

December 26, 2021 - David Baumgartner

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Preacher: David Baumgartner

[0:00] We welcome you to the media ministry of Bethel Community Church. Knowing Jesus, making Jesus known. Well, good evening everyone and Merry Christmas from my family to yours.

Last week we were in Luke's gospel account. Do you remember that? Yeah. In our passage in Luke, we read of Jesus' birth in a stable.

He was seen by lowly shepherds and even Bethlehem. Bethlehem is referred to by Micah as one of the least significant towns in Judea.

What does all of that point to? I think a great theme that he's making here is how God humbled himself when he became man.

Now, I don't think we should miss this here, that these shepherds were Jews, right? And just consider this. Luke, who is a Gentile, highlights the very first people to pay homage to this newborn king as being Jews.

[1:11] Luke did that. Tonight we're going to be looking at an event that occurred after Jesus' birth. You might think of it as tonight, you know, us celebrating after Christmas here. We're going to be looking at the visit of the wise men.

And our text is found in Matthew. So if you please turn with me to Matthew chapter 2. We'll be looking at the first 12 verses. We may wonder this question.

Why did Matthew, who's a Jew, who's writing primarily to Jews, omit the visit of these Jewish shepherds? And instead depicts these wealthy Gentiles from the East being the first to pay homage to this newborn king.

Why did he do that? Well, tonight, I think we're going to see a reason for it. We're going to focus on the wise men. And identify what I believe are some admirable qualities that they have.

And that's so that you and I also may be wise. We'll be looking closely at our text here. So if you have a handout, you can follow along with me in the text.

[2:21] First, let's go ahead and pray. Heavenly Father, we are grateful that we can be here tonight. And to once again be refreshed by the wonderful story when God became a man.

We are so grateful for that, Lord, and how it has changed the whole planet. It has changed each of us. And we're so thankful for that.

Lord, we pray that as we study your word tonight, that we would see some things that would encourage us and strengthen us. And that our lives would be a reflection of all of who you are as you change us into that glorious image.

Thank you, Lord. We are thankful. Ten thousand reasons and more. In Christ's name we pray. Amen. Amen. If you look with me at verse one, it says this.

Now, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, it's in the days of Herod the king. Behold, Magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem saying this.

[3:28] What were they saying? Well, before we look at that, notice that word now. That signals that some time has transpired since the birth of Jesus.

That's going to be confirmed later in verse nine because Jesus is called there a palion. He's a child. Not an infant, as we saw in Luke's account.

You might also look in verse 11. It says, because they came to a house. Not a stable. Not a barn. Not a cave. No, he came to a house.

All of this indicates that the family is still in Bethlehem at this time. But it occurs later on, possibly one or two years later. I want to ask this question.

Who are the Magi? Well, we're told that they're from the east. The truth is, we know very little about them. For example, it's generally assumed that there's three men.

[4:27] And that's based on the number of gifts that they bring. But the truth is, friends, we really don't know. Also, they've been commonly depicted as the three sons of Noah, representing those families, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, which is why one of them oftentimes appears to be from Ethiopia.

They're pictured oftentimes as kings riding on camels. We don't know that. Other names, we're told, are Melchor, Balthazar, and Caspar.

These names didn't appear until some 500 years later. So kind of interesting there. Supposedly, their remains were found in the 4th century by St. Helena.

That's the mother of King Constantine. And now their skeletons are in a golden casket in a cathedral in Europe. I want to ask you, how much of that is true?

If you dig up some bones, how do you know it's those guys? I wonder if they had name tags on or something. I don't know. All of this, friends, is legendary folklore.

[5:37] And I think it's really nice for Christmas cards and devotionals and things like that. What about the word magi? That's the plural of the Greek word magos.

And it's actually a translation of a word from ancient Persia, which would be Iran. And it means great. They were not kings.

Rather, they were a priestly line or a tribe from the people of the Chaldeans. That would be the people that lived in the southern portion of Iraq.

You may remember, Abraham was from the Ur of the Chaldeans. And they were very skilled in astronomy and astrology. Over time, the name magi became associated with the word magic.

And so, you know, perhaps like a magician. Back then, we have to remember, there was not much of a separation between superstition and science.

[6:35] Astronomy, which might be considered a science, and astrology, which is considered a superstition, was pretty much blended back then. But here's the thing, though.

The magi go all the way back to the time of ancient Babylon. King Nebuchadnezzar had a group who served as his official advisors. We read an interesting account that when Nebuchadnezzar conquered and entered Jerusalem.

