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The Worship of the Christ

Matthew 2.1-12

Series: God With Us

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The Village Church at Shell Point

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I. Missing the Obvious

- A. I have a reputation within our family
 - 1. Not a welcome reputation
 - a. But it is pretty much the consensus among our immediate family
- B. It's a reputation for not being able to find things that are plainly visible
 - 1. For instance, Jean might say something like, "Would you go into the laundry room and bring me the scissors that are on the shelf?"
 - a. I say, "Sure."
 - b. And off I go into the laundry room
 - 2. 10 minutes later...
 - a. And I have seen many things in the laundry room
 - b. Dozens of things
 - c. But for the life of me, I can't find the scissors
 - 3. She walks me back into the laundry room, and immediately pulls the scissors out of a cup where they are nestled nicely among some other things, like pens and pencils
 - 4. As Jean would say, "If it were a snake..."
- C. Now I think Jean bears some responsibility for this particular reputation
 - 1. If she would hide things in plain sight, I'd have an easier time finding things
- D. In our text this morning, the greatest event in human history has taken place
 - 1. And it is attendant with a glorious sign – highly visible to anyone attuned to look for it in Jerusalem and its surrounds
 - 2. And absolutely nobody seems to have seen it!
 - a. The greatest discovery, waiting to be experienced right under their noses
 - b. And practically everyone misses it
 - 3. Except for a bunch of foreign pagans
 - a. Several hundred miles away
 - b. And they see it
 - c. And they go out of their way to come to Jerusalem and discover this monumental event
 - 4. And when they get there, nobody seems to know what they're talking about

E. **Matthew 2:1–12** (ESV) —

1. 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?
2. For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”
3. 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;
4. 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.
5. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:
6. 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. 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.
8. 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. 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way.
10. 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.
11. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.
12. 11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him.
13. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.
14. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

II. **The Wise Men – Fact and Fiction**

- A. This is a curious text for a lot of reasons
 1. In Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus, he begins by laying out the origin of the Messiah Jesus through a genealogy
 - a. A genealogy that shows, as we explore a couple weeks ago, that Jesus was a descendant of David
 - b. Both a royal descendant, and a legal descendant
 - c. And in fact, as we saw then, the only human being who could have so qualified to be Messiah
 - d. In doing so, Matthew is jealous to establish the origin of Jesus to have been the fulfillment of prophecy
 2. Then Matthew explores Joseph’s predicament
 - a. How, when betrothed to Mary, before they had come together, discovered Mary to be pregnant

- b. But in a dream, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and explains that Mary is with child by the Holy Spirit
 - c. And that Joseph should go ahead to take Mary to be his wife
 - d. And this too was a fulfillment of prophecy
3. And so now Matthew tells the story of the visit of the wise men from the east
- a. And again, infuses this story with prophetic scriptural foundation for the episode
 - b. Showing that in the birth of Jesus God is placing His stamp of authenticity on the coming of Messiah Jesus
4. But it is a curious text, nonetheless
- a. First, as we have pointed out, it seems the key players in this episode are a bunch of pagan astrologers who have traveled a great distance
 - b. When the event itself is happening right under the noses of the Jewish people in and around Jerusalem
5. And then it is curious because a mythology has grown up around this story
- a. Much of which has little or no basis in the biblical account
6. We sing “We Three Kings of Orient Are...”
- a. But were these really kings?
 - b. And were there really three of them?
7. And every year we, like every other church in the land, put out a nativity
- a. A make-shift shelter, with straw and animals
 - b. And a little manger where they would normally put straw for the animals to feed
 - c. But now there is a baby in there – depriving the animals of their evening meal!
 - d. And among the onlookers in this manger scene are, you guessed it – three wise men
 - e. But were the wise men really at the manger at all?
8. And how did they know to go there?
- a. How did they see things from hundreds of miles away that were missed by the Jewish people who had traveled to Jerusalem in droves
 - b. And appeared to be clueless of what was happening right under their noses?
9. We need to sort those of this stuff out

B. **Who?**

- 1. So who were these guys?
- 2. First, they were almost certainly not kings
 - a. The text says they were magi
 - b. Magi were not kings – they were usually the kind of people that kings would rely on for advice
 - c. We’re familiar with such people through books like Daniel

