

Good morning! And Happy Thanksgiving!
Matthew 2:1-12
Pray

Intro

A couple years into our marriage, I got to surprise Cassandra with a trip to Hawaii to stay with her high school best friend. Her friend is a marine biologist and at the time she was working at the aquarium in Honolulu. Talk about a dream!

But I need to paint this picture accurately, it wasn't all rainbows and sunshine. We stayed with her highschool bestie and assimilated to a particular part of her friends lifestyle that was particularly challenging for me.

You see, her friend is.... Vegan.

(Not a value statement, I actually really enjoyed some parts of being vegan for a week, but it just isn't for me)

This should not surprise you. The guy who smokes meat almost every single week couldn't be a vegan?
GASP!

But all week long, I had my sights set for the Saturday night out Cassandra and I had planned, just the two of us, and a steakhouse.. Nothing would stop me from getting there at the end of the week. If the car would've broke down I would have walked. No car, I would swim, if a diet of chickpeas and home-made kombucha would have provided me the energy, I would have gotten there.

And it really was worth it. The steak I ate must have been 1/4th of a cow, if it was an oz. And Cassandra had to tolerate all the sounds and comments that comes from me at a time like that. I am sure I had said that was the best steak I ever had and that I could never be vegan at least a dozen times during that 1.5 hour meal.

Just rubbing my stomach with the biggest smile on my face. No leftovers.

This week of waiting, anticipation, and expectation for the greatest meal of my life was teetering on the line of sacred to me. (tongue-in-cheek) And it was something I was protective over, determined for, and joyful over.

You see here's something we all know to be true -- when we finally get the thing we've been looking forward to, it brings out of us almost an uncontrollable joy and excitement.

Things like:

Seeing our favorite performer live in a sold out stadium

Finishing a degree

The day of a wedding

When the thing you're looking forward to for so long finally arrives, it's like an uncontrollable, total-body response of joy.

That's what we're going to see happen today in the story of the magi.

Over the course of the next few weeks we are going to be looking at a particular part of the Christmas story -- the visit of the wise men, or magi. And we'll spend most of our series exploring together the gifts that they give to Jesus -- gold, frankincense, and myrrh -- what these gifts mean and what they point to about Jesus. But this week I want to just walk us through the story of the magi in Matthew 2, and in so doing show us what their response to the arrival of the long awaited Messiah means for how we can respond to the arrival of Jesus in our lives.

The Story

Before we read through Matthew 2, I want to set up some context so we can know what is going on here. 574 verses in the Old Testament point to a coming Messiah. A conservative count sees 200 prophecies pointing to Jesus To show a few: (References on slides)

Micah 5:2

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.

Isaiah 9:6

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
and his name shall be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Numbers 24:17

"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.

The Israelites were expecting a child to be born in Bethlehem who would be King. And these prophecies go back hundreds and even over a thousand years before Jesus' birth.

But then you reach this part in the story, after the book of Malachi, where its like all communication goes dark. 400 years of silence from God. No prophecies, just waiting...

And then the story picks up in Matthew 1. An angel comes to Mary, sending her a message that she will bear a child who will be named Emmanuel (God is with us) and they travel to Bethlehem, are given space in a barn, and Jesus is born.

It is there in this story where we will pick up in Matthew 2 .

2 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,

Now, there are a lot of assumptions we make about these wise men so I want us to have some clarity. But here is what we do know.

First - They were highly respected experts

The term Magi and wise-men are synonymous. And the role they would play was actually highly regarded.

Joseph A. Seiss, a theologian and historian who wrote meticulously on the topic, gives this context on the Magi's expertise and credentials in his book *The Gospel in the Stars* -

Anciently they were mostly a pastoral people greatly occupied with religion, astronomy, and other sacred sciences. They were the great teachers of kings and people in the divine wisdom.

The magi were useful in their expertise and even were advisors to Kings! Very well respected and held a high position.

Second - Many travelers, not just 3

The story has become about 3 wise-men because there's 3 gifts, but probably more like a couple hundred people.

The Magi would have been traveling as a sect or a school, and they would have had their families and their servants, so this would have been a large crowd of people, not just three.

And 3rd - From the "Far East" (We don't know exactly where they are from)

These Magi could be coming from anywhere as close as a day or two's travel or as far as Babylon. But we know they were not from Jerusalem.

Biblical scholars often argue that Matthew intended for the magi in his Gospel to be understood as gentiles or non-Jews who come to Bethlehem to worship Jesus. They surmise that this story is meant to foreshadow the fact that Christianity would eventually become a gentile religious movement instead of a Jewish one.

So they likely have been studying lots of different prophecies and religions, but are compelled by what they have read in the Old Testament.

So much so, that this large school of highly respected scholars came to Jerusalem saying this in v2

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."

This should have alerted everyone in Jerusalem something was going on. They were saying that the King everyone has been waiting on has arrived.