And by the way, this is recorded in Jeremiah chapter 39. You can look with me in your handout here. It says this. Then all the officials of the king of Babylon came and sat down in the middle gate.

Now, here they are. Nergal Sar-Ezar of Samgar. Nebu Sar-Sakim, the Rab-Saras.

Now, Rab actually means chief. He's chief of the eunuchs. And then you have this third guy, Nergal Sar-Ezar. He's the Rab-Mag.

[7:39] He's the chief of the magi. He's the chief of the magi. He's the chief of the magi. It was back in Nebuchadnezzar's time. And they had influential positions. They were counselors and advisors to the king.

You might want to ask, how influential were the magi? Well, apparently, you could not become king unless you had the support of the magi.

You had to be approved by them. There's this classical historian by the name of Herodotus. And he said, speaking of the king Xerxes of Persia, they did not undertake any important decisions without first seeking counsel from the magi.

So you have this powerful group, very influential group here. And they asked this question in verse 2. Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?

For we saw his star in the east and come to worship him. I want you to notice something here. They acknowledge Jesus' kingship, even in his infancy.

[8:50] Notice, they say, born a king. Not born to become a king. No, rather, who has been born a king of the Jews? Secondly, they attribute honor to this king.

Notice, this king has his own star. How many kings have their own star? I can't think of any. No.

Third, it says this. We've come to worship him. That's the masculine singular pronoun. Not worship it. Not worship her.

As some goddess. No, we came to worship a person. Him. And how did they know that they were looking for a new king? In other words, what convinced them to make this long trip?

Some 500, 700 miles? Did that occur from just looking at a star? And then you go, oh, let's get on our Arabian stallions and let's go find this thing.

[9:52] No. No. There's a really interesting account in the book of Daniel, chapter 5. Here's the context here. King Belshazzar, this is Nebuchadnezzar's son.

He's ruling and he's having this party. And there's this writing on the wall during this party. And so they begin to ask this question, who can translate this?

And someone comes up and steps forward and says, we know a guy. His name is Daniel. And if you look with me, chapter 5, verse 11. They said to him, King Nebuchadnezzar, your father, your father the king, made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers.

Now, that actually happened back in chapter 2, when Daniel was the only person who was able to interpret King Nebuchadnezzar's dream. And so as a result, he made Daniel the chief of the magi. Think about that. I would assume that as the chief, Daniel would have taught the magi everything that he knew. Wouldn't you think so?

[11:03] I would. And of course, that would have been passed down over the years. But even regardless of that, notice, they were in search of truth.

And they sought it out. And they had the ancient scriptures that were there about the coming king. Consider with me Genesis 49, chapter 10.

That was written some 1,400 years earlier. It says this. The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him, and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.

Or how about when they turned to Isaiah? Again, written some 700 years before this account. Of the increase of his government, speaking of the Messiah, and of peace, there will be no end.

On the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness, from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of the host will do this.

[12:14] Yeah, putting a star in the heavens certainly is the zeal of the Lord. How about Micah, chapter 5, verse 2? That was also written some 700 years before Jesus was born.

But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrath, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me, one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from old, from ancient days.

Friends, my point here is that the information was there. It's there. And the thing is, is that they sought it out. And so they got on their horses, and they took this long trip.

Jacob, you know what it's like to go on a long trip, don't you? Yeah. They went on this long trip. It encouraged to me how many people consider what's out there on the radio, on the television, in the Bible bookstores.

How many? Not very many. I think many people today are indifferent. They're not like these wise men. Think about natural revelation.

[13:31] We were having a discussion recently with a family about God has placed natural revelation that points to him. It's out there. You can see it because it speaks that there is a God.

So, these wise men, they arrive in Jerusalem, and they begin asking questions. In verse 3, it says, When Herod the king heard it, it says he was troubled, and all of Jerusalem with him.

Let's ask this question. Who is Herod? He's called the king of the Jews, right? The thing is, he was not from the line of David. He was only slightly Jewish.

And that's because he was a descendant of Esau, who were told in Genesis 36, who intermarried with Canaanites. So, all of Esau's descendants were only partially Jewish.

Herod actually came to power because of his dad, Antipater. And that happened when the Roman army under Julius Caesar defeated Pompey.

[14:41] Antipater was able to align himself with powerful people in Rome, and he gained a high position there. And in 48 BC, he appointed his sons,

Herod and his brother, in positions of power in Galilee and Judea.

Young Herod, he's very good at collecting taxes. And so, Rome liked him. And so, he was named king of the Jews by the Roman Senate in 40 BC.

And he had some qualities. That's why he's called Herod the Great. He was an excellent administrator. He had many building projects.

