

Matthew 2:1–12

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Date: 23 December 2018

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[0 : 00] The text for today is Matthew 2, 1 through 12, on page 895 of the White Bibles. Please stand for the reading of God's Word. 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, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw a star when it rose, and have come to worship him. When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.

They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for it is so written by the prophet, 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.

Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 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.

After listening to the king, they went 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.

[1 : 28] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.

Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. You may be seated. Well, good morning.

And I just want to welcome those of you who are here by way of visiting on this Christmas Sunday. We are so glad that you're here. And I don't know if you've been here for a while.

You will have recognized that the pianist during the offertory was Ben Leinard. Ben and Helen are back. It's just a joy to have you here after being here for so many years.

[2 : 26] It's wonderful to see you and to have your family back in town. And Arthur and Daniel Jackson are here. Pastor Jay, we still love you. We still think you belong here. Get out of Kansas City.

Come on back and help me out. It's great to have both of you here today. And just a welcome to all of you who might even be here for the very first time. You've walked into a quiet season in our church life.

And with all the activity in this church, it's actually kind of pleasant to walk into a major holiday and just begin to reflect a little bit on what the Lord has done.

So we're glad, very glad that you're here. If you need movements for the message, if you need to know how the pastor is going to carry out his preaching, just think along the lines of Matthew's claim, that which Matthew thinks will bring credibility, and then Matthew's call.

Or over the next 30 minutes or so, he makes a Christmas assertion. He will provide a particular argument.

[3 : 50] And then he will lay down an appeal. And hopefully, just knowing that much about the piece that I've prepared for you will enable you to track very easily Matthew's Christmas claim.

If I were to title it, that's what I'm going to do. There's a lot of clutter. And I want to bring some clarity over Christmas.

Christmas is coming, but what is it that came? Clearly, must be more than just a story to be told on the week of winter's solstice.

Hopefully, it is more than capitalism's enterprising initiative to buoy the economy.

Historically, I think there must be something beyond it as providing Christianity's alternative to Judaism's Hanukkah and Festival of Lights.

[5 : 13] But what is it? What is the claim of Christmas? Matthew puts it right there in the text, verse 2, through the mouth of the traveling wise men who had come from the east.

Through them, Matthew says to us, Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? That's Matthew's Christmas claim.

That in Jesus, we have the King through the promised line of Israel.

In fact, you didn't have to wait until chapter 2 and verse 2 to hear Matthew's Christmas claim. He launched his gospel with a line like this.

The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. In other words, the book, it could actually almost refer to the entire record of his gospel.

[6 : 25] The origins of Jesus, who is the son of David, namely King, Christ, promised Messiah. That's the claim amidst all the clutter.

Jesus, King. King of the Jews. According to the line in chapter 2 and verse 2.

Now, just knowing that claim means that he's not so much interested in Christmas as an event to be celebrated as he's interested in it as an interpretation of all of the events that had led up to it.

Christmas is the conclusion of something, not what we think as the beginning of something.

Christmas is the birth of a king who had been long ago promised.

Where is he who was born king? It's fascinating, isn't it? His unconventional Christmas.

[7 : 33] 2-1. Now, after Jesus was born. He gave seven words. The last verse of chapter 1 to Christmas Day.

He gave seven words to what we consume six weeks over. Seven words. I mean, it got that simple. She had given birth to a son.

Christmas Day. He's not concerned with the day. He's concerned with the declaration. He's not concerned with the event. He's concerned with now after.

He's launched his gospel indicating that Jesus is king. And now through the words of the travelers, where is he who has been born king?

That's all he's about for Christmas. In fact, the gospel of Matthew bookends this claim.

[8 : 32] Here you have wise men traveling to discern or inquire something concerning Jesus and kingship.

And the ruler of that area, Herod, doing the same. Guess what happens at the end of the gospel of Matthew? He closes the gospel with this same Jesus, now 33 years later, before not Herod, but Pilate.

And Pilate's question, are you the king of the Jews? Same phrase. And so the entire gospel is wrapped on this Christmas claim.

And it's one that I would set before you because it's what Matthew would have you consider as ultimately important.

Is Jesus a king? If he is a king, what kind of king? Is he a promised king? Is he an earthly king? Is he a metaphorical king?

[9 : 42] Is he a mythical king? Is he a magical king? Is he a king? Is he a king? If the wise men do their part, are you to bring your heart to this king?

That's the claim. Now that claim was evidently so intriguing it caused some people to come from far away. The travelers. Take a look here.

