

The Child Born King

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Date: 08 January 2017

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening to all of you. Glad to be together again. Hope you all had a good holiday. I hope you're staying warm. We are starting a new series in this event this Sunday.

We're celebrating Epiphany. Actually, that day was Friday. The revealing of the true nature of Jesus, particularly to these magi, these wise men.

And we're beginning a series looking at that passage tonight. And I was thinking about how to prepare for this this week. And as I meditated on this and thought about all that it means, it actually took me back to thinking about when I first met my wife.

And I met Laura all the way back in 1999. That's when we started dating. That may seem like ancient history. But we met, we started dating, and things progressed pretty well.

And then at some point we turned a corner and took a really big step, I think, in relationships. And that is that I went home to meet her family. And again, this is 99, so this is before Facebook.

[1 : 02] You can't Facebook stalk people. And so we went home. And we did a kind of a ritual that is very common when this sort of thing happens. And that is we get home, I meet everybody. And then they go to the cabinet, and they open the cabinet up.

They grab the family photo albums. And they bring them out, and they plunk them down on the coffee table. They sit me down on the couch, and they say, well, we are going to show you some pictures of Laura. And they open it up, and they start to show me all of these great pictures.

You know, there's the requisite photo of Laura as a baby with a bowl of spaghetti on her head, right, where she's using it as makeup. And then there's one from middle school, actually, where Laura is wearing her grandmother's blazer from the 70s, complete with thick shoulder pads.

And she has this ruby red lipstick on, and she actually went to school dressed that way. And so we get to see all of these photos. And the reason that we do this is pretty obvious, I think.

You know, they're looking at me, and they're saying, you met our beloved Laura, but you met her when she was an adult. And you obviously love her and care about her, but you don't really know her because you didn't know her all those years that she was a kid.

[2 : 14] And so they pull the snapshots out to show you this is what she was like at 2. This is what she was like at 12. This is what she was like at 16. And you begin to get a fuller, deeper, more comprehensive understanding of who that person is by looking at those snapshots.

And in the same way, all of us who come to know Jesus Christ encounter him as he is an adult in his earthly ministry, in his continuing ministry.

And in our minds, we think of him as an adult. But the gospel writers, when they wrote the account of Jesus' life and ministry, they included snapshots of his childhood.

Not many. But they essentially, I believe, are doing it for the same reason. You've come to know Jesus. You've come to be curious about him or perhaps even to believe in him.

But you really need to see these snapshots from his childhood in order to more fully understand who he is and why he has come. And so that's our series for the next four weeks.

[3 : 19] We're going to be looking at these snapshots from the childhood of Jesus. And asking of each passage or each snapshot, how does this help us more fully understand who Jesus is, why he's come, what it means to know him.

So tonight we're looking at this epiphany passage, Matthew chapter 2, the visit of the Magi. A couple of years ago here, we looked at the whole passage and all of the details and tried to explain everything that was going on.

Tonight we're just going to look at the first three verses. And we're going to focus on this and what it says to us. So what I want to do is do a little walkthrough of the passage just to give us a little context.

And then I believe this passage has something to say to non-Christians. And I think that it also has something to say to Christians. So walkthrough, something for non-Christians, something for Christians.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for this word, epiphany, and all that it means, Lord. [4 : 18] But at the core of it, we know that it means that there must be an act of divine revelation for us to see clearly and truly who Jesus is. And we know that that's something that can very well happen tonight.

It's why we're here. It's why we open your written word. Because we believe that through your written word, you actually open the eyes of our hearts to see the truth of who Jesus Christ is. And so we pray that that would happen, Lord, for those of us who know him, that we would be reminded afresh.

For those of us who don't, that perhaps for the first time we would come to recognize the truth of who he is. Lord, we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So Matthew chapter 2, verses 1 through 3.

Just want to start with a little walkthrough and just give you a little context about what's going on here. The passage opens, verse 1. Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king.

Okay, so he's giving us a little time and place here. Hope you notice that it says, after the birth of Jesus. Often we think of the Magi visiting on the night of his birth.

[5 : 23] Not true. It actually happened months after, maybe even a year or two after. So probably Jesus was more likely a toddler by the time they got there. And then it mentions that this happens in the time of Herod the king.