For instance, a theater, some fortresses, an amphitheater, which is like a football stadium, a hippodrome, which is an oval-shaped thing used for horses and chariots.

He built three famous towers, a palace, and most notably, he began reconstruction on the Jewish temple back in 19 BC.

[15:47] But Herod was also very cruel. He was not a guy that you would invite to your Christmas dinner. You don't want to do that. Herod's entire rule was characterized by violence, betrayal, death.

Consider this. Among his, even his family members, one of his nine wives, three brothers, his mother-in-law, father-in-law, brother-in-law, an uncle, many others were killed by him.

And so, and we know, of course, that he's the guy who ordered the execution of infants close to the birth of Jesus. Somehow, Herod learns about the arrival of these wise men.

And when he learned of it, notice it says that they were looking for a king, and it says, Herod was troubled. That means that he was very upset.

That means that he was startled, thrown into confusion. That same word is used of the disciples when Jesus was walking on the water, and they said, look at that, that's a phantom.

[16:52] We're seeing a ghost. So, and then notice it says, and Jerusalem was troubled too. And that's because they knew how cruel Herod was.

And he, no doubt, he would turn his actions against them. Verse four, gathering together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he, that's Herod, began to inquire of them, where was the Christ to be born?

I want to pause here for a minute. Who are these chief priests? Who are the scribes? Were there the religious leaders in charge at the time? Did you know that they were frauds themselves?

They were. They did not come from the priestly line of Aaron, as we read about in the Old Testament. And that's because about 150 years before this, before the Romans came along, actually, the area was controlled by the Syrians, and they removed all of the Aaronic priests, and they installed a family of puppet priests, those who could be bribed, those who could be manipulated.

And, of course, they stayed in power during this time. Verse four, Herod asked the chief priests, where is the child to be born? And notice this, they all knew the answer.

[18:14] They quoted from Micah chapter five. We already read that. Verse six, Verse seven, Herod secretly calls the Magi and ascertained from them the time the star appeared.

I want you to notice the deception here. In reality, he wants to know how old the child is. Verse eight, He sent them on to Bethlehem and said, Go and make a careful search for the child.

And when you have found him, report to me that I too may come to worship him. That's a lie. Here we see another example of Herod's deceitfulness. Verse nine, And having heard the king, they, the wise men, went on their way.

And then it says, And lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the child was.

Here's a good question. What do we know about this star? Well, people throughout the ages have had several suggestions. The star was a comet.

[19:31] Some have said it's a conjunction or an alignment of some planets. Still others said that it was an exploding star or a supernova. You know, none of these things line up with scripture.

If you notice in verse nine, it says that the star went ahead of them and then it stopped over the place where the child was. That doesn't sound like a star to me, does it?

Or anything naturally that we would see? I think the best thing that we could say is that God sent something to guide these wise men. And in verse 10, it says, When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

Here's their second admirable quality that I see. They were joyful, knowing that something extraordinary was about to happen. God had sent that light that would lead them to the truth. And now here's a fourfold way of saying how happy they were about that. They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. I want to ask you a question.

[20:46] What's missing today? Joy. Isn't it? You know why that is? It's because there's very little hope.

It's as if the Titanic is sinking. And so let's put on some party masks and let's party because we have no other thing to do. I think it seems to me virtually everyone senses that something significant is about to happen.

Don't you see that? People will say that. Something's about to happen, but they don't know what. And it's because there's no joy.

Why is it? Because there's no hope. There is no hope. You want hope? Place your faith in Jesus Christ.

He will never leave you nor forsake you. And by his blood, we are promised an eternal life. We just recently heard some friends that we haven't heard from in a long time.

[21:54] They said that they've had the hardest year that they've had in literally decades. And the only thing that's kept them going is the hope they have in Jesus Christ.

What a great hope we have. They talked about financial problems, health problems, family problems, you name it. We all experience those. But friends, we have a hope.

And what a great thing that is. Verse 11, it says that they came into the house and they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshipped him.

Here's what I see as a third admirable quality. They knew that they had found whom they were looking for. Earlier they had made their intentions known, right?

We've come to worship him. It's back in verse 2. Now their search is over. Notice here, they worshipped him, Jesus.

[22:56] Not Mary, but Jesus. Apparently it didn't bother them that God was a baby lying in a feeding trough.

How did they worship? Well first, look at it. They expressed their deepest respect paying homage to him by bowing down. Secondly, notice they gave gifts.

It says in verse 11, opening up their treasures, they presented to him gifts. Gifts of gold. Very rare. Very beautiful. Gold is used for the best things that you can buy. Think of the construction of the temple itself and all of its contents filled with gold.

It's also associated with royalty. That's because gold is fit for a king. And who is Jesus? He's the king of the universe. It goes on here.

[23:55] Frankincense. That word Frankincense. Frank means pure. Did you know that, Brother Frank? Yeah. Pure incense. It's true.

Frankincense comes from a certain tree that grows in Arabia. There's this milky white substance and it's very fragrant, very expensive. This guy named Pliny, who's a Roman philosopher, said that a pound of it costs a full week's wages.

Thirdly, they gave myrrh. That's an oily substance that's extracted from a tree that's also found in Arabia. It makes a perfume that really smells great, apparently.

It's used to embalm the dead, as in John 19, when Nicodemus prepared Jesus' body for the burial. It can also be mixed with wine as an anesthetic, as in Mark chapter 15, at Jesus' crucifixion.

It, too, is very expensive. Pliny says that it costs about 50 days' wages, a pound of it. So, here's a question here.

[25:04] Many people say that these gifts have symbolic significance. Do you think the wise men knew that? It's really hard to tell. But notice here, verse 12, our last verse, and having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their own country by another way.

So, as far as I can see, that's the last we read about these wise men. What do we see here? I see three contrasting groups here. First of all, you've got the Herods of the world.

Herod is a picture of what? Hatred, hostility, deception. Every story has a villain, right? And Herod sure fits that.

He's the guy, again, who ordered the murder of those children. We might say that Herod is irrational. And here's why. Because if the prophecies about a new king are true, you're not going to be able to stop it, are you?

But if the prophecies are false, then why worry about them? But Herod's against the idea of this new king coming. And the true meaning of Christmas, I think it's still being resisted by many people, just like Herod.

[26:28] Everything about Jesus, his arrival, his teachings, his ministry, are still very troubling to many people. And I think there's a reason.

And that's because of this. There was one who inspired Herod, who's much more evil than he is. And he's spoken of briefly in Revelation 12, verse 4.

It says that his tail swept away a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. And the dragon stood before the woman who was about to give birth so that when she gave birth, he might devour the child.

Yeah, that sounds like Herod, doesn't it? And all those who are antagonistic against the Lord.

There's another group. You have the chief priests and the scribes.

This group, I think, is rather difficult to understand. And that's because when asked, they knew about the Old Testament prophecies. It says, His origins from old.

[27:37] His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth, speaking of Jesus. And yet, they wouldn't walk a mere five or six miles to see if it was true.

We don't read of any of them going to Bethlehem. I think for them, it's business as usual. And when Jesus does come on the scene some 30 years later, they don't recognize him then either.

Their silence says a lot. And I think it still speaks today. It's called indifference. Indifference. That's because many people are still indifferent about the Lord Jesus coming.

What he did. How he lived his life. How he proved himself to be the true Son of God. If I could invite the musicians that come up.

There's a third group. The wise men. Wise men still seek after Jesus. You guys knew I was going to say that, didn't you? These wise men traveled a great distance in search of the truth.

[28:46] And as far as we know, I think that they were led by much more than the star. I think they were led by what was prophesied about this coming king. The birth of this king was accompanied by miraculous signs.

And when they found Jesus, they recognized his deity, even as a baby. And it says they worshipped him. Matthew's inclusion of these wise men shows us that worship of Jesus is not only for the Jews.

It's for all people, regardless of our nationality. Even the Gentiles were willing to seek out the truth, while most of the Jews weren't at this time.

And that's because his birth marked the beginning of the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, the Davidic covenant, the new covenant. His birth makes salvation possible.

Amen? Amen? What a wonderful savior we have come to honor and pay homage to. What a wonderful time to think about how glorious he is.

[29:59] What a wonderful time to think about all the promises that he has laid out for us. What a wonderful time to remember his birth, his life, and also his death.

We're going to transition into a remembrance meeting and it's an open meeting so I'd encourage anyone and everyone you're invited to share as the Lord puts on your heart those things that you'd like to share to edify each other as we remember who Jesus is.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you so much for this text that we have to study and I know there's a lot of details in here and sometimes it's easy to get lost in the weeds but Lord, you have these things in here for a reason and it all points to how glorious you are.

It also points to the truthfulness of your word. It points to the promises that you have in your word for us. Lord, let us just relish in that tonight.

Let us enjoy the fellowship of the redeemed and we pray, Father, that as we remember the life and the death of the Lord Jesus that he would be exalted in our praises tonight.

[31:26] Thank you for this, Lord. In Jesus' name, Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.