In those days, wise men. That's the translation that we got all the way back from this thing called the King James Version. It almost feels as though they translated the word here to think about philosophers or learned people.

Later, they'll talk about these people as being we kings. They might not have been so much kingly rulers or wise in a philosophical sense.

Tradition actually gives us three of them, although we don't know how many came. And you can probably ascertain why we come up with three because they end up laying three gifts down.

[10 : 53] And you know this time of year when you arrive at somebody's doorstep, you're supposed to arrive and be able to turn that handle with your elbow. If you're turning the handle with your hand, it means you didn't come with a gift.

And each man would have come with a gift and waited on the handle to present. And we have three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Therefore, we must have had three travelers. That's just

complete supposition.

But they did come. And in tradition, they even have names, Melchior and Kaspar and Belfazar. And we've got this whole wonderful panoramic view of these wise men coming.

The word here, the magi in the Latin, Actually, this whole Greek word is borrowed from what would have been taking place east of Israel.

The Parthian Empire. The Medes and the Persians. Think distant Iran. And travelers who had been religiously inclined because the major religion of the Parthians was dealt with even the Zodiac.

[12:13] And so what these men were, they were learned spiritualists from a far distant place.

Who, I don't know whether you would call them theists or atheists, But you would call them believers in some force taking place in the world.

They would have actually attached significant meaning to religious traditions and the promises that grew up around them. So that they had heard of Israel's past and would have connected with Israel and yet a number of other faith traditions.

That something's at work in the universe. You might think of it as a power, as a force, as something that you need to look to the skies and to the stars.

Where even alignments signify some massive movement that has interpretive force. And in some way, they saw a star and they began to attach it with the significance of Israel's ancient tradition.

[13:23] Indeed, early in the Old Testament, there are moments where there's prophetic voice coming forward about a star that will arise.

And so here they are. The claim of Jesus as Israel's king is intriguing enough for distant outsiders to make their way and inquire.

And so they do. I like this because I think it's a window for many of you.

I don't know whether you're an atheist or an agnostic. I don't know if you're a theist. I don't know when you read the comics, whether you just look at zits or others, or if you actually glance across the page to the astronomy and the indications of time.

I don't know, but there are many, many people today who may not have an opinion on God, but they do have an opinion that there's something at work in the cosmos.

[14:42] Some force that needs to be held within equilibrium. Some possible attachment even to religious traditions. And it's those kind of people.

Spiritual people. I'm not a Christian. I'm not a non-Christian. I'm not a Buddhist. I'm not a Muslim. I am, however, spiritual.

That person hears this. Jesus as king claim. And says, I need to take a look. Interestingly in the text, he's not, they are not the only ones who consider the claim.

For others, the Christmas claim that Matthew presents isn't something they would travel far. They're not going to get on a plane and go to a conference, think it through.

But rather, that claim is something that's troublesome. Take a look at Herod, the king. When he hears the question, it says in verse 3, He was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.

[16:05] Well, it's natural, I would think, because he's the one that actually is in office. I mean, there were others that put him there. But he was the office holder.

And so if you've actually got the political clout, and someone comes into your mayoral door, and says, you know, I've come because over in a certain precinct, I've been told somewhere in this area, a new king has been born.

And that is troubling to the one who has earthly power. Indeed, for a world that lives under its own rule.

So it was troubling to Herod, and it was troubling to everyone. The last thing we need is someone upsetting the equilibrium of the city, as if they would be coming from the other side of the aisle.

He was troubled. The claim. For some worth traveling to explore.

[17:21] For others, troubling, probably because they get the implication. If Jesus is king, then he is not.

It's interesting, then, that the first person who really understands the claim of Christmas is one who, in the text, will not relinquish his own rule. It isn't one who would fall in worship.

It's one who will reject it. And there may be Herods, even here today, who are troubled to think that Christmas would require a relinquishing of your self-rule.

Who wants to be ruled by anybody? There's a Shakespearean retelling of King Richard, who abdicates his rule.

In other words, he relinquishes his crown. And the language that Shakespeare presents to the reader is language that Herod could not embrace.

[18 : 49] But if you're troubled today with the notion that Jesus is a king that would require you to move off the center of self-rule and become a follower, then this is what it is.

This is the way Shakespeare retells the speech of abdication. This is what Herod could not do. And it may apply very well to you.

I give this heavy weight from off my head and this unwieldy scepter from my hand, the pride of kingly sway from out my heart.