- d. Daniel, during the reign of the Persians, was likely considered a magi
3. Some magi, like Daniel, were faithful servants of the king
 - a. Others could be interlopers and pretenders such as those who worked in Nebuchadnezzar's reign in Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar became increasingly frustrated with them, nearly completely losing confidence in them
 - b. They could even be charlatans – as in the story of Simon Magus – and pretended to be someone great, parlaying his skill as a magician into cash and influence
 - c. But by and large, magi had a good reputation as servants of the king – serving as advisors much like a president's cabinet today
4. Now these magi appeared to be astrologers – star gazers
 - a. That seems to have been one of their main sources of insight, governing their activities and advice
 - b. In those days the line between astronomy and astrology was, at best, fuzzy
 - c. The Hebrew scripture does not endorse astrology
 - d. **Jeremiah 10:2** (ESV) — 2 Thus says the LORD: “Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them...”
 - e. **Isaiah 47:13–15** (ESV) — 13 You are wearied with your many counsels; let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you. 14 Behold, they are like stubble; the fire consumes them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. ...
5. But here are people from the east – Persia most likely – pagan astrologers
 - a. And God uses their preoccupation with the stars to confirm the extraordinary event of the birth of Messiah
6. Somewhere in their study and preparation they may have encountered the word from the Hebrew scriptures
 - a. **Numbers 24:17** (ESV) — 17 ... a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...
 - b. May have even learned something of the prophecies of the coming King of the Jews from Daniel's legacy from times past
7. And so, when an unusual star appeared in the heavens over Judea, they head off to the West and follow the star
8. So these are the magi – not kings
9. In addition, they appear to be wealthy magi
 - a. They come bearing gifts – expensive gifts!
 - b. And they have an accompanying entourage, evidently, for they seem to get the attention of the people, even King Herod learned of their visit to Jerusalem
10. And then, how many of them were there?

- a. We sing “We three kings...”
- b. But the text doesn’t say anything about how many of them there were
- c. It’s likely that the three categories of gifts incline people to believe there were three wise men
- d. But that’s an assumption that doesn’t necessary hold water
- e. It’s possible to have a dozen magi bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh
- f. We simply don’t know how many there were

11. So that’s pretty much what we know about these guys

C. **When?**

- 1. Next question – when did they come?
- 2. Well, if the star appeared when Jesus was born, and then they started on their journey – it likely took them some months before they made the trek to Judea
 - a. In fact, Herod inquired of them when the star appeared, and then made the decision to kill the infant boys age two and under based on the time frame given to him by the magi
- 3. So the magi could have taken months, up to two years, to visit the holy family
- 4. So you can forget about them showing up at the manger!
 - a. In fact, the text itself says they came to a house to see Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus
 - b. They had traded their makeshift campground for an Air-B-N-B by the time the wise men arrived
- 5. Now, will we remove the wise men from our nativity?
 - a. I doubt it!
 - b. We’ll just realize that the whole story is compressed in time into one scene
 - c. And we’ll grant a bit of artistic license in presentations of the nativity

D. **How?**

- 1. Then finally, how did these wise men know to come to Judea?
 - a. What kind of astronomical event led them?
- 2. There’s been much speculation over the centuries about this – both among theologians as well as by astronomers
- 3. Some have thought they magi had observed a comet
- 4. Others, like the great Johannes Kepler, the father of modern astronomy, thought it was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation of Pisces which occurred in 7 B.C.
- 5. It could have been either one of those things, or something else altogether
 - a. But it’s hard to imagine that once the magi got to Judea that one of those phenomena could have led them to the address of the house like some kind of 1st Century GPS

6. So it's possible that some combination of astronomical phenomena, plus a miraculous display like the Shekinah glory, would have led the wise men
7. But bottom line – Matthew shows little interest in those details
 - a. Somehow, God led a bunch of pagan astrologers to the place where Messiah Jesus was born
8. And that's just like God, isn't it
 - a. Condescending to a bunch of pagan Gentiles to lead them to the Savior
 - b. Even while the vast majority of religious people in Judea were clueless of this momentous occasion!

III. **The Gifts**

A. Then, let's take a few moments to examine the gifts brought by the wise men

B. **Gold**

1. First, the magi present Jesus with gold
 - a. **Gold is the treasure of kings**
2. That's the way it has always been, for pretty much all kings
 - a. In Persia, from which these magi have likely come, it was not appropriate to approach a king without a gift
 - b. And the most appropriate gift was something gold
3. When archeologists have explored the burial places of the kings, they have discovered tombs filled with gold treasures
 - a. The death mask of Agamemnon is made of pure gold
 - b. The tomb of Tutankhamen, discovered in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes in 1922, was filled with gold artifacts
4. Some have surmised that the gold given to the holy family on this occasion was like used to provide the finances for their escape to Egypt which we'll explore next week
 - a. And that certainly may be true
 - b. But that in no way dismisses the symbolic significance of the gift of gold – the gift of kings
5. So when the magi gave gifts of gold they were acknowledging the right to reign and rule of this newborn king of the Jews

C. **Frankincense**

1. And then **Incense is the gift of worship**
 - a. It was used in the temple worship
 - b. Used as well to anoint the priests of Israel
 - c. Added to the meal offerings presented to the priests by the people as thanksgiving offerings.
2. Symbolic for NT believers
 - a. **Philippians 4:18** (ESV) — 18 I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

3. So when the magi presented frankincense to Jesus they, intentionally or unintentionally, identified him as our Great High Priest
 - a. Who life was an acceptable offering, a pleasing aroma to His Father
4. It's interesting to note that in OT worship incense was never mixed with sin offerings
 - a. Only the meal offerings – which were offerings of thanksgiving – included incense
5. And when we think of Jesus we recognize that He was without sin
 - a. He alone could say, “I always do what pleases [My Father]” (John 8.29)
6. Jesus, our Great High Priest, a pleasing aroma to the Father
 - a. The gift of frankincense – symbolized the worship of our Savior

D. **Myrrh**

1. And then there is myrrh
 - a. **Myrrh is the gift of death!**
2. Used in embalming
 - a. Nicodemus used 100 lbs of myrrh and aloes to prepare the body of Jesus
 - b. You can imagine myrrh being a cottage industry in the ancient world when that much is used for one body!
3. Now that may seem a strange gift to give for a baby!
 - a. We have no way of knowing what these magi understood about their giving – only that they were giving gifts of great value
 - b. But it was certainly prophetic in the giving of myrrh
4. The ministry of Jesus was always rooted in suffering
 - a. He was the man of sorrows
 - b. **Psalm 22** describes His death on the cross; includes what Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
 - c. **Isaiah 53:4–5** (ESV) — 4 Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.

E. William Barclay: Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, myrrh for one that was to die – these were the gifts of the wise men, and, even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and in the end the supreme Savior of men.

F. Barnhouse: We see from the symbolism of these gifts that the eternal royalty and holiness of Christ were announced from his earliest years. He had come forth from heaven to perform the work of redemption, and he was prepared in every way to do the Father's will so that he might fulfill every demand and obligation of the law. Thus only would he become eligible to die on the cross; and by that cross alone redeem the world. That life could show that he was the fit candidate for the

cross, and we cling with surety to the work that was accomplished there at Calvary, since we know that our sin-bearer was himself without sin.

IV. **The Response**

- A. So how do we respond to this strange, curious, yet wonderful story of these wise men?
 - 1. These Gentile pagans, led by the light of a star, led by God, to the birthplace of our Savior?
- B. **Herod the King**
 - 1. Herod the Great was, in many ways, an extraordinary king
 - a. His building projects were nothing short of astonishing
 - b. And his administration of Judea was remarkable for many years
 - 2. But toward the latter years of his life he had become more and more paranoid
 - a. And so when the entourage of the magi came to Jerusalem and starting inquiring about the birth of the king of the Jews
 - b. It caught the attention of Herod
 - 3. After all, there had been no birth in Herod's household!
 - a. What was he to make of a claim like that?
 - 4. So the birth of Jesus was a threat to him
 - a. And a threat to his own dominion as king of Judea
 - 5. So Herod summoned the wise men, and interrogated them
 - a. Finding out the details of what they knew
 - b. And told them when they found the child, they should let him know and he would come to worship him too
 - 6. Of course, that was all a ruse
 - a. Herod had no intention of worshiping the child
 - b. He wanted to terminate the child
 - 7. But the birth of Jesus was a threat to Herod
 - a. And it is a threat to all who are attached to their domains, no matter how large or small
 - b. The King of kings came to rule
 - c. To rule in the hearts of believers
 - d. But ultimately to rule the world
 - 8. And one response to the birth of Jesus is to resist Him
 - a. To do everything possible to deny Him
 - 9. Is Jesus a threat to you?
 - a. Are you afraid He will disrupt your own little status quo, your own little dominion?
 - 10. I'm here to tell you that He will do exactly that!
 - a. He will turn your life upside down
 - b. He will supplant your own operating principles
 - c. And in place of them He will take over the throne room of your heart