It's kind of funny there. And people in the day this was written would have known that that was a bit ironic because Herod was not a king. He was a Rome-sanctioned ruler of the region. But he was not a king. But everybody knew he very much wanted to be king.

So there's almost a little sarcasm going on here. Herod, the guy who thought he was king. And Herod was very cruel and very paranoid. At one point even put some of his own family members to death in order to hold on to his power.

And so that's the kind of leader he is. And also, we also know from history that Herod ruled and then he died in 4 BC. So think about the passage.

Do the math. What does that mean about the birth of Jesus? If Herod was alive when Jesus was born and Herod died in 4 BC, well, our calendars are off.

[6 : 29] I mean, most scholars think that Jesus was born sometime between 4 and 6 BC. So a little off there. But that's okay. So moving on, it says, I love the song, We Three Kings.

We sing it during the Advent and Christmas season. But they were not kings. Nor were there three of them. Probably many more. There's a tradition that developed later in the history of the church that they were kings.

That there were three. Not in fact true. But it makes a great song. We still sing it. But they were something called magi. They were probably very politically powerful. Very highly educated.

Very wealthy. But they weren't kings. And it's probably more accurate to say that they're pagan astrologers. Or religious scientists.

We'll come back to that in a little while. And it's obvious that they're not Jewish. They're from the East. But they're very familiar with the Old Testament scriptures. In fact, seemingly more familiar than many of the Jewish leaders.

[7 : 42] And so that raises the question, how could that possibly be? And the answer is simply this. That when it says they are from the East. That's referring to the area that was formerly known as Babylon.

Babylon is the East. And if you know anything about Babylon. Or you remember the series that we did in the fall. Well, 600 years before Jesus. The nation of Israel had been taken into Babylonian captivity.

And so people were being enculturated and assimilated in Babylon. Jews were being assimilated into Babylon. But also Babylon was sort of absorbing a lot of Jewish culture.

There was an exchange happening. If you were here for the series on Daniel. You remember that Daniel was actually brought into Babylon. And trained to be a Magi. So that was the education that he got.

Divination and astrology. And reading animal entrails. And various sort of signs. And all of those things. Daniel learned all of that. That's the training that a Magi receives. So through the exile. [8 : 48] The Babylonian tradition had become infused with the Jewish tradition. And so the Magi of Jesus' day. Probably had the Jewish scriptures. Right alongside their other sacred texts.

They were very familiar with them. And through their study of scripture. And their observations of the world around them. They had begun to put two and two together. They had come to believe that God's promised Messiah King.

Was about to be born. And so they were desperate to figure out who he was. And where this was happening. So then in verse 3 it says. When Herod the king heard this.

He was troubled. That doesn't just mean kind of mildly annoyed. It means he was deeply, deeply disturbed. And all Jerusalem with him. And I want you to look at this.

There are essentially two opposite reactions here. Given for the birth of Jesus. You have the wise men who come. And they want to worship him. And then you have Herod. Who because he wants to hold on to his own throne.

[9 : 51] Begins plotting to kill him. We'll look at that passage in a couple of weeks. It's interesting to see the polarizing impact of the birth of Jesus. Before he's ever uttered a word.

Right? It reminds me of that C.S. Lewis quote. That says something along the lines of. Either Christianity is true. And therefore it is of infinite importance.

Or it is not true. And therefore of no importance. But the one option that is not left open to us. Is that it is of moderate importance. Right?

You either crown him. Or you kill him. But there's no middle ground allowed. Because of the very claims that are made about Jesus Christ.

So we see that polarity even here. So this is the snapshot of the Magi. You can imagine. Picture of the Magi. Just as they're arriving to greet the toddler Jesus in his home.

[10 : 47] And so we ask. What does this have to say to us? And I think that it actually addresses both non-Christians and Christians. In overlapping but distinct ways. First we'll talk to the non-Christians.

And I recognize that's a broad category. Right? So some of us may be ardently non-spiritual. And not interested in this at all. Some of us may be following a different faith.

Very, very passionately. Some of you may be considering yourselves seekers. Or not sure what you believe. Agnostic. I know that it's a broad term. To those of you who are wondering.

