

## Epiphany Celebration

December 31, 2023

Matthew 2:1-12

As you may know, I'm the oldest of 5 siblings. Since we all live in the same general area, we get together sometimes, especially to watch sports. One thing that always fascinates me is when the Packers are on and someone scores, the reactions will always be different between my two brothers. For instance, a few weeks ago, when the Packers got scored on by the Buccaneers, my reaction was negative. My brother, however, cares more about fantasy football- a competition where one has different players from different teams and however well they do, that's your score and you compete against your friends' teams- and the wide receiver that scored was on his team, so while I said "No!" He said, "Yes!" My other brother however, who doesn't like sports, looked up from his phone and said, "wait, I thought the Packers were red and white. Who are we rooting for, again?" One event- but different reactions.

Today, we see something similar with the birth of Jesus- here Matthew displays the "Three Reactions to Jesus." 1. Worried Rage, 2. Willful Ignorance, 3. Worshiping Joy.

**1. Worried rage-** Matthew tells us that Jesus was born in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great- so this must have been about 5 or 6 BC- about a year or two before he died. Herod the Great is a fascinating historical figure. He ruled in Jerusalem as king- but he still had to answer to Caesar Augustus and the Roman Empire. Consider this quote about him: *he was wealthy, politically gifted, intensely loyal, and excellent administrator, and clever enough to remain in the good graces of successive Roman emperors. His famine relief was superb and his building projects (including the temple, begun 20 BC) admired even by his foes. But he loved power, inflicted incredibly heavy taxes on the people, and resented the fact that many Jews considered him a usurper. In his last years, suffering an illness that compounded his paranoia, he turned to cruelty and in fits of rage and jealousy killed close associates, his wife Mariamne, and at least two of his sons.* Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus once said, *"It's better to be Herod's pig than his son."*

You can imagine then, the kind of disturbing fear that shook Herod to his core when a group of rich foreigners come saying, "we are here to worship the baby that's been born king of the Jews." You can also imagine why all of Jerusalem, who knew Herod, were deeply disturbed as well. But let's dig into Herod a bit- Why is he so threatened by a baby? Because his people are going to give their worship and allegiance to someone other than him. He's addicted to power, and will, as we see later when Herod orders that all baby boys in Bethlehem be put to death gladly kill anyone who threatens his power. What we see here is a toxic, dangerous combination of pure terror and ruthless rage. What's fascinating is that this is a common reaction to Christ. Did you know that every day, throughout the world, statistically 13 Christians worldwide are killed because of their faith, 12 churches or Christian buildings are attacked, 12 Christians are unjustly arrested or imprisoned, and another 5 are abducted? That's not simply intolerance- that's fear and rage. One of our members told me a fascinating story- years ago he and one of the pastors were visiting a prospect, and they showed up to her house, and immediately after they entered, her husband said, "I'm about to put down my newspaper, and when I do, you'd better be gone. That's not just "I don't care for Jesus." That's fear and rage. Herod knew, deep down, that this baby born would make him less powerful, less influential, less feared. On a personal level, when you are confronted with an all-powerful God, you realize very quickly that if he is truly your God, that means that you are not in control of your life. You don't get to live how you want,, be who you want, or worship who you want- and

that strikes against the very nature of the human being- all your power is taken from your hands. And as we can see with Herod, and as I've personally seen in myself, that is often met with fear and anger-worried rage.

2. **Willful ignorance.** When the Magi go throughout Jerusalem asking, "Where's the King of the Jews," Herod doesn't know where the Messiah would be born, so he asks the Jewish "Teachers and Scribes." These are the experts: The theologians who knew the Old Testament back and forth. These were the highest ranking spiritual and religious leaders in all of Israel. There was no one in the world that knew God's Word better than these men, and when Herod asked them where the promised King who would save God's people would be born, they knew it was Bethlehem, and they could point to the specific prophecy from Micah to prove it. That's astounding. Do you know what's even more astounding? They didn't think it was worth their while to go and see this King. Think about that! Their entire lives revolved around God's Word, and they would have known more than anyone how the *entire* Old Testament, every author, every narrative, every prophecy finds its fulfillment in this coming King, Messiah, Immanuel who would come and set God's people free. Every day their prayers included asking God to send this Messiah, and all of them would have yearned to see him. So why wouldn't they jump at the chance to see him? Why wouldn't they sprint alongside the Magi to worship him? They preferred their heads to stay on their shoulders, and knew that if they showed even an ounce of excitement over this "King of the Jews," Herod would have no problem putting them to death; he had already killed 3 members of the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They also liked their positions of authority. They liked being the religious experts who were the most highly respected, distinguished people in Israel. Running toward the small town of Bethlehem, worshiping a baby alongside Gentiles was beneath them- people may get the wrong idea! They had all the knowledge they needed, but when push came to shove, they made a choice. Instead of Jesus, they chose their status, their respectability, their reputations.

