

Matthew 2:1-12

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and Merry Christmas Sunday to you, especially those of you who are in from out of town. You might have noticed that we're without amplification today on almost every front, and it seems that all of our Hyde Park microphones are still resting quietly somewhere downtown as a result of being left behind from the Christmas on the Town event, which, if you weren't able to make it, was, as TJ said, a wonderful evening.

I think we had 537 people there, and I look forward to doing it again in the coming years. So what a wonderful time that was. Well, given that we have been preaching our way through Philippians all of Advent, of course, singing Christmas carols, but nothing sermonically given to Christmas, I decided that this year we would take a classic Christmas text.

Matthew 2, 1 to 12, the journey of the Magi, the wise men. And let me begin by saying this.

Matthew's Christmas has a certain peculiarity to it. His retelling is wholly unexpected and distinct from Luke.

I don't know if you caught the difference. It's right there in the opening five words of the text that was read. Here they are. Now, after Jesus was born.

[1 : 44] There's the peculiarity of Matthew's Christmas. Now, after Jesus was born. If you want to know how strange it is in regard to Luke's more famous rendering, you only have to look at the preceding verse, the last verse of chapter 1.

But Joseph knew her not until, here it is, he gives all of seven words to Christmas Day. That's Christmas, according to Matthew in seven words.

And she called his name Jesus. And no sooner does Matthew arrive at the day than he is done with it. Now, after Jesus was born.

Adios. Sayonara. Vamos. Gone. Gone. We would do well to ask why.

For us, Christmas Day is the event. It's what a child longs for. It's what they're depressed over come December 26th.

[3 : 03] Do I really have to wait a whole nother year? Not so for Matthew. Why?

The answer he provides is simple. Matthew is more interested in what Christmas means than the memories it brings.

This ought to be especially helpful for any in our midst today who are quite depressed this week. They're all singing, it's the most wonderful time of the year.

Well, may Matthew become your patron saint. Because Christmas Day is done with before he comes to it. In fact, if you want to know how far along he pushes past Christmas, just take the words of chapter 2 and verse 16 seriously, where Herod, when he learned he'd been tricked by the wise men, killed all the male children in Bethlehem in that region who were two years old and under, according to the time he perceived or ascertained from the wise men.

How far does Matthew's event that was read today, the visit of the wise men, push one beyond Christmas Day? Probably a year or a year and a half already.

[4 : 26] Well, isn't that great? You're done with the holiday? The clouds lift. Matthew wants you to know what it means. He's not concerned with all of our experiential memories.

And may that be a word of comfort to many. His concern is with what it declares. Not the day itself. And in our text, notice, he puts the meaning or the declaration of Christmas on the lips of traveling wise men. Just look at it. Chapter 2, 1 and 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, saying, Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

Matthew places the meaning of Christmas on the lips of these traveling wise men. Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

[5 : 39] In Jesus then, according to Matthew, we have the birth of God's promised king. What is Christmas?

According to Matthew, a ruler has been born. And more than that, Matthew would have you believe, Matthew would make you a Christian by asking you merely to consider the proof texts that are related to this event.

Notice, verse 5 of your text, They told him in Bethlehem of Judea, For so it is written by the prophet. This ancient, inscripturated promise delivered to Micah concerning the geographic place of this birth is, for Matthew, a rationale for what has been fulfilled in this birth.

It goes all the way back in chapter 1 and verse 22. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, Behold, a virgin shall conceive.

He puts forward an ancient proof text and attaches it to Jesus and his birth or the place of his birth in order that you might believe.

[7 : 08] He goes further in chapter 2, 15. If you're wondering whether this indeed is his modus operandi, they remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophets out of Egypt.

I called my son. Or 2, 17. This was fulfilled, then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah. Or, all the way over in 3, chapter 3, For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet when he said.

This is Matthew's retelling of Christmas. The rehearsal of a long ago word written down asking you to consider the birth of Christ, the place of his birth, the geographic region in which he lived as a young boy, and the entry of the Baptists who bore witness of him.

And on the basis of that, believe. For Matthew, Christmas meaning, then, comes down to one word. What is Christmas? Fulfillment.

Fulfillment. Christmas then is not the beginning of something. It's the end of something. I don't care what the church calendar tells you by opening the church year with the first Sunday of Advent, Matthew would put it at a different place.