Who are seeking. Who are asking questions. I would humbly suggest that the Magi are actually a good example to follow. I think they actually offer us a good example of what it looks like to seek in an honest way.

So I want to point out a couple of things about the Magi and the way they go about seeking Jesus. The first thing that's pretty obvious from the story is. These are people who want to know truth.

[11 : 50] Not their version of truth. They're interested in finding out what is true. Regardless of whether it aligns with their preconceptions.

Now, the reason I think that's important to point out is because these days. It seems that more and more and more we live in a culture. Where people knowingly prefer their version of truth.

Or the truth that they would prefer to believe. Over what may in fact be true objectively speaking.

Right? So you may know that the Oxford Dictionary named as its 2016 word of the year post-truth. They think that that really summarizes the year. I mean, think about the fake news phenomenon.

Right? Think about the polling data that shows the incredible misinformation that's out there.

But what's most interesting is that people, even when they realize that their information is fake. Or maybe based on spurious data. Or none at all.

[12 : 55] They don't actually care. They don't actually care. And so post-truth doesn't mean that we're post any concept of truth. But what it means is we're post-believing that objective truth is as important as preferred truth.

That we would actually prefer to believe in the world that we would like to think exists. Rather than the one that does. But these magi are uniquely willing to get outside the echo chamber.

To sort of leave their comfort zone. Because they're desperate to know what is true. What is real. Regardless of the implications. Regardless of whether it will be convenient for them.

They're very courageous, I think. And very humble. To do this. So the second thing I want to point out. That's the first thing. The second thing is this. Is they don't make the artificial distinction

between faith and science.

That we often see today. They don't make that artificial distinction. And I think it's worth pointing that out. Because these men are the scientists of the day.

[14:02] They are some of the most highly educated people in the world. And yet they're also very thoroughly religious. And what you see them doing here in the passage is very important. They are relying on the one hand.

They're relying on their observations of the world. They're relying on what they see. They're relying on their faculties of reason. To understand the world. And at the same time.

They're relying on not just observation. But revelation. So they have all of these sacred texts. And they're looking at the world. And then they're going to their texts.

And reading. And they're looking at the world. And they're trying to see how they line up. How they interact with one another. Now at one point. The Jewish texts were probably just alongside all the rest.

But over time. You can imagine that at some point. The Jewish texts. The Old Testament. Began to make a little more sense. Of what they were seeing. Than the other texts.

[14:58] It began to explain what they were observing. More and more and more effectively.

Right? And it's the same experience I have. When I try to figure out. Why am I so selfish? Why?

Why do I constantly lose my temper with my kids? You know? Why am I so unbelievably impatient? And I look at what counselors have to say.

And I look at what various religions have to say. And philosophies about all of that. And then I come across the concept. Of sin. And idolatry. And I say.

Oh yeah. That's true. And I connect with it on a level. That nothing else. Offers.

And I begin to realize. This is a text. That can explain me. To me. And it begins to take on. More authority. And that's I think.

[15:54] Some of what's going on with them. They begin to see. What's happening in the world. And what's happening with the. These myths of a coming Messiah. And they begin to look at the stars. And then they begin to look at this text.

And it begins to jump off the page. This is true. And it's real. And it's happening right now. And so they want to come. And they want to figure out. What this is pointing to. And I think it's worth it. Worth pointing this out. Because these days. Many people make an artificial distinction. Between faith and science. And this really assumes. That faith and reason. Are separate things. You know. There are faith people.

And there are reason people. But what we need to realize. Is they're actually counterparts. Right. They're sides of the same coin. Faith and reason. Need each other. Right.

So for believers. So for people of faith. We need to be able to understand. And articulate. The reasons. Behind our faith. Right. That Christianity is not a blind leap.

[16:47] That you take in the dark. Right. That Christians are looking at the extraordinary amount of evidence. For Jesus. And for his resurrection. And they're trying to put those things together. And draw conclusions.

Based on available evidence. Right. And many of us believe. That the only way to make sense of all the evidence. Is to recognize that Jesus is who he says he is. The Christ.

