

Matthew 2:1-12 "Epiphany: the Manifestation of the King"

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Date: 04 January 2026

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[0 : 00] Hi, my name is George Sinclair. I'm the lead pastor of Church of the Messiah.

! It is wonderful that you would like to check out some of the sermons done by Church of the Messiah, either by myself or some of the others. Listen, just a couple of things. First of all, would you pray for us that we will open God's Word well to His glory and for the good of people like yourself?

The second thing is, if you aren't connected to a church and if you are a Christian, we really, I would really like to encourage you to find a good local church where they believe the Bible, they preach the gospel, and if you have some trouble finding that, send us an email. We will do what we can to help connect you with a good local church wherever you are. And if you're a non-Christian, checking us out, we're really, really, really glad you're doing that. Don't hesitate to send us questions. It helps me actually to know, as I'm preaching, how to deal with the types of things that you're really struggling with. So God bless.

Let's pray. Would you pray with me? May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

You may be seated. So, as George just said, today is Epiphany Sunday.

[1 : 43] And in the rhythm of the church year, this is called a feast. It's like a celebration. One of the high points of the church year. Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, these are all feasts. And the point of that is that we are to sort of unplug a little bit from the Christmas busyness and focus our attention entirely on what God has done for us in Christ to achieve our salvation. That's what these feasts are for. They're big moments in the life of Christ and also major events that where God has accomplished our salvation. Those are feast days. Okay. So today's Epiphany. What on earth does Epiphany mean?

George already told us, but I don't see if you remember. It's a story, brother. In our culture though, like in modern English, when we talk about Epiphany, we often think about psychological things. So we think about like a light bulb moment, where you get a new piece of knowledge or you see something different. You see something from a new perspective. But culturally, the assumptions we build into that are that an Epiphany is private.

It's individual. It's out of the blue, unexpected. The idea is culturally, we think of Epiphany as like a subjective experience. Well, by the biblical view of Epiphany is very different. It means something much bigger. It means something objective. So rather than a private experience, a biblical Epiphany is public. Rather than coming out of the blue, a biblical Epiphany is the fulfillment of promises made thousands of years ago. And rather than giving us just a new perspective or new information, a biblical Epiphany involves God giving us himself in Christ at a specific place in a specific time.

You know, in the Ephesians reading today, Paul calls this a mystery. He doesn't mean like a whodunit, where you put the clues together. He means something that was hidden by God in ages past and has now been revealed, has now been manifest. That's what Epiphany means. A manifestation.

It's about the fact that the light has arrived. And whether you or me are looking for it or not, the light has arrived. And the story of the Magi tells us that. So I want to look at together the story of the Magi in Matthew 2, which George just read and ask, what does this Epiphany, this manifestation, what does it tell us about the Gospel, about the good news, about the Christian message? And I'll tell you, I'm going to suggest three things. And I'll tell you what they are and we'll go through them. The first is the Gospel gives us a person, not a system. A person, not a system.

[4 : 57] The Gospel is a manifestation, not a reward. And third, the Gospel forces a choice. And the choice is worship or hostility. There it is. So the first point, the Gospel gives us a person and not a system.

All right, let's look at the drama in Matthew. It's a great story. It involves Magi, which is plural for Magus. And some translations render it wise men. Some even say astrologers. But these are basically Eastern men who are experts in what you might call maybe esoteric knowledge. And they're used to looking for signs, including looking in the heavens for signs. They're not part of the Jewish people, the God's covenant. They are from far away. And they're looking in the sky for signs.

And they get called by a star. And they go looking for a king. And when they get to Jerusalem, if you're looking for a king, they go to the palace. It's a good place to look for a king.

And they see King Herod. Now, the text tells us that Herod was troubled, which is like a bit of an understatement, I think. Like Herod the Great, they called him Herod the Great, okay? He was a man who spent his entire life building and protecting his kingdom. He's a man who murdered his own wife and some of his sons to ensure that no one touches his throne. So is he troubled by a potential rival king?

Yep. He sure is. It's not... When the Magi show up and say, where's the king of the Jews? Herod thinks, wait, I thought I was king of the Jews. Who's this other person? Okay? And the Romans gave him that title, king of the Jews. That's Herod. But it isn't.

[7 : 09] You see, it's specifically, and don't miss this, it is specifically the kingship of Jesus that makes Herod so upset, that makes him so nervous. The kingship. And I, you know, I think this idea of Jesus' kingship, the fact that Jesus is a king, is, I think, muted and undervalued undervalued in the church today, in different kinds of churches. So in evangelical circles, we talk about Jesus being our personal savior. That's true. Thank God that's true. I mean, it's a precious thing. But Jesus isn't only that. See, if Jesus was only that, it wouldn't have bothered Herod. Herod doesn't care if you have a private spiritual life. Just keep Jesus away from the palace of real world decisions. That's what Herod's worried about. You can have your own private spirituality all you want. Just stay out of the palace. In more progressive or liberal churches, you hear about Jesus being sort of a prophet of social justice or a teacher of values like inclusion, tolerance, and so on. Herod wouldn't have been threatened by that either. See, the Roman Empire was just as pluralistic as modern-day Canada. They're happy to integrate new value systems, new ethical teachings, whatever. Just stay out of the palace. See, Herod was threatened for one reason and one reason only, and that's that Jesus is a king, king of the Jews. See, if we reduce Jesus to a system of ideas or a set of moral principles, then he lives safely in our heads. We can manipulate ideas.

