

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, January 3, 2016**

WORSHIP THE NEWBORN KING

Matthew 2:1-12

I would ask you for just a moment to suspend disbelief and imagine that I am the General Manager of the Washington Redskins. I know that would be an improvement in the eyes of some folks, but just picture that for a moment. I would also ask you to suspend further your disbelief and imagine that you are a scout for the Redskins. I summon you into my office and I say, "I have an assignment for you. The draft is coming up and so we are going out and we're looking for a new running back. We need to replace one of our current running backs and so we're looking at this one particular person and we want you to go and scout and offer your opinion as to whether we should draft this person."

"Where am I going?"

"You're going to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill." And you think that's good. Chapel Hill, Carolina was good this year. They played in the ACC championship game. They have a couple of good running backs.

"Who is it that you want me you see?"

"Well, I want you to see this guy named Sue." You look kind of puzzled. I see your look of puzzlement and I say, "Well, I know that sounds strange but maybe Johnny Cash was onto something. This person, this Sue, is a halfback. Plays on the football team. You know how good Carolina's been. They've won eight or ten national championships in the last fifteen years. And Sue was an all-American halfback and we think we can fit him into our backfield."

At which point you realize that I've gone a little off the beam because Carolina hasn't won any national championships in football in the last fifteen years. However, the women's soccer team has won national championships many of those years. So your response is, "Sir, I think that would be a waste of my time."

And I say, "Well, why is that?"

You say, "Well, for one thing you are not talking about football – American football. You're talking about soccer. It's true that the rest of the world calls it football, but here we call it soccer. For another thing, you're not talking about a halfback, you're talking about a soccer player. And for yet another thing, this person's name is undoubtedly Sue, because you're talking about the women's soccer team, not the men's."

At which time I decide it's time for me to resign and seek the General Managership of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

Obviously, I have confused categories. Soccer is not football and, quite frankly, women are not men. I doubt that any woman is ever going to play running back for the Redskins or any other NFL team or any other college team. Women don't play football. They play soccer and they're very good at it, but they don't play American football. That scouting mission would have indeed been a waste of time because I was going to send you, the scout, down to visit the wrong person. And that leads, believe it or not, to Bethlehem.

The magi were going scouting. They were going to visit someone whom they thought was going to be someone really important, far bigger than any NFL football player. They thought they were going to find someone who was going to be King of the Jews. And to tell you the truth, I'm not sure exactly what they thought the significance of that was for them. But they believed that this was a person of consequence. As a matter of fact, this was going to be a person so important that they were willing to make a more than one thousand mile journey through dangerous territory in order to come and bring Him gifts.

The story of visit of the wise men to Jesus above all is a testimony to who He is. It's a testimony specifically to His divinity as revealed not only to Jews but to all of humanity. The child to whom the magi payed homage was not just another human being. Rather, He was God incarnate. And in the course of these twelve verses we receive three testimonies to that divinity. Testimonies that make clear that the magi were not confused. They had the right sport. They had the right player. As a matter of fact, they had hit the mother lode of draft picks, as it were.

The first of those testimonies is found in the first couple of verses. Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, He was born during the time of King Herod, and so these men from the east – wise men, sometimes thought to be astrologers – came to Jerusalem and they asked, "Where is the One who has been born King of the Jews? We want to come and pay taxes to Him." Isn't that what you do to a king? You pay your taxes. I know I've been paying my taxes to the king for I don't know how long. No, they weren't there to pay taxes. They say, "We saw His star in the east (it's generally thought that they're referring to their homeland of Persia) and have come to worship Him." Worship Him. That is not something that you do to just anyone. The word for worship that's used here and is used throughout the New Testament, the word *proskyneō*, is a word that in the New Testament almost always has God or Jesus as its object. And on those rare occasions where it doesn't, it's referring very clearly to false worship, to idolatry.

The wise men may have been doing nothing more than paying homage to royalty, but there is in fact a far deeper meaning to what they were doing, even if they didn't realize it. The readers of Matthew would have read this and said to themselves, "Wait a minute! You don't worship kings." It's true that heads of state were frequently worshiped in the ancient world, but they weren't worshiped simply as kings. They were worshipped if they declared to their subjects that they were gods. So, for instance Caesar Augustus, after a period of time as the Emperor of Rome, was supposedly elevated to divinity, became a god, and at that point it became appropriate to worship him. You don't worship politicians, you don't worship even statesmen. You worship gods. And so when the wise men came to Jesus they weren't simply coming to the foot of someone who was going to

be a political messiah to lead the Jews out of slavery and out of oppression from the Roman Empire. They were coming to pay homage to One who was far more than that. I'm not suggesting that the wise men had a fully developed Trinitarian theology or anything close to it. I'm not saying that they could have shown up at the Council of Chalcedon and explained the doctrine of the two natures of Christ to the church fathers. I'm simply saying they knew that the One whom they were going to was far, far more than human. And the readers of Matthew's gospel would have certainly understood because they wouldn't have read it in isolation. They would have understood that what's happening here is that they wanted to pay homage to the God of Israel.