Right. That we need to be able to understand the reasons behind our faith. But likewise. People who are saying. Well I believe in reason. And I don't believe in. People who are devoted to reason. Need to be able to admit. The faith behind their reason. Right. That there are reasons behind faith. But there is also faith behind reason. You know. I was talking to a guy not too long ago.

Who right out of the gate. Just let me know. Once he found out I was a pastor. Let me know. Just by the way. I'm an atheist. You know. I don't know what they think I'm going to do. You know. When they. You know. But it's just so you know.

[17:41] Like don't touch me. So I had to. I wasn't planning on it. But. But. But then he begins to lay out the reasons why. And. And. And very quickly. We get to the whole concept of miracles. And he says. I mean.

Everybody knows. None of that stuff actually happens. And any halfway intelligent person knows. That these things are not real. You know. And. You know. Things like the virgin birth. You know. A pregnancy doesn't just happen. You know.

That doesn't just happen. But that very same guy. If you were to ask him. Well. How did the universe come into being? You know what he would say? It just happened. You know. It reminds me of this quote by Glenn Scrivener. He says. Christians believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. Christians. Materialists believe in the virgin birth of the cosmos. Choose your miracle. You know. And really. I think that that's true. At some point. Faith plays into whatever worldview. The most ardent materialist. At some point. You dig down far enough. There are faith assumptions that are not provable.

[18 : 38] That you simply take. By faith. So the conflict is not actually. Between belief. And unbelief. There are not believers. And unbelievers. We are in fact.

All believers. The question is. What is the object of your belief? The object of your faith? And so what you see in the Magi. There are people who are interested in what's true. No matter what. And they're willing to rely on both observation.

From the natural world. And revelation. Through scripture. To find it. So. Something for those of us who are seeking. Now I want to move to. What does this have to say to those of us who are Christians?

Christians. And I just want to again. Look at the Magi. And I want to point this out. The Magi are. As I said before. Some of the most highly educated people. Probably in the world.

They are of a completely different ethnic. And cultural. And religious background. And yet. They are desperately searching for Jesus. They're not of the same culture.

[19 : 37] They have a totally different religious background. Culture. All that. But they are desperately searching for Jesus. You know how long they had to travel. To get there. This isn't just like going to northern Virginia.

Probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 900 miles. 900 miles. That would have taken months. And months. And months. Over dangerous. Rough.

Unpredictable. Terrain. 900 miles. They're that hungry. And the reason it's worth pointing this out. Is in the same way. I think that. That there are people all around us.

From all different backgrounds. Cultures. Ethnicities. Religions. All different backgrounds. And you don't have to go elsewhere. To find. You know. You live in a place like D.C.

We're surrounded by people from everywhere. And we're surrounded by people. Who are desperately hungry for Jesus. They're searching. If you told them.

[20 : 34] That you would definitely encounter Jesus. If you travel 900 miles. They'd say sign me up. And they'd start walking. There are people who are hungry. Now why is this something. That we need to point out to Christians.

Why am I not saying this to seekers. Well the main reason is this. I think that the idea of sharing our faith.

Makes us incredibly uncomfortable. I think it makes us squirm. Like very few things. Make us squirm. I think that we're uncomfortable with the whole idea.

You know. And as Christians. It's just. You know. When issues of faith come up. That you get that pit in your stomach. And you just say. Oh no. And you just don't want to talk about it. And I think that there are a lot of reasons for that.

I think that we have. There are bad examples of evangelism. And proselytizing out there. Right. I mean. There are examples of coercion. And bait and switch.

[21 : 32] And manipulation. And all of these things. That maybe we've seen firsthand. Now. I remember when I was in middle school. And I had a friend. And this friend and his family. Invited me to come see a play.

And oh. By the way. Yeah. The play's at our church. I said. Okay. And I go along. And we get there. And it's this play about this family. Driving along on the road. And they're talking.

And there's like the one family member. The one kid. Who doesn't really. He's not sure what he thinks about Jesus. And the other people of the family are like. Come on. You know. Don't you know. And all this. And he's like.

I just don't know if I believe in him. And then. And they have a huge wreck. Right. You know. Curtain drop. Intermission. Right. Change the set. Come back.