One of the signs we saw Numbers earlier was that a star would rise up to signify the King was coming and these experts saw it and were telling people in Jerusalem.

They were making so much commotion about it the King of Jerusalem heard of this and sought them out. Continue in v3

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."

So the people want to know more -- where is the Christ to be born? They ask. The wise men in response quote the prophecy from Micah 5:2 -- He's from Bethlehem.

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."

Herod, The King of Judea was troubled. Uneasy, bothered, when he heard that these Magi were looking for the King of the Jews. His first thought was likely something like "You've found him! Its me! I'm the King! But he knew they did not mean him, they were looking for a child.

So Herod calls the Magi in on a secret meeting where he sends them to go find this child so that Herod can worship him.

Secret meetings, a troubled and paranoid King... interesting to note, lets see how this plays out. V9.

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.

Lastly, we see that the Magi followed the star as it moved across the sky and landed over the house where Mary and Jesus were. When they entered, they fell to the ground and worshiped giving Him gifts.

Now, what does this story mean for us? As I said, we'll explore the gifts and what they say about Jesus in the weeks to come, but for now let's just focus on the story itself. I think there's a lesson for us in how the various groups respond to Jesus in Matthew 2.

Did you notice the contrast? You have three groups -- the religious leaders, Herod, and the wise men. Let's look at each one and see how they responded to Jesus is reflective of how we can respond to Jesus."

They responded in 3 ways, so let's look at -

The 3 ways people respond to Jesus.

Indifference

I first want to look at Indifference. Indifference as a response to Jesus. If you look back at this story, plenty of people in Jerusalem heard what the Magi were saying when they arrived. They were asking where the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies was, where is the newborn king of the Jews? He should be here.

So the Jewish citizens heard them asking, and did nothing. Then the King heard this and sent them instead of going himself, but the CHIEF PRIESTS AND SCRIBES - THE appointed leaders of the faith, who studied the scriptures, and were dedicated their lives to these prophecies, they remained in Jerusalem as well.

Y'all. Bethlehem is 2 miles from Jerusalem. 2 miles. That is a 1 hour walk if you are casual about it.

Could you imagine waiting 400 years for this moment, for God to move and do something hearing in Jerusalem "Hey Benjamin, I think that the GOD OF THE UNIVERSE has just ENTERED INTO OUR EXISTENCE a couple miles down that road, wanna come?" and this guy just goes "meh, tell me about it when you get back."

Are you joking? THE leaders of the faith are confirming that this prophecy is being fulfilled, that the Savior is to be born in Bethlehem, and all of them are just *shrugging* and not checking it out for themselves?

As frustrating as it is can be to look back at this account and think we would be different, we really cannot say.

Because we lose focus on what God is doing in and around us every day.

Instead of faithfully ministering to our kids and families, every evening is just a rush through the routine to get everyone fed and in bed

Instead of seeing how God might use us build relationship with our coworkers, we grind through the day with our heads down without even a thought of talking to others

In preparing for our Christmas celebrations, we can fill the table with food, the tree with gifts, and then move through the entire holiday with our eyes on our comforts instead of the birth of Jesus.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave a sermon in 1928 about Advent, and waiting on the Savior and in that sermon he says this.

“Not all can wait – certainly not those who are satisfied, contented, and feel that they live in the best of all possible worlds! Those who learn to wait are uneasy about their way of life, but yet have seen a vision of greatness in the world of the future and are patiently expecting its fulfillment. The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.”

Like the priests of Jerusalem, we can get too drawn into how things are now and be content. We can lose sight of our longing and need for a Savior and become indifferent this Christmas season. That is one response. Let's look to another.

Second

Opposition

Look back to Herod, our paranoid King. He was troubled, and called the secret meeting with the Magi so that he could find Jesus and worship Him.

There are some extra details to his character I think will be really helpful for us to know:

30 years before this point in the story, Herod had his wife and children executed out of fear they would overthrow him.

When He was ill and near the end of his life, Herod had his oldest son killed so that his son would not try to take the throne sooner

On the day he died, he had it arranged that hundreds of Jewish leaders would also be killed to ensure there would be mourning at the time of his death.

He was terribly self-centered and paranoid. There was a saying under his rule. **It would be better to be one of Herod's pigs, than in his family.**

Herod's track record was that He would do anything to keep us much power for himself, for as long as he could.

Which is why it should be no surprise for us when He does this in response to the news of a king being born, look at verse 16...

16 Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

Herod did not want to worship Jesus, he wanted him dead. Jesus was a threat to Herod's reign as King and he wanted to do anything he could to stop Jesus from taking his power.

Now, just because we are not kings, that does not mean we do not try to protect our own kingdoms.

Here is what I mean by that.

Advent is a declaration God has come into the world. And it's a reminder to us he is seeking to come reign in our lives.

Are we open to his reign?