[8 : 39] You don't commence with the church year at Christmas. By the time you come to Christmas, according to Matthew, you're at the very climax of it all. You're not commencing with a story, you're at the conclusion of it.

In other words, let me put it clearly, as you think about this week, he doesn't care about the event in the way we do. In fact, he would tell us Christmas is not the event, it's the interpretation of all the events that have been inscripturated and promised and now find their way into human life.

Now that's peculiar. He would make you a Christian today by merely forcing you to wrestle with the question.

If he is not the king, then how do you account for that ancient promise in Micah? If he didn't come forth out of Egypt, then how do you account for that ancient word long ago written down?

If he wasn't born of this young virgin, then how do you account for the word of judgment on Ahaz and his unbelief in Isaiah? when he looked for deliverance from another place?

[10 : 06] This is the peculiarity of Matthew's Christmas. God has put a promised king in the world.

Here's his emphasis. Just as he said. So today, if you want to remain a non-Christian or if you want to remain agnostically committed, then you tell Matthew how all those texts fit without meaning.

It is a striking argument. the king promised actually back in chapter 1 verse 1 of Matthew the book of the beginnings or the genealogy of Jesus Christ.

That word Christ was not his middle name. It is a title put forth in the Hebrew scriptures that concern the anointed one.

So that when the wise men come saying where is he who was born king of the Jews they use a word known in the Roman world.

[11 : 45] But when Herod hears it verse 4 he asks the question tell me where the Christ was to be born. for Herod attaches the king with the Christ.

And Matthew has been on this from the very get-go. This is the beginning of the genealogy of Jesus which means savior king which means ruler or Christ or anointed.

And so with that we're really now really wrestling with the implications of Christmas. Matthew's message is already in seven minutes of preaching on the table.

Jesus promised king of the Jews which would have meant not merely something for Israel but because the promises originate to Abraham and include the notion that all the families of the earth

will be blessed in him then we have here according to Matthew the birth of the ruler of the universe to whom all people owe their allegiance.

So the question is simply did anyone in the text get it? I know you think I'm going to go straight to the wise men but I'm going to begin with Herod did Herod get hold of Matthew's Christmas meaning?

[13:30] The answer is quite clear yes he did Herod got hold of Christmas look at chapter 2 and verse 3 when Herod the king heard this he was troubled in all Jerusalem with him interesting in the text this word troubled is used elsewhere of individuals who fear they have seen a ghost he is terrified and notice the definite article is also present in the text Herod the king this almost Matthewan like sarcasm this imposter king I've been told that when Americans refer to the queen of England they refer to her as the queen of England definite article but when Britons refer to the queen of England she's simply queen she's the legitimate one she's queen of England but when we refer to it's the queen of

England well Herod here is a pretender in God's world and Matthew puts it forward Herod the king not king Herod Herod the king that we might all know there are two kings in the text and which one is legitimate for indeed the wise men came asking where is he who is born king of the Jews did Herod get it you bet he did look at the implication when you begin to look at what he does he inquires in the text summoning verse 7 the wise men secretly and ascertaining 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 this is feigned allegiance he had no intention of bowing before another king indeed you know that from the text we've already read by verse 16 when he finds that he's been tricked he goes and has every male child in the region of

Bethlehem killed infanticide and the mourning and wailing went up why not because he didn't understand Christmas but because he understood it perfectly if Jesus is the promised king then he is not what about you and me what about today I mean we're not even definite article rulers are we just common everyday folk it isn't as if you have some crown to lay down other than your self proclaimed rule Herod understood that in the birth of Jesus we had a king which meant that there was a king of kings and if there is a king of kings then there is a king of the common man and so we ask what will you do with

Matthew's Christmas today many are willing even here in churches let alone the city or culture at large to give Christmas some space of celebration you get on cars or board planes and acknowledge the festivities surrounding the birth we like to say of the savior but move from savior to any act of personal submission and that kind of Christmas well we're not so willing nor eager to celebrate Herod would not be bridled in fact it's because he understood Christmas that he did everything humanly possible to ensure that he would not bow and that

Christ rule would not come I think of it for churchgoers we'll celebrate Christmas this week all of us will as we celebrate the release of new movies as well but the question of course I'm just going to wait that out I'm not embarrassed I'm sure I'm not as embarrassed as whoever that phone belonged to we will celebrate Christmas all of us let me ask you have you wrestled with what it requires of you in areas of submission or service do we want him as savior and not as lord are there areas of life where we willingly consciously continually voluntarily resist his word and his reign to the degree in which this is so we are feigning allegiance and living as a rebel in a world where

[20:11] God has already put a ruler on the throne it seems then that the wise men stand as Matthew's alternate response I mean these are actually the men then in the text that Matthew would not only have us be but they're the men that this little text is entirely organized around I mean notice in verse 1 it's the wise men who come but by verse 12 it's the wise men who depart the wise men anchor the entire text they are the organizing principle and we have come asking where is he who was born king of the Jews that we might worship him and the climax of course at the latter part of the text when they come into the place they fell down verse 11 and worshipped him this is

Matthew's paradigm for you and for me to come seeking who is God's king and then to submit your life to his rule now this is the whole gospel of Matthew in effect the beginning here at the incarnation men are worshipping the Christ child but take a look at the way Matthew closes his gospel in 28 after the resurrection of this same one when you get to Matthew 28 verse 17 and when they saw him that is the resurrected Christ they worshipped him this is this is the very book end of Matthew Jesus is king to whom all authority in heaven and on earth has been given and at the beginning we

have these gentile outsiders willing to acknowledge it and to become part of the promises of God and at the end we have the eleven representatives of God's people going forth with that very message but both having grasped the meaning to worship and bow down come and see the glory of the

Lord so who are these men how did they get here and why did they come I've hinted at why they came and we'll return to it by way of conclusion but who are they in the Greek they're simply the magi obviously they have seen this star it says and they from the east and have come to Jerusalem well who are the magi it is some contemporary sense that these are the guys that wrote the columns for the back of the arts and entertainment section on astrology so whether you're an Aries or a Libra or whatever but nothing could really be further from the truth these are in ancient world the educated learned men who would have given themselves much more likely to the study of scrolls and texts than they would have at attendance in a seance when you think of the book of Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar he had wise men these were those who ruled the court they were aware of political theory they were aware of civil acts in the community they were those who had been schooled in law they were the most liberally educated men on the face of the earth who would advise kings they were men in the cabinet as it were that's who they were and these educated outsiders are the ones who come isn't it interesting that the very first people then that begin to worship in Matthew's quote

Jewish gospel are Gentile outsiders who are willing to look into things and inquire for themselves it makes me think of that promise in Isaiah there will be a there will be a birth of one who is a light of revelation to the Gentiles and we're actually seeing that played out in our text well how did they get here obviously it's the star it says there in verse 2 for we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him interestingly when they get on their journey again after speaking with the king it almost appears as if that star had disappeared and now was back on the scene verse 9 and behold I mean there's the word to catch your attention and behold suddenly the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was and when they saw the star when they just in a sense they reconnected with the star they rejoiced exceedingly this is how they got there they began to follow this star it's obvious from the text the text seems to give the impression every indication that this is a special star this is a unique star this is a one-off star this is a temporary star burning for a particular occasion remember now these men and part of their education would have studied astronomy these are men that learned how to read the night sky they marked the seasons out by them and they actually began to think that the gods would communicate in a sense through the created order they were full-orbed learned explorers and yet when they saw this star from their distant land they knew that it did not have a regular place in the night sky regardless of the season in which they were living and so somehow they make an effort to leave their place and follow this and you have to ask what would make them get on a camel and come that long way well given that these men are more apt to go into a library than they are some kind of necromancer like round table ouija board to determine a course of action my guess is they had ancient texts of their own that they read that would have indicated some way that a star would attend the birth of one in this case even in

Israel I look forward to speaking with them one day I began to wonder if they had an ancient scroll of the Torah even and some guy ran off to see what in the world could account for this star and he dusted off the book of numbers and thought he had read somewhere that there would be a unique star associated with something in the sky's concerning Israel and here it is out of the mouth of Balaam that jackass of a prophet his third oracle son of Baor in chapter 24 I see him but not now I behold him but not near a star shall come out of Jacob and a scepter that's the symbol of a king a scepter shall rise out of Israel it's as good a guess as any

[28 : 28] I haven't familiarized myself yet maybe some of you will with what other ancient extra biblical texts there are in the Babylonian record or the Assyrian record or the Egyptian record which might actually indicate stars in association with Israel but here's one if that indeed is the case then their faith is like yours in this sense it rests upon a belief in a word set down that's what got them on a camel that's how they arrived indeed a star we'll hear more about this next week I'm sure with light God put lights in the heavens to to not only adorn them but to provide adequate revelation for us but this light actually comes to rest over the crash that in a sense subsumes all lights indeed

Jesus will later say in his adult life I am the light of the world that in a sense all lights are adequate but imperfect representations of that which will enlighten human life that's why of course even in

revelation 22 we see him coming as the morning light think about that I think about Peter who had that incredible experience of the transfiguration where he experienced some amazing thing the kind of thing you want to experience in order to make you certain that you should be a Christian if I only had an experience like the transfiguration or the experience of the star crossing the skies and landing on a crash then I would be convinced but Peter himself says

I was with him I was on the holy mountain and we have a sign more sure than my experience on the mountain we have an inscripturated word which is like a light dawning on the soul I'm a Christian today not because I can make an argument before you on all the evidence for the resurrection although a good argument can be made I'm a Christian today because I have no other way to account for the organic inscripturated fulfillments in Christ which come from word set down

I know that's the strangest thing perhaps to come on a Christmas Sunday but I think Matthew would in the great African American tradition would stand and say I support this I would support that a young man or a young woman give their life to Christ Christ on the basis of inscripturated words which are a light more sure than any experience you can have in your life that's Matthew's way of making converts spirits who are they a word to that we have had how did they get there a word on that we have had but why did they come we have come it says in verse 1 and 2 to worship him and having seen him verse 12 they worshipped him the entire trajectory of the meaning of Christmas stands on this very truth and notice how they stand in contrast to

Herod this is what Matthew does he sets two characters before you he did the same thing in a previous text with Joseph it's as if he wants to tell you something about Christmas and then he says so you going to be like Joseph and believe in the word set down or are you going to be like Ahaz and look for someone else to deliver you in regard to Jesus being a savior but now he says I want to talk to you about Jesus being a king are you going to be like Herod or are you going to be like these other men all the characters understand the meaning of Christmas what will you and I do with it that is the question there's so many things I could bring you from wonderful writers just so you know if you're getting ready to become a Christian today or if you are a Christian you're getting ready to finally submit today

[34 : 22] I like the way T.S. Eliot puts it in the journey of the Magi a cold coming we had of it just the worst time of the year for a journey and such a long journey the weather was sharp the very dead of winter but after coming Eliot says about these wise men we return to our places these kingdoms but no longer at ease here in this old dispensation salvation within alien people clutching their gods I should be glad of another death once one takes up with Jesus all things in this world begin to recede they have to it's what Malcolm Muggeridge said when he became a Christian in his 80s he says well if you grow up in the church it's one thing to become a Christian but when you become a

Christian as an adult well you have to realize then that there are many things in your life that has to go that's the sticking point I am not interested this morning in you walking out of here with merely a sentimental understanding of Christmas to come and see the glory of the Lord and to bow before him I'm not interested in that I'm interested in you wrestling with the reality of what in our lives must! Milton see how far upon the eastern road the star led wizards haste with orders sweet oh run prevent them with thy humble ode and lay it at his blessed feet have thou the honor first thy Lord to greet well if you're going to out run these wizards and you're going to actually give your life to Christ this will be the best Christmas of your life and it's going to cost you far more than any present you could buy because that's what kings do I will say as one who has outrun the wizards and fallen on my own knees before this baby that he has not asked me to serve him as a servant but as a friend his yoke is as costly as it's been been the only thing

I've wanted on my neck coming out of Philippians and I shut it down with this you will recall that passage that one day every knee shall bow at his incarnation these blessed outsiders show the world the meaning of Christmas at his resurrection those representative insiders show the world but at his consummation every knee shall bow not not not necessarily willingly but it will bow so you can do it now or do it then you can you can begin to follow or you can be led kicking and screaming reminded of

Richard the second in Shakespeare's retelling when he was forced to abdicate his rule didn't want to give up the throne he said I give this heavy weight from off my head the pride of kingly sway from out my heart all pomp and majesty I do forswear there wow well merry christmas to you what a travesty it would be having looked at this peculiar christmas what a travesty it would be of the most

peculiar proportions if you having heard this arrive at the day for which all days have been created only to find that while you have many memories you never got the meaning our heavenly father as we come this season we ask that we would both christian and non christian alike reflect on the meaning of christmas and may we respond willingly by bending our hearts to his ownership and [40 : 23] I pray for many here today who decide to do it that you would come along with great comfort and grace and speed them as they depart serving in your name amen