Lights up. You know. Hellfire and clouds. Right. And all of the family is in the clouds. Except for the one kid. And he's in the hellfire. And he's yelling off. And help.

[22 : 26] And rescue me. And you know. The family's like. You really. You should have accepted Jesus. When you had the chance. You know. And then. You know. And then. To make matters worse. The play ends.

And then I'm like. Oh. Thank goodness. You know. For refreshments. You know. And no refreshments. You know. I guess. Churches. We can't afford refreshments. So. They just sent us into this little room.

You know. But. We can't afford refreshments. But we can afford to print out lots of little cards. That you write your name and address on. If you want to make a decision for Jesus. Right. And this made a huge impression on me.

I don't think it was the one that they were aiming for. But it made a huge impression on me. And there are these kinds of approaches out there. But I think that if we're honest. If we're really honest about why we are so uncomfortable with the idea of sharing our faith.

It's much simpler than that. It's simply that we're terrified of rejection. I think we're terrified of being rejected. And it's true that we live in a culture where sharing your faith has a bad rap.

[23 : 24] You know. The Barna Group did a study where they asked Americans their opinion about this sort of thing. And they said well. They came back and they reported that if you're the kind of person who tries to convert other people to your faith.

That 60% of Americans would now consider you to be a religious extremist. Right. So the culture has shifted a little bit on this issue. Right. So the truth is if you begin to talk about issues of faith you may get rejected a time or two.

There may be a couple of people out there who say oh man you're an extremist. But I guess I would say so what? You know you go through rejection a few times.

And you realize that you're still here. You know you're not a smoking hole in the ground. You survived. Right. You're intact. And you realize it's not as bad as we think that it is.

It's not as bad as we make it out to be. But more to the point we need to understand that while our culture is in certain ways very much against proselytizing. In the same token we also live in a culture that very highly values knowing and understanding and sharing our personal stories.

[24 : 36] Our personal narratives. Right. The journey that we've been on. What we believe about the ultimate questions. People really want to know. They're curious. And I don't know if in my personal experience lots of people who don't know what I do for a living don't know that I'm a pastor.

Nevertheless I'm finding constantly that people are talking about these kinds of questions in my life. I mean I went to pick up my son from a class and one of the other moms who was picking the son up were just standing there waiting for our kids to get out.

And the mom says you know with my boys the topic of death came up the other day. They had an uncle who died. And they started asking me mom what happens when we die. And I didn't know what to tell them. What do you think happens?

You know and I'm like on my iPhone I'm like I'm sorry what? This kind of thing happens all the time if you have the eyes and the ears. It is happening all the time. People are curious. They're hungry. They're thirsty. People don't know. They're dying to know. What happens? And they want somebody to talk to. And there's no space in our culture to have those conversations. Right.

[25 : 41] So let me ask you this. If you have friends or co-workers who with whom you're not willing to be honest about the most centrally important aspect of your identity.

That is your relationship with Jesus Christ. Then what kind of relationship is that ultimately? You know is it a real relationship at all?

Is it of any value? You know. I mean the fact is some people may reject you. But what's the alternative? You just sort of create this false self. And you kind of put it out there.

And you just hope that it will get accepted. But then when it gets accepted is that even a real relationship? This culture deeply values sharing our stories.

Not in a coercive way. Not in a manipulative way. But simply saying listen I've thought about this. I've read about this. I've talked to a lot of people about this. And this is what I think. This is what I believe about God. This is what I believe about the world.

[26 : 44] People are open. They're way more open than we think. So someone says okay well. Okay I can see that happening in our culture.

But the thing that really chaps my hide. Is when people go to other cultures. And impose this religion on other people. That's the thing that drives me crazy. Because we all know that that's just another form of cultural imperialism.

Right. And again. To some extent that has happened. Right. People have been cultural imperialists in the name of Jesus. That has happened. But I would humbly suggest that the much greater threat of cultural imperialism does not come from Christianity.

It comes from secularism. That that's where real cultural imperialism is happening all the time. And there's a guy named Laman Sana. If you're familiar with Tim Keller.

He talks about him a lot. And he wrote a book about this very topic. His book is called *Whose Religion is Christianity?* And this is a man who teaches at Yale.

[27 : 47] And he's also an African. He's a Gambian. And so in this book *Whose Religion is Christianity?* He makes the argument that Christianity is actually more open to cultural difference than any other religion.

And he says this. He says to be African. Here's his argument. To be African is to believe in the supernatural. Right.

Essential to my Africanness. Is that I believe that there are good spirits and bad spirits. And the problem is. How do you deal with the evil spirits? And so you have lots of fear and enormous amounts of superstition.

About how to deal with the spiritual world. And so he says. If I send an African. Off to Harvard or Yale or Princeton or Oxford or Cambridge. They're going to get there.

And they're going to be told. Well none of that is real. All of this actually has a scientific explanation.

Right. And he says. By contrast. Christianity actually respects my Africanness.

[28 : 47] Because it lets me stay African. Because it says. Yes. There are evil spirits. Because Christianity says. Yes. There is a spiritual world. But here's the good news.

Jesus Christ has overcome the evil spirits. So you no longer have to be afraid. So he says. That Africans recognize. That Christianity actually renews their Africanness.

He says. In the end. Christianity doesn't make me more European. It makes me more African.

Right. So. Africans recognize.

That here's the choice. They say. If I become a secularist. According to Sana. If I become a secularist. I have to stop being African. But if I become a Christian.

I actually become more African. And I think that one of the reasons. We have the story of the Magi. In the Bible. Is to show us. Right from the start.

[29 : 48] Of Jesus's life. That the gospel was never meant. To be confined. To one culture. Or one people group. Or one ethnicity. It was never meant. To be confined. In that way.

Right. If you know anything about wine. You know that there's a concept. In the wine world. Called. And forgive my horrible French. Terroir. And terroir. Is the.

Is the quality. That wine gets. From the place. Where it is planted. So you can take the same.

Grape. And you can plant it. Here. And here. And here. And here.

And at the end of the day. When you drink that wine. You're going to actually have. Four different wines. All from the same grape. Why? Because those wines. Take on.

All of the. Unique characteristics. Of the place. Where they've been planted. And in the same way. We don't just have. American Christianity. Right.

[30 : 42] That's one wine. Right. But we have. Chinese Christianity. With a. A distinct. Chinese quality to it. Right. We have African. Christianity. We have Arab. Christianity.

And there is a distinct. Africanness. To the African. Christianity. That is. Not like American.

Christianity. And so on and so forth. All around the world. And yet. They all share. In the same vine.

Of Jesus Christ. And that. I believe. The Magi. Show us. That that was the intention. From the beginning. When Paul talks in Ephesians. About the mystery. That is to be revealed.

That's what he's talking about. It was never just meant for you. So in the same way. I think as we look at the story of the Magi.

What this shows us who are Christians. Is the fact that Jesus came for everyone. Which means no one has the corner on the market. Of Christianity. And in fact. Everyone should have equal access to it.

[31 : 42] I think the reason that we need to meditate on this. And come back to this reality again and again. Is that all too often Christians today. Especially I think. If we could just be honest. In our

kind of generation.

In our sort of demographic. It's very common to say. In places like D.C. Let's put the whole truth and doctrine thing aside. What we really need to do. Is roll up our sleeves.

And we need to do good work. And that's what really matters. Good tangible work make a difference. Now I want to say this to that. And I think this is what this story shows us. That good work is important.

And it matters. And we cannot neglect it. But ultimately this shows us. That the world doesn't need us. The world doesn't need us.

The world needs Christ in us. The world needs Christ in us. Right. So if you're a modern day magi. [32 : 39] And you're searching. And you're searching. And you're seeking. I hope that this is encouraging to you. I hope that it inspires you to continue searching. Particularly when it comes to Jesus Christ.

That you'll look at the available evidence. That you'll talk to the people who know him. And love him. And follow him. And ask them to share their stories. For those of us who are Christians. I hope that this reminds us.

That Jesus is still out there to be found. But he's no longer meant to be found in a manger. That he's in fact meant to be found in the lives of Christians.

So we are the means through which epiphany happens. And will continue to happen. Until he comes again. Let's pray.