We can edit principles. But see, the text says, the Magi followed the star until it stopped over a house. And there they found not a set of principles or religious teachings. They found a person in a specific place with specific people at a specific time. A person. A person. You know, there's an old epiphany tradition. I don't know if any of you have done this, but it's called the Magi's blessing. And people would take chalk and they'd mark their door frames with the year, so 2026, and they'd write the letter CMB, which are the traditional names of the Magi, not in the Bible, but in the tradition. And it also stands for the Latin phrase, may Christ bless this house.

So the gospel, friends, is the news that the king, the real king, has moved into the neighborhood. Christ isn't a system. He's a person. It's not a set of ideas you subscribe to.

He's a real person you can encounter. And if he's the king, then he lays claims to your household too. Not just that living room chair where you maybe do your devotions, your Bible reading and prayer.

Jesus lays claims to your kitchen, your bedroom, your office, the whole thing. So we meet Jesus on his terms, or we don't meet him.

[10:49] Even if we think we do. You meet him on his terms, or you don't meet him at all. So the gospel involves a person, not a system.

It's a person. Okay. Point two. The gospel is a manifestation and not a reward. So the gospel is a person. Then the question naturally follows, well, how do you find this person?

How do you find the king? Where is he? In our culture, we are trained, from when we're very young, to believe that the best things in life are things that you earn.

They're rewards. We work hard. We study. We strive. And eventually, we get the prize. Whatever the prize is. A good job, or a big house, or a partner we want, or whatever.

I don't know what it is. But you basically earn it. That's the cultural narrative. And we often can fall into treating our spiritual lives this way. So if I pray enough, or if I learn enough, I know enough Bible, or if I get my act together, then I will find God.

[11:56] So the assumption is, God is at the end of a long human search. That's the cultural understanding. But look at this story.

See, it's full of irony. The scribes who are talking to Herod. Herod asks them, where is the Messiah to be born?

And why would he ask them? Well, these are the Bible scholars. These are the PhDs in Bible, in theology. And when Herod asks where the Messiah is to be born, I mean, they don't miss a beat.

They don't even have to look it up. They know. Bethlehem. Yeah. Everybody knows that. Bethlehem. That's where he's going to be born. You know, they've got this information.

They've earned their status as guardians of the truth. But here's the sad thing. They don't move an inch. The Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem.

[12:55] But they don't go. It can be easy to have Jesus be a theoretical reward for your study.

But not a living reality to be encountered. I know. I've met people. They've got PhDs. They're very smart. They've got PhDs in religion or Bible. But they hate God. You can love studying the Bible and hate God.

You can love religion. You can love Anglican liturgy and hate God. The whole thing about being a Christian is you encounter a real person. And that person is not rewarding you for your hard work.

That encounter is pure grace. Look at the Magi. So they're Gentiles. They're not Jewish. They're not part of this covenant. They're not experts in the Old Testament.

Have they read it? Who knows? Maybe not. But God hangs a bright star in the sky for them. Paul says in Ephesians in that reading that this is the manifold wisdom of God.

[14:12] That the Gentiles, which is most of us here, are grafted. This is Paul's language. Grafted in to something that's Jewish. If you're not Jewish, you're a Christian, you've been brought into something that in its origin was fundamentally Jewish.

Okay? So the Gentiles are fellow heirs. These Magi, though, didn't earn the right to be called fellow heirs.

They were invited by a light. And that light made the first move. I think about, makes me think about, the idea of God's will.

You know, the anxiety that people feel about discerning God's will. And I felt that in my life. I remember when I was in my maybe early 20s and I was thinking about, what do I do with my life?

It feels so monumental. I remember those feelings like being young and you're making a decision here that's going to impact your entire life and shape the way that life unfolds. It felt, in some ways, it felt paralyzing.

[15:28] Like, there's a fork in the road and I better pick the right one. If I don't, I'm doomed. That kind of thing. Again, it's treating guidance from God as a sort of reward for being a really good discerner.

But look at the Magi, though. So they get to Jerusalem and they go right to Herod, which is either a really bad miscalculation or a really dumb decision.

Because if you find out there's a rival king, don't go to the king in power and tell him that. Just in case you're ever in that situation.

You know, it could have gotten Jesus killed. And as we'll see in the next story, all the infants do get killed. Except for Jesus. So if the gospel is a reward for them being wise or whatever, they would have failed.

But see, because the gospel is a manifestation, God's initiative, God is infinitely resourceful. Little setbacks like that are not a problem.

[16:36] God just warns them in a dream and they go and God leads them back another way. So, God's not hiding from you. God's not hiding his will from you.

