front and back. Spiritual indifference is a dangerous state of heart because it's symptomatic of a hardness of heart.

- ❖ That describes the priests and scribes. **But then there's a third group with a third reaction to Christ, and that's the reaction of the wise men.** If Herod reacts with open hostility, the religious leaders react with mere indifference, then the magi react with genuine faith.
 - **Their reaction is a picture of faith in action.** I don't know if they actually became followers of Christ, but they certainly acted in faith, even with only limited knowledge and information. The journey ahead of them was long and dangerous. But they counted the cost and accepted the sacrifices because at the end of their search they believed they would find the King of kings.
 - Isn't that what faith looks like? **Faith is a journey that has its share of costs and sacrifices, but the Christian is the one who counts them all as rubbish in order to gain Christ** (cf. Phil. 3:8).

- ❖ So really it comes down to how you see Jesus. Do you see him as a threat? As a danger to the life and identity you've been building for yourself? Or is he just the answer to a theological question? Is he just the Christ you read about in Scripture?
 - Or is Jesus the King of kings and Lord of lords? Is he that prize at the end of your search? Is he the great reward that keeps you going on the journey? Is he worth it?

Deserving of Glad Worship From Us All

- ❖ That leads to our third and final point. We see the Christ child drawing the peoples of the earth to himself, disturbing the peace of the powerful and learned, and third, we see him deserving of glad worship from us all.
 - The wise men made it clear back in v2 of what they intend to do once they find the child. **They intend to worship him. That word literally means to prostrate oneself.** To bow down in worship. To lay out flat on your face in humble reverence, before your Sovereign.

- ❖ Picture it. These are probably dignified, grey-haired scholars. They were highly-educated and politically-connected. **Can you imagine such wise men laying flat on their face before a two year old?** That doesn't happen. Except in church. That's what makes church worship so profound. There's something about Jesus that brings the rich, powerful, and learned in this world to their knees in humble worship.
- ❖ What I find so encouraging are those times when I get to look out on this congregation and see you worshipping Jesus. Because in our congregation are a lot of scholars, a lot of highly-educated people with lots of abbreviations behind your name. Some of you are high-ranking within your company or profession. You normally don't bow. If anything, people bow to you.
 - **And yet here in church, in our worship service, we've got accomplished surgeons and top executives – bowing their hearts (if not literally their knees) – to humbly worship their God and King.** Who we are reminded in this season, came to us in the form of a baby – a helpless, little baby.
- ❖ If we look back at our text in v10, it says when the wise men saw the star again, "*they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*". It's a convoluted phrase. Matthew piles on adverbs and adjectives to try to describe the great extent of the joy they're feeling. Deliriously happy with mega happiness is another way to put it. **So they sought the Christ to – not just worship – but to bring their exceedingly glad worship.** That's what he deserves.
 - You see, the emperors of Rome used fashioned themselves as gods, and they demanded their subjects to worship them. And they got what they demanded. Whenever they would pass by, people would prostrate themselves. But it was never in glad worship. It was obligatory worship. There was no exceeding gladness involved.
 - But Jesus deserves better. **As the true Emperor, the King of all kings, he deserves more than our obligatory worship.** He deserves our whole hearts. He deserves our full affections. **Because the more gladness we feel as we worship Jesus, the more glory he gets.**
- ❖ **If my daughter were to give me a Christmas gift this morning with a ho-hum attitude – simply because her mother told her to – I'd receive her gift but not much glory.** But when my daughter gives me a Christmas gift, it's after weeks of telling me she got me something, and she bops up and down in excitement when she hands it me. Her face is full of joy and excitement as she waits for me to open it. You see, she not only gave me a gift. She gave me glory. **In the same way, God only receives great glory when we worship him with great gladness, with great joy.**
 - But what if I don't feel this joy? Where do I get this joy? **Despite what you might hear on the radio, we can't just choose joy.** It doesn't work that way. You can't flip a switch and turn on your joy. You can't make yourself worship God in gladness. It's not just a matter of choice.

- ❖ It's a matter of sight. It's a matter of having eyes to see Jesus for who he really is, in all his glory and wonder. **The magi didn't have to choose joy. With a clear sight of the Christ child, joy overwhelmed them.**
 - In v11, it says they worshipped. They prostrated themselves, and in their gladness they offered gifts: gold, frankincense (a resinous tree gum used for incense), and myrrh (another tree gum used in perfumes and for embalming the dead). They were all highly expensive but all worthy of a king.

- ❖ Some have pointed out that, in these gifts, the magi acted better than they knew. For each gift is symbolic. The **gold** fit for kings is symbolic of who Jesus is. The **frankincense** commonly used by priests is symbolic of what he came to do – to atone for the sins of his people. And the **myrrh** used for embalming is symbolic for what it would cost him. His own life.
 - **Jesus died our souls to save.** That's the gospel in a nutshell. If the Lord grants you the eyes to see this truth as precious and true, then your soul can do nothing else but rejoice exceedingly with great joy.

- ❖ I hope you now see this familiar Christmas text in a new light. In the light of missions, of God's passion and plan for his beloved Son to receive exceedingly glad worship from all the peoples of the earth.
 - **Church, this is a plan still ongoing, and I truly believe that God is calling many of you to be a vehicle of gospel blessing to the nations.** To take the bright shining gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to peoples who have never seen and never heard.

- ❖ **With the start of new year at hand, I wonder if 2017 is the year that God is calling you to take a step of faith onto the missions field in a short or long-term capacity.** Some of you were active in missions in the past but life got busy. But the reality is that it's probably going to stay busy so putting things off wont make a difference.
 - Why don't you make a resolution this coming year to re-engage and go on a missions trip? And for others, you've never been on a missions trip. Let that be a goal of yours this coming year. In February, we'll have a Missions Month, and you can hear about all the trips we have lined up.