With mine own tears, I wash away my balm. With my own hands, I give away my crown. With my own tongue, deny my sacred state.

With my own breath, release all duteous oaths. Oaths, all pomp and majesty I do forswear.

[20 : 00] That's a man who laid it down. That's something that we know as you continue to read the story, Herod would not do.

His call in the text to the travelers who were intrigued was when you find this one, let me know so I can worship him.

But in actual fact, what would follow our text if we had time is that when he had been tricked by these traveling, curious spiritualists, verse 16 of the same chapter, he became furious and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem who were two years old or under according to the time he had ascertained from the wise men.

This is what people do with Christmas. I will not have it and I will ensure that I put away any other rule that would tell me how to live my life.

It's interesting that it's within a two-year block. I mean, later in our own text, when the wise men arrive, it says they'll go to the house. They don't go to the stable. Don't think that this text I'm reading today and preaching from brings you to the stable.

[21 : 23] It's probably a year or two beyond the day. It's after Jesus was born and it's at a time when he's now dwelling in a house.

And this king says, anything that came within the distance of when this might have been fulfilled, I want out of my kingdom.

Travelers who are intrigued about the claim, a king who is troubled by the claim. Fascinatingly to me, there's a third set of characters in the text and it's the religious leaders of Israel, the ones to whom the promise was given.

And they almost disappear in the text. Verse 4, they have been assembled and they've been asked, where will your king be born? And they actually provide a text to which we'll come to in a second. But there's no indication that they were willing to travel. There's no indication that it concerned them at all or were troubled by it. It's absolute indifference.

[22 : 34] Perhaps there's some here today who, if you were to, quote, find myself in the text, you'd say, yeah, I'm them.

I mean, I know a bit about the Bible. I know that it says he was going to be born in Bethlehem, but I don't really care. I got other stuff going on. I don't need to kill all the male children two years old and under.

I'm not an antagonist toward the Christian faith. But let's be true. Let's cut it straight. I'm here today because, well, because people I know are here today.

I'm here today because it's Christmas Sunday. But truth be told, when you talk to me for 15 minutes now about Jesus being a king, I will very easily be able to walk out that door and be indifferent toward what you have said.

But that's the assertion. Matthew's claim, Jesus is the promised king, the one to whom all kingdoms will one day bow, the one to whom all authority would one day be given, the one to whom all nations would find forgiveness, the one to whom would have all and ever more and ever more.

[23 : 57] And ever more and ever more and ever more dominion. And ever more. The credibility for the claim, the argument for the assertion is right there in verse 6, isn't it?

The credibility or the argument that Matthew presents to you on the claim says, they told him, in Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet, 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.

That's Matthew's argument. What do you base your claim on? Well, the credibility of my claim, at least here, is resting on something an ancient prophet named Micah wrote down hundreds of years ago, namely, that we have a recorded, written source, a documentary evidence that I would bring into the courtroom and present to the jurors that I have on paper from hundreds of years ago that that promised king would come from that origin, that town, that hospital.

On the birth certificate, it would read Bethlehem, and in Jesus we have that. Now, you may say, that's not enough for me.

And I'm not saying it has to be enough for you. I mean, Matthew's going to put all kinds of paper in front of you. He's going to say, hold on, I got another one. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, they'll call his name Emmanuel, out of Isaiah 7.

[25 : 50] I got some more evidence. A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping in loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children. Oh, I got another one. There's a voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord.

He is going to go time and time and time again to the Hebrew scriptures, and he's going to grab hold of something, and he's going to say, this in and of itself may not prove my claim, but by the time you read my 28 chapters, you've got to deal with, you've got to deal with a body of evidence. Now, that ought to be somewhat compelling if you're a traveler today, and you're actually, with integrity of mind, right now under the hearing of my voice, willing to consider for 10 more minutes the claim that in Jesus, you have God's King.

In Micah's day, Israel wasn't doing well. They were going to be hauled off to Babylon, and then you had all the Assyrian entities around, and God almost says to them, well, don't you have a king? You know, but the people, they had a king, but they knew they were going to lose. He goes, well, don't you have a king? Well, let me tell you something, one day you're going to have one, and let me tell you, let me tell you where he's coming from.

[27 : 27] He's going to be born in Bethlehem, and that much, you have to admit, is true. I mean, people aren't getting on airplanes today to go see Israel in the town of Bethlehem because somebody pulled the shade over their eyes because there's some tradition that he was born in Bethlehem, but historically, of course, he couldn't have been born in Bethlehem.