11. You don't have to be Herod the Great in order to be concerned that Jesus will be, not just the king of the Jews, but the king of your life
 - a. How then will you respond to this Jesus?
12. If you're like Herod, you'll do everything you can to keep Him out of your life

C. **The People**

1. Not only was Herod disturbed by the birth of the child Jesus, the people of Jerusalem were as well
 - a. **Matthew 2:3** (ESV) — 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him...
2. Why would the people be troubled? What did they have to be concerned about?
3. They lived in a tenuous equilibrium, with Herod balancing his power with the Roman occupation
 - a. Another factor injected into this precarious and vulnerable time could disrupt their lives as well
 - b. The last thing they needed was an X-factor like a new king emerging on the scene
4. So while Herod was threatened by Jesus' birth, the people were afraid
5. Are you afraid that Jesus will disrupt your equilibrium?
 - a. Are you afraid that He will complicate your lives?
6. I'm here to tell you that this Jesus will in fact disrupt your equilibrium
 - a. He will complicate your lives!
7. He will come to save His people from their sins
 - a. Which means you've have to give up yours!
8. But will you respond like the people of Jerusalem?
 - a. Will you be afraid of this Jesus?
 - b. Or will you embrace Him?
 - c. Will you listen to Jesus when He tells you, "Do not be afraid!"
 - d. Which is the command He gives more than any other

D. **The Priests and Scribes**

1. This is an interesting group
 - a. The religious people; the leaders of Judaism
2. **Matthew 2:4-6** (ESV) — 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he [Herod] 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.' "
3. This is interesting on a couple accounts
 - a. First, these people represent the full range of religious leaders in Judea
 - b. Both the liberals and the conservatives

- c. The chief priest were from the sect of the Sadducees – the liberal wing of religious leaders, those who did not believe in the miraculous, and certainly not in the resurrection
 - d. The scribes were the conservatives – they believed in the literal Torah, the law of God
 - e. But both groups knew the scriptures enough to know where the Messiah was to be born
 - f. They knew He would be born in Bethlehem – just down the road from Jerusalem
4. So when queried by Herod they gave him accurate information – which he relayed to the magi
 5. But you have to wonder – and this is really what makes their response so interesting – why didn't they go with the magi to find the child?
 6. Of all the people in the world who you'd think would have a vested interest in the birth of the Messiah, it would be the religious leaders
 - a. They knew all the information
 - b. They understood the scriptures rightly
 - c. But when blessed occasion unfolded before them, they didn't care!
 7. They didn't care!
 - a. They were happy to dispense advice and direction
 - b. But they were not really interested in the birth of the Savior, the king of the Jews
 8. Instead they sent the Gentile pagans to Bethlehem
 - a. And stayed home
 9. Do you care about the birth of this Jesus?
 - a. Are you willing to follow those who are searching for Him?
 - b. Or do you fashion yourself to be just fine the way you are?
- E. **The Wise Men**
1. And then there are the wise men – the magi
 - a. These Gentile pagans
 - b. Led by a star
 - c. Wise enough to seek out all the information they could about this newborn king
 - d. Wise enough to leave their comfortable surrounds and search for this king
 - e. Wise enough to find this Jesus
 - f. Wise enough to worship Him
 - g. Wise enough to give of their substance to Him, to honor Him for who He is
 2. Wise enough to be transformed from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light, the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ
- F. So which response will it be for you?
1. Is Jesus so threatening to you that you will keep Him out of your life?
 2. Are you afraid of this Jesus, afraid of the disruptions to your life that He will certainly cause?

3. Are you apathetic toward this Jesus that, though you know much about Him, you simply don't care to pursue Him?
 4. Or will you, like these wise men, willing to worship Him
- G. For it is the wise men, even today, who seek Jesus Christ

Benediction

Romans 11:33–36 (ESV) — 33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” 35 “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.