I don't know about you, but this part of the narrative is what convicts me the most. Because if these men who knew their Bibles better than I ever will were capable of ignoring God when he was so close out of personal convenience, what kind of spiritual apathy and willful ignorance am I capable of? All Christian leaders, and all Christians have to make choices. Do I as a pastor of this congregation willfully skip over what the Bible teaches about sexuality, money, forgiveness, and countless other topics that clash with what our culture teaches, or do I say clearly- "Sex is reserved for a man and woman within the covenant of marriage, which makes homosexuality, casual sex, premarital sex, looking at someone sexually who isn't your spouse, even thinking sexual thoughts about someone you're not married to, all sinful? Do I preach clearly that just as sinful as those sins is gossip, holding a grudge, lying, greed, laziness, jealousy, disobedience to authority and therefore all those sins are equally as damning- knowing that this may turn people off, push people to different churches who conveniently work their way around those teachings? All Christians have to face those choices- do I tell my children, friends, parents the hard things they don't want to hear, but need to hear? Do I forgive that person, even if it means I have to let go of my pride? Do I join this or that church which teaches God's hard teachings, even if it means leaving behind my traditions, my comforts? Do I live according to God's Word, or do I do what's convenient? Do I do what's right, or easy? It's a hard question- *but not for the Magi.*

3. **Worshipping joy.** "Who *were* the magi?" There is a lot of myth that has developed over the centuries. Firstly, Matthew never said that there were three of them. I would guess that there were more. They weren't kings, and they wouldn't have been considered "wise" men according to Matthew's original audience. Remember, Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience- and the Greek "Magoi," where we get the

word “Magi,” is also where we get the word “Magic.” This word typically refers to sorcerers, fortune tellers, astrologers, and anyone who engages in witchcraft. These are very obviously and vigorously spoken against in the Old Testament, and the word “Magoi” is never used in a positive way in the Greek Old Testament. “Magoi” also refers to the educated elite. They were the most highly trained not only in astrology, dream interpretation, and fortune telling, but also medicine, astronomy, literature, language, science, and so on. These were the intelligentsia, the college professors, the most educated people in that part of the world- and not believers in God. Every original reader of Matthew’s Gospel would have said, “wait a minute- what are *they* doing here?”

Where were they from? The East- which could be Babylon, Persia, or Arabia. How did they know about Jesus? We’re not exactly sure. We know from Roman, non-Christian historians from that era that there were rumors throughout the Roman Empire- especially the Middle East- that a powerful king was going to be born out of Judea. We also know that around this time, Jupiter and Saturn overlapped each other and created a “mega-star” several times, but the star that they saw could have also been a supernatural occurrence because it appeared when Christ was born, and then reappeared and stopped and rested over the place where Jesus and Mary were. How well did these men know their Bibles? We can’t know for sure- It seems they may have been familiar with Baalam’s prophecy that we read from Numbers because they knew a great ruler was coming, and this star must have been the sign to them. But they didn’t know to go to Bethlehem. What they do is they go to Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, and go throughout saying, “Where is he? Where’s your newborn king?” And people must have said, “huh?” And then they go to Herod, the scribes tell them about Micah’s prophecy about Bethlehem, and off they go with joy and excitement. Then they reach Jesus and Mary and the scene is almost hilarious. These rich, powerful, highly educated, elite men fall on their faces before a baby born in a barn- and they offer gifts that would have been worth more money than Mary and Joseph have ever seen- Gold, Incense, and Myrrh. And the question that we are supposed to wrestle with is this: How is it that the King of Judea wants to kill his own Savior, the theological experts who should have sprinted ahead of the Magi to worship Jesus essentially ignore him, but these pagan, non-Jewish, astrologizing, false-god worshipping, sinful, theological ignorant, yet highly educated Magi fall to their knees, exploding with joy, worshipping this impoverished baby? How?

Because Jesus is a God of grace. If Jesus were a God of morality- and the way you are accepted by him and saved by him is through your efforts, your religious dedication, your good works, then the Magi would be the last people that God moved and invited to worship Jesus. If Jesus were a God of pedigree and accomplishment, and his kingdom was about impressive buildings, powerful people, and success, then the Magi would never have worshiped him because he was poor and unknown and ignored and hated. The fact that the Magi worshiped at Jesus’ infant feet proves that in Jesus’ kingdom, it doesn’t matter who you are, what you’ve done, the mistakes you’ve made, the times you’ve reacted to Jesus with fear and rage or willful ignorance- because we all have. The fact that Jesus came down to earth proves that we’ve all chosen what is easy instead of what is right- and Jesus offers nothing less than full forgiveness all for free, through faith in his sacrifice for your sins. In front of the Magi was an altogether different kind of God, a different kind of King who embraces and loves and forgives sinners. Whether they knew all the details of Jesus’ identity or not, what we know is this: The Magi knew that all of their wealth, all of their pedigree, all of their elitism, all of their gold, frankincense, and myrrh, was nothing compared to the glory, grace, and salvation that Jesus offers- and it’s free. You don’t earn it, you receive it as a free gift from God bought with Jesus’ blood. That’s what makes Jesus different. That’s what makes Jesus worth it. And that’s what brings us all to our knees in worshipping joy. Amen.