Are we open, when scripture shows us that our speech matters, when we grumble, complain, slander others, and gossip, and Jesus says His way is better, are we open to that? Do we change our speech?

Or in more subtle ways, do we ask Jesus in prayer
how He might want us to parent,
Want us to care for others in our CG
Want us to step into our work week
How He might want us to spend our time on the weekends

Advent is a time we prepare our hearts for the coming of our King who has claim over every aspect of our lives.

Are we open to His reign, or do we oppose Him?

I do want to address that you might be someone here who does not know Jesus as King. You are here because a friend or family member invited you, or just came in wanting to try out church for the first time.

And you might be struggling with the idea that Jesus being God and King means that you are not and that is a hard message to hear.

And Jesus as King just feels like a threat to your Kingdom, and your life and what you have going on right now. What I hope you can hear today is that professing Jesus as King does come at a cost to ourselves, but it is for our good. . We do need to deny ourselves, our sinful desires, our temptations for things we think are good, and that is hard and painful, lifelong work.

But it is for our good and Jesus wants His power over your life to be what frees you from sin that leads to death, and instead trust that in Him you will find life.

Jesus' invitation is to worship Him as Lord, as the Magi did. That brings us to the third response to Jesus.

Worship

Here is what is shocking about the Magi's response:

- 1) How far they were willing to travel

The Magi traveled I would argue at least a couple of months to get to Bethlehem. As we read in Matthew Herod had all the sons ages 0-2 killed based on the travels of the Magi, which leads me to believe the Magi had to have been arriving months after Jesus was born, despite beginning their journey when they saw signs He was born.

- 2) The expensive gifts that they brought

But they didn't just travel far, they brought expensive gifts! We will learn more about these in the coming weeks, but they gave a child costly gifts showing honor and worship.

Gold - has to be physically mined out of the earth, refined, and worked and purified. This is a very laborious, therefore a very expensive process as well. Gold was tremendously valuable as it even is today

Frankincense And Myrrh - These are both exotic imports of tree saps/resins used to make incense and perfume. They were actually valued more than gold because of its rarity and that they were imported from a great distance away.

These gifts were produced from elaborate craft work, and extremely valuable in their economy.

3) They bowed to a baby

And lastly, they bowed down to Him and called Him King!

These Magi were advisors to kings, greatly respected, obviously rich, and yet, they laid themselves low at the foot of a baby, because He was God entering reality as the King and Savior of His people.

All of this points to the truth that Jesus is Lord. They would do anything to get to Jesus and give Him their gifts and worship.

Which is what we are invited to do every day, with our lives, our prayers, our homes, relationships, even our money. We get to worship Jesus Christ as our Savior and King.

So as a church, Citizens is taking time in this sermon series to help us all let this Advent season be an opportunity for us to show King Jesus the response He deserves.

Through **sacrificial generosity and worship.**

When I say worship, I mean whole life turning and celebration that King Jesus was born and rules and reigns now and forever. This includes Sunday Gatherings, singing, praying, and taking communion, but it also includes 6 other days of the week. Seeking to see the work of Jesus in your life and around you.

We want to profess Jesus as King in our homes, in our workplaces, in our city, not just when we Gather.

So first, we are asking that you give to Citizens Church, either for the first time, or reevaluate your giving for the coming year, as an act of faithfulness, and worship to God that He was generous to you, so you may be generous to others.

Second, Give to Christmas Missions Offering

Every year during Advent, we gather a Christmas Offering as a church to help fund other kingdom work across our city, state, nation, and world. This is a chance for us to be generous above and beyond our regular giving, out of our overflow, to see God's Kingdom advance all around us.

This year, we are seeking to raise \$10,000 to go towards three ministry initiatives:

Church Planting in the United States

Citizens Church is a part of the Harbor Network, a group of like-minded churches across the country seeking to launch, lead, and multiply thriving churches that last. Part of our Christmas Offering will go towards seeing more churches planted and more cities reached with the Gospel across our country.

Leipzig Project Church Plant

Over the past year, Citizens Church has been growing a ministry partnership with the Leipzig Project, a church plant in Leipzig, Germany. Some sociologists have recently labeled east Germany, “the most godless place on earth”, and the Leipzig Project is seeking to step into the darkness with the hope of the gospel. The funds we raise in this year’s offering will go towards their new home in the center of the city.

Citizens Church Ministry Expansion

We are starting to pray and ask the Lord for a long term home in our city. A place that can serve as a kingdom outpost as we live out our mission to be a Jesus-Centered Family on Mission with Him for decades to come.

So, let us respond rightly to the birth of King Jesus. With worship, with prayer, with song, and generosity all throughout our lives.

Third, Serve our city in 2024.

You can partner with us as a church, serve within one of our Community Groups, or let us know how you want to commit to serving Charlotte as we expand our missions in 2024.

Pray

Transition to Time of Response