Just one step in front of the other. Listening. So even when they and when we make a mistake, God's light keeps shining to guide us.

Because ultimately the gospel is not about how hard we search. It's about whether or not we're willing to be found. I'm just going to say that one more time.

The gospel is not about how hard you search. It's about whether or not you're willing to be found. That's true of the Magi.

That's true of us. So the gospel is a manifestation, not a reward. Third point. Third point. The gospel forces a choice.

[17:39] The choice is between worship or hostility. So if the king is a person, a real person, and if he has manifest himself to us, the Gentiles, then to the nations, then we're left with a choice.

In the gospel of John, Jesus is often called the light. And it's kind of interesting how it says, the simple fact that the light appears is itself an act of judgment.

Well, why is that? Because the light shows what's there. Judgment is about distinguishing. Right? So the light shows what's there. It doesn't just illuminate the path.

It distinguishes what's in the heart. It acts like a divider. Because notice the same news, which is the king is here. That's the news. The king is here.

That lands very differently on Herod as it does on the Magi. Herod's troubled. And the Magi are overjoyed.

[18:49] The light of Christ reveals who we really are. That's a bit uncomfortable, but that's what it does.

It makes all the difference, though, that that light is coming from God's infinite love. I remember Christopher Hitchens, the atheist intellectual who died about 15 years ago, said he couldn't imagine being a Christian and believing in a God who knows everything.

It'd be like living in North Korea, he said. It would be, except God is love. And if that light reveals what's there, comes from a place of love, then you're safe.

You should want the truth. We should want the truth. Okay? The light shows who's willing to bow and who's determined to stay on the throne of their own life.

Look at the Magi's gifts. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These are really expensive items. We might be tempted to think of these as like donations to a good cause.

[20 : 02] These are actually tributes. So, if you come and give gold to a king, you're essentially acknowledging that that king has the right to your gold.

You're basically saying, hey, King Jesus, I thought this gold was mine. Silly me, it's yours. Here you go. It's a tribute. Okay? It's a recognition of the claim that the king has over your life and the entire world.

What I once thought was mine is yours. That's what's being said in these gifts. What I once thought was mine is yours. You know, worship is the, let's say, the ultimate form of surrender.

When you come and you worship, you stop being a seeker and you become a subject of the king. The Magi opened their treasures because in that little house, in that little manger, they found a treasure that was more valuable than all the gold in the world.

So, parting with that was no big thing. In that Ephesians reading, in chapter 3 of Ephesians, Paul says that when you worship, when a Christian's gathering for worship, we're making God's wisdom known to rulers and authorities.

[21 : 27] It's a witness to someone, something. It's a subversive act. Worship is. You might think you're just coming here and it's very nice and very tame thing to do on a Sunday morning.

It isn't. It's a subversive act. Because you're telling, when you worship Jesus as the king of the world, the king of the Jews, and now the king of the Gentiles, you are telling every Herod in your life, whether the Herod manifests as guilt and shame, or the need for human approval, or the fear of not being enough, or demonic powers and influence, or addictions, or whatever.

Anything hostile to God, anything that works against human thriving, you're telling that Herod, you're telling these rulers and authorities that they no longer have jurisdiction over you.

Do you see? To worship is a witness, not just to the world that we can see, but to the world we can't. When you bow to the king in that little house, the king in the palace loses its power.

You see what I mean? When you bow to Christ, Herod loses power. So the story ends with a detail that we often overlook.

[22 : 54] The magi, at the end, departed to their own country. This is what it says. Departed to their own country by another way. So they go home a different way than they came, which you read that, you think, okay, they took a little detour.

But I was alerted to a deeper meaning here by Augustine, or Augustine, whatever you want to call him. He was an African bishop, North Africa, and in the early centuries of the church, 4th, 5th century.

And he says this about that verse. The magi departed to their own country by another way. Augustine says, the way was changed.

Yeah. Their way of life was changed. See, the going back another way is a spiritual transformation.

Because once you've knelt before the true king, you can't go back to the old roads. You can't go back to the old systems. You can't go back to the striving and self-defense and the me, me, me, me, me.

[24:01] You can't. Because there's a new ruler at the center. You don't have to live in that paralyzing anxiety of the fork in the road.

Because the king is driving the ship. The king is steering your life. You can rest. And if you're a Gentile, which means you're non-Jewish, you're no longer an outsider.

You're a fellow heir. That's Paul's words. You're a fellow heir. You're brought into something. Bigger than you. Way bigger than you. So, as we leave today, let's let that call of epiphany sink deep in us.

We don't need to manage Jesus. He's not a system of ideas or morality. We meet him. We don't have to earn his presence.

We surrender. We can follow the star out of the palace of our own self-absorption. We don't have to be the boss, the expert, the protector.

[25:12] We don't have to have it all together. Follow the king out of the palace of your own ego and your own striving. And go into that little house, metaphorically speaking, where the king is waiting for you.

In other words, go home another way. Go home changed. Go home as a subject of the king. recognize that he has manifested his love for you.

That's good news. Amen. Amen. Thank you.