We don't need to get tied up in a lot of knots in this passage about what the star was or who the wise men were or specifically where they came from. The important thing in this passage, first, is to notice that they came to worship – the first testimony to Jesus' divinity.

The second testimony to that divinity is found in the fulfillment of prophecy. In verses 3-6, Herod heard this and of course he, thinking like a politician, would have immediately heard that if they were coming to find the King of the Jews they were coming to find someone who was a threat to his throne. And so he wanted to know, "Where's the kid, so that I can get rid of Him?" And he called together the chief priests and the teachers of the law and asked them where the Christ, where the *Meshaiah*, the anointed one, the Messiah of Israel, was to be born. And they immediately went where you would expect them to go. They went to the prophets, because the prophets said who the Messiah would be and what He would be and what He would do. And they answered Herod's specific question. They said, according to the prophet Micah, in what we would call his fifth chapter, He is supposed to be born in Bethlehem. "Bethlehem and Judea are by no means the least among Judah because out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Now we understand that passage somewhat differently, I think, than the chief priests did. Certainly we understand it differently than Herod did. When Herod heard this, he heard that this is where the pretender to the throne is going to be and therefore he would have to do something about that. Then verses 13-18 describe the killing of the children of Bethlehem, which Herod ordered in order to try to eliminate the One who he thinks threatens his throne. But in fact, what the chief priests and the teachers of the law were pointing to was this reality: that the Old Testament offers to us the words of the prophets, words of God spoken through men, in order to indicate who Jesus was going to be, who the Messiah was going to be, where He was going to come from, what His lineage was. We are told in the Old Testament that He was going to be from David's house. And that would have been consequential, because that would have indicated that He had a genuine claim on the throne of Israel. But even more than that, we're told something that Matthew quotes in chapter 1, verse 23. We're told in Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14, that the One who was to come would be named Immanuel, and that means "God with us." The One who was to come was not just going to be a political leader, not just going to be a king. He certainly wasn't any threat to Herod's phony puppet throne. He was to be "God with us." When you put all this together, you put Matthew's repeated reference to Old

Testament prophesy together and in particular you add in the one from chapter 1 that comes from Isaiah 7, what you hear him saying is that the One whom the wise men had come from the east to worship was indeed the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God with us.

The third testimony, then, is found in the gifts that the wise men bring. We're told in verse 11 that they came six months to a year after. There's no hint that they found them in a cave or in a stable. They came to a house. And at that house they came and they found the Child and they found His mother Mary and, according to verse 11, they bowed down and they did worship Him. And as we all know, worship is not simply something that you do with the tongue. You don't simply say, "I worship You. I adore You. I glorify You, O God." You do do that, but worship is more than that. Worship is giving of yourself and giving of what you have, giving of what you are. That's what genuine worship involves. More than just words, it involves actions as well. And so when the wise men come to worship Him, they come bearing gifts.

They opened their treasures, and they presented Him first with gold, symbolic of royalty and given to Him because they saw Him as the King of the Jews. Myrrh was a spice. It was a perfume. It was mixed with wine to make an anesthetic. It was also used in burial as an element in embalming. Them giving myrrh to Him, a very odd choice, unless these were meant to be symbolic gifts, was their way of pointing to what was to come. Again, not necessarily did they know or could have explained at the time, but the gift that they gave was a way of pointing toward His eventual crucifixion and burial. So we hear in this story not only a proclamation of royalty but an echo of the cross as well.

Finally, they give Him frankincense, or as the NIV puts it, simply incense. Incense – or this particular kind of incense – is a kind of gum. It's made from the bark of a tree, and it was very expensive. Because it was expensive it was only used on very special occasions. One such occasion is that it was used in the grain offerings in the Temple. At several points in the Old Testament it's associated with the worship of God. So one of the gifts that they gave was in itself a recognition that the One whom they had come to see was not simply a king, not simply a politician, not simply a statesman-to-be, not simply a prophet, not simply a teacher, but rather was One who was to be worshipped as God in the flesh.

That's a wonderful story and it's nice to know that Jesus was, in fact, God in the flesh. So what of it? I doubt seriously that there's anyone here who doubts that in any real way. I suspect everyone here would agree with that statement. Jesus Christ was God in the flesh. Yes, that's true. Does it really make a difference? I mean, what if He was just a human being. There are plenty of folks these days who want to convince us and convince the world that, in fact, the one that we worship as the Son of God and as God the Son was nothing more than a man. There are lots of popular books out there. Go on Amazon sometime and look up the names Reza Azlan or Bart Ehrman and you'll find tons of books telling us that no, Jesus was just a prophet