I mean, you'd have to be foolish to think that 2,000 years of people moving toward Bethlehem is somehow out of union with the truth of the matter.

That Jesus the Nazarene was born on Christmas Day in Bethlehem in accordance with documentary evidence that indicated that's where it would be.

The assertion and the argument, the claim and the basis for his credibility. What about the appeal? What's his call? The text couldn't be clearer. The appeal is for universal worship.

[28 : 53] Verse 2, we've come to worship him. In the language of the king, Herod, bring me word, verse 8, that I too may come and worship him.

When they finally arrive, verse 11, going into the house, they saw the child with Mary and they fell down and worshiped him. That's his appeal.

Christmas, king. Consequence, worship. Now what is worship?

I don't know, but it's on your face. I don't know, but it's get lower, get lower than the crash. Worship is serve.

Worship is fear. Worship is being headlong as a subject.

[30 : 04] Worship is being ruled. And Matthew's clean on this too. That threefold reference to worship at the beginning, just as this kingship claim comes in at the end, take a look at the backside of Matthew.

As if he's saying, man, you can watch my whole movie and you're not going to miss this. The appeal is worship. Take a look at chapter 28 of Matthew at the resurrection appearance when the women had come to the tomb, verse 9, and they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him.

Notice what they took hold of first of all. His feet. You've got to get down to grab hold of his feet. Or take a look even further, verse 17, and when they saw him, they worshipped him.

But some doubted him. Matthew is saying from beginning to end, Christmas is coming and let me tell you what came. King!

And let me tell you what it calls you to do. Worship. And what is worship? Life at his feet. Let me put it to you this way.

[31 : 31] We often think of Jesus as the gift of Christmas and let's unwrap Jesus. That's not what happens here with the wise men. They worship him and they present gifts to him.

He is the receiver of gifts, not the gift, at least in the narrative. Think of it this way. Two days from now, somebody in a living room somewhere is going to come where you're sitting.

If you're over 40, you're going to be sitting. And the little kids are going to carry a present. It's going to have your name on it and they're going to set it at your feet. And you're going to open it and say, thank you.

But what the text is indicating is that it isn't as if Jesus is the gift you're unwrapping. Jesus is the one in the text, in the creche, to whom the gift is given.

According to the end of the gospel, he's in the big chair. He's been enthroned. He's got the ottoman. He's in my chair in my house.

[32 : 33] And imagine Jesus on Sunday, not Sunday, imagine him on Christmas morning. I mean, think this through. When they put a gift at your feet, think of Jesus as the one in the chair.

And you are the gift. And everything you got will also be given.

And he will be pleased. In our family, there are people that open gifts, they gush, and then there are people who don't gush. We like gushers.

You're going to open a gift that someone went and bought and go, oh, that's very nice. Thank you very much. I needed that. No, we like people to open the gift and be like, wow!

This is incredible! This was my reach gift! You know what a reach gift is, don't you? It's the gift you asked for, but you had no idea they'd really get. It was beyond the economy of scale to be given.

[33 : 42] And yet, it was there, and now it was yours, and this is the way Jesus will be ready for you in two days. He wants to take your life, open you up, not just change you, but take great joy over you.

Christmas joy is Jesus' joy over you if you give yourself to Him.

I've got to be done now. I've got to be in my seat. There's not much else to say. Matthew has a claim.

Jesus is the King of the universe to whom all authority is given, and He will rule forevermore and evermore, and one day you'll actually look Him in the eye. Amen. The claim is credible.

The assertion has a reasonable argument. It's not emotional. It's not sentimental. It's recorded with documentary evidence that you can, over time, feel the weight of the individual pieces like waves that make a case.

[35 : 06] And the call is simply this. Do your part. Become a follower of Christ.

The words of Milton. See how far, see how from far upon the eastern road the star-led wizards haste with odors sweet.

Oh, run, prevent them with Thy humble ode and lay it lowly at His blessed feet.

Have Thou the honor first Thy Lord to greet. Our Heavenly Father, we have but only a few hours to clear the clutter and come to understand the claim of Christmas.

And I pray that for some the travel here this morning would have been worth it.

[36 : 37] That for some they will gain entrance into your everlasting hall by having given themselves to you today.

And for all of us, oh Lord, keep us from the pride of Herod and the indifference of others and lead us to the one in whom we should rejoice.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen.