

Christmas 2018

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening, everyone. It's great to see you. Not that I actually can see you. It's all dark out there at the moment. But it's great to be here with you in church tonight on a special occasion like Christmas Eve.

If you've got kids or got grandkids or something like that, it's just that time where it's just palpable in terms of their excitement. My kids are all, last time I saw them, they're all tucked up in bed, ready for tomorrow morning.

They're going to get up fairly early. They've been pretty excited for some time for Christmas. And the thing they're particularly excited for, as I suspect you're excited for, is to what am I going to get?

What's my Christmas present going to be? One of the great traditions of Christmas is the giving and the receiving of gifts. And all of us hope, I think all of us hope, for something that we really want.

Something that connects with who we are, with our interests and our passions. The best gifts are not necessarily the expensive ones, but the ones that are personal.

[1 : 0 7] My kids, for instance, were particularly excited. The thing that they stood out for them and talked all year about is that for each one of them, we got something that was unique for them and just put it in their stocking as just a joke.

One of the kids in my place goes through band-aids like you would not believe. It just puts them on everything. It's sticky tape for them. So we put band-aids, several boxes of them in their stocking, and they just thought that was hilarious.

One of our kids likes all things potatoes, so there was a bunch of potatoes in their stocking. Another one had a craving for avocado at that particular moment, so there was like four avocados in their stock.

And they just thought it was the best thing, and they continue to talk about it. It's because those presents connected with them personally. It says something about them, something significant about them.

And what we have here in this passage that Gary just read out to us is Jesus receiving some pretty strange gifts. Three gifts, really strange gifts, and yet quite significant gifts.

[2 : 1 5] It's there in verse 11 of Matthew 2. Jesus was presented with gifts of gold and incense or frankincense and myrrh. Now as a poor peasant girl, Mary might have been pretty pleased in this moment because these are expensive gifts.

This baby comes with an extensive trust fund. But she's, I'd imagine, quite baffled by this at the same time. These gifts are deeply personal.

They say something very significant about this baby. They are three gifts that reveal the significance of Jesus, of who he is, what he's come to do, and what it's going to cost him to do it.

So the gold points to who Jesus is. Gold was a gift that was brought to an audience with a king in the ancient Near East.

The magi were expecting to see a king. And they ask in the text, where is the one born who has been born king of the Jews?

[3 : 21] And so they brought gifts for a king because they were expecting to see a king. And what alerted them to the arrival of this new king is in the second half of verse 2 of the chapter.

We saw his star in the east and we have come to worship him. You see, these magi are astrologers and magicians and interpreters of dreams.

And in the ancient world, most people believed in astrology. And so the magi, these three men, are considered to be the elite. They're the academics, if you like.

They're the wise men of their time. They're knowledgeable. And when these guys saw a star, they immediately recognized that something special was happening.

You see, a particular event happened in history that caused stars, and particularly significant stars, to be associated with kings and rulers.

[4 : 24] When Julius Caesar died in 44 BC, one of the most astonishing flukes in history took place. A nova appeared in the sky over his funeral.

And so from that moment on, stars were connected with great men. It became kind of the fashion of the time. And so when these magi see this star, they put two and two together.

And what would have also encouraged them to dust off their passports was that there was a very strong rumor around in the first century that world dominion is going to shift and be set in Judea.

So famous first century historians like Tacitus and Josephus and Suetonius all recorded this shift in world dominion to Judea. And so it wouldn't have been elite for the magi to conclude that political changes are on their way when they saw this star.

And what these stargazers saw was most likely the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. It happened three times in the year 7 BC, 29th of May, 3rd of October and the 4th of December.

[5 : 38] And the magi knew that Jupiter was regarded as the royal star, the royal planet. And Saturn had long been the symbol of Israel.

And so the competent astronomer would have concluded that this new age is now beginning with a new king and the ruler of the world is about to shift to Judea.

And they set out on a long and a difficult journey to find the ruler of the world and offer this ruler gold. The second gift, frankincense or incense, was also an unexpected gift.

And this gift reveals what Jesus came to do. You see, incense was used by the Jewish priests in the temple worship as they mediated between God and people.

And incense was used to symbolize relationship with God. And the magi were recognizing Jesus as the ultimate priest.

[6 : 47] The one who would mediate between God and humanity. The one who would bring about complete reconciliation between God and people.

Jesus is the one who would establish that relationship. But any new mother would have been thrown by the third gift, myrrh. You see, myrrh was used to embalm the dead.

It was a symbol of death. So imagine tomorrow morning, one of my girls runs to the Christmas tree, grabs their present, and it's a toy coffin.

It's kind of odd. What do I do with this? You see, the gift of myrrh here for Jesus was prophetic. The baby born a king was the baby born to die.

And this is how Jesus was going to bring about the reconciliation between God and humanity. Jesus would die for the sins of the world. And the title of King of the Jews, quite interesting, is only used twice in all of Matthew's gospel.

[7 : 56] It's used of him here at the birth of Jesus, and it's used again at the crucifixion of Jesus. Born a king who exercises his rule by sacrificing himself for humanity to bring us back into relationship with God.

So there's the three gifts. We see who he is, what he came to do, and how much it cost him to do it. Now, what's really interesting in these verses is how people respond to the who, the what, and the how of Jesus.

One thing you notice throughout the historical biographies of Jesus is that whenever Jesus turns up, opinions of Jesus are divided.

And here at the very start of his life, we see at least two major camps forming. One is full of praise and welcome, and the other one is full of hatred and opposition.

The Magi and Herod here in this text stand as polar opposites. Herod lies through his teeth. Verse 8, he says, Go and make a careful search of this child as soon as you find him, report it to me, so that I too may go and worship him.

[9 : 14] Now, Herod has as much interest in worshipping Jesus as I have in sewing lessons, which is not much, I can tell you.

And later in the chapter, we know that Herod didn't fool the Magi. They sneak off without telling Herod where Jesus is. And Herod is furious, so furious, that he orders all the boys two years old and under in the vicinity of Bethlehem to be put to death.

Herod wants Jesus dead. And he will do whatever it takes for that to happen. You see, Herod is the Roman appointed king of the Jews, and he doesn't like the news that there's a new king in town.

There's a new king that's been born, and he is threatened. And Herod, when Herod is threatened, this guy is infamous for his cruelty in which he dealt with rivals to his throne.

Herod's response was hatred and fear, a hatred of anything, of anyone, that threatened his self-centeredness and his autonomy. And this account of deception and fear and bloodshed and injustice and homelessness is all too familiar.

[10 : 44] As we draw close, close to the end of another year, there is a great deal that is wrong with our world. But we walk into controversy when we ask where all this evil and wrong in our world comes from.

One end of the spectrum says, well, it's the fault of the rich and the powerful. They're the ones to blame. And this view of the world tends to make the poor and the minority groups the heroes of the world.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who insist that immoral and irresponsible people are the main problem. And this view of the world tends to make hardworking, decent, middle-class people the heroes of the world.

And at first glance, this story seems to side with the first view. Herod is an unjust ruler, abusing his power, slaughtering the innocent.

However, when you take in the full teaching of the Bible, it says that the source of the world's evil is in fact every human heart.

[11 : 57] Every human heart. Herod's reaction to Jesus is in a sense a picture of us all. You see, if you want to rule your life your way, if you want to be king over your life and someone else comes along and says, no, I'm actually king, one of you's got to give way.

One of you's got to give way. Only one person can sit on the absolute throne. And Jesus comes into this world claiming to be God.

Even before he could speak, others were claiming that of him. To be the ultimate ruler of all things. And as he grew and as his ministry developed, he called for allegiance to himself, so supreme, that it makes all other commitments look weak in comparison.

It is a claim to absolute authority, a summons to unconditional loyalty, and it inevitably triggers deep resistance in our hearts. Where's the true king?

This is the most disturbing question possible for the human heart. Who is in charge of my life? We want to remain on the throne of our lives at all cost.

- [13 : 27] For some of us, we use religion to stay on the throne. Trying to put God into a position where he has to do our bidding. Because we're so righteous rather than serving him unconditionally.

Alternatively, others flee from religion, becoming atheists and loudly claiming that there is no God. Either way, we're expressing a natural hostility to the true rule of the true king.

Herod couldn't get rid of Jesus, even with an army at his disposal. In fact, as the text said, he died, but Jesus didn't.

Jesus still rules, and he still calls people to follow him. When Queen Victoria ruled as the British monarch in the 1800s, she controlled a third of the world.

And she said one day that she couldn't wait to meet Jesus. And she was asked, why? Why do you want to meet Jesus? And her reply was, so that I can cast my crown before him.

- [14 : 44] She recognized that even as one of the most powerful people in the world, she too had a ruler. A ruler who deserved her everything, even her crown.

Now what's interesting here is that Herod isn't the only negative reaction to Jesus that's recorded. There's another negative reaction. It's not as strong as Herod's, but it's just as negative.

They're the ones who are simply doing nothing with Jesus. That is, he's a non-entity in their life. And this group, ironically, is the chief priests and the scribes who have been waiting for the Messiah to come.

Verse 4, it says, gathering together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he, that's Herod, inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him where to go, where to look. And then that was it. Back to business as usual for these guys.

- [15 : 51] The sheer silence and inactivity of the religious leaders is remarkable in view of the magnitude of what has just happened.

They didn't lift the sandal. Why not at least go with the Magi? You see, they knew it all.

But they did nothing. They knew their Bible. They had no problem in giving Herod the answers. But they missed God.

They didn't go to greet him. Their apathy eventually hardened into an outright opposition of Jesus. And their knowledge of Jesus was no substitute for obedience to him.

And so it's astonishing that the positive reaction of Jesus comes from the Magi. The rest of the Bible, these guys are viewed quite negatively.

- [16 : 54] Only Matthew talks about these guys in positive terms. Impressed by what they saw, in the sky that night, they journeyed west to Judea to find out what it all meant.

It is astonishing that these men who had so little to go by should venture so far, endure such hardship in travel, and face such uncertainty of actually finding the one to whom the star was pointing.

And what's more, they gave him costly gifts and the worship and the honor of their hearts. Where the religious leaders expended no time, no energy, no expense or inconvenience.

Where Herod expended a great deal of time and energy and expense and inconvenience in order to try and kill Jesus. The Magi expend a great deal of time and energy and expense and the reason to try and find Jesus so that they can worship and honor him as God.

The Magi are the worshipers. Those who joyfully ascribe the dignity, the authority and honor to King Jesus. Indifference, hostility, or worship.

[18 : 19] They're the responses to Jesus. So let me just take a pun here and I want to speak to two broad groups here tonight. There are those who are gathered here tonight who are the worshipers.

Those who accept Jesus, accept the claims of Christmas, accept Christianity, and you follow Jesus. It's really important for you if you're a Christian to know that every Christian still has a heart with residual anger and hostility towards God.

And it will always be there until the end. It will always be there. And that's why it's so hard for us to pray. It's so hard for us to be generous.

It's so hard for us to obey. It's so hard for us to grow. There is still a bit of Herod in all of us. There is still something in us that fights God every day.

And so you cannot just glide through the Christian life. We've got to be far more intentional about following Jesus and treasuring Him above everything.

[19 : 29] Far more intentional about our Christian growth and about prayer and about our accountability to other people in overcoming our bad habits. And so take the opportunity this Christmas to renew the commitment to move forward following Jesus into 2018.

If, however, you're here tonight and your response is maybe an indifference or even a hostility, I'd like to give you some respectful advice.

For those who are unsure about Christmas and Christianity or perhaps even the existence of God, that's okay, wherever you are.

Just know that you are not objective in your view of Jesus or of God or of Christmas or of Christianity. The philosopher Thomas Nagel is an atheist who's very candid about this.

And he wrote this. He says, I'm talking about the fear of religion itself. I'm speaking from experience, being strongly subject to this fear myself.

[20 : 43] I want atheism to be true. And I'm made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers.

It isn't just that I don't believe in God. And naturally, I hope that my belief is right. I hope that there is no God. I don't want there to be a God.

I don't want the universe to be like that. My guess is that this cosmic authority problem is not rare. His point is that nobody is really neutral about whether Christmas is true or not.

If the Son of God was really born in a manger, then we, by that moment, have automatically lost our rights to be in charge of our lives.

Who can be objective about the claim like that? Keep that in mind if you don't believe in Christianity. Question your doubts. I've got to know, I just imagine that, you know, in the next couple of days, you've got a number of things on your plate in the next week even.

[22 : 01] But maybe in the very near future, you might want to take a look at the issue of who Jesus is, what he came to do, and what it cost him to do it.

The Magi were the knowledgeable men of the East. They were the academic elite. But their knowledge about the events of Jesus and his first Christmas took them only a certain point.

Their observation of the star took them to Jerusalem. Wrong town. Took them to Jerusalem. That's as far as they got. In the end, they had to go to God's revelation of himself in the Bible to find Jesus.

And in finding Jesus, they found what they've been looking for all of their life. He is the wisdom that these wise men were looking for. And I want to say it without explaining it.

Jesus is the answer to everything that you are searching for in life. He is the goal. He is the destination. And so I encourage you to be like these wise men, to search for Jesus, but go to the source.

[23 : 15] The evidence for him is overwhelming and it is compelling. In fact, on the way out tonight, out there in the atrium on the Connect desk is a little book called Christmas Uncut.

Just grab one. Take it with you. Grab it and take it with you. Read one of the biographies as we're doing tonight in Matthew's God. Read one of the biographies of Jesus. Consider Jesus and ponder who he is, what he came to do and what it cost him to do it and what it means to bow down and worship him 2,000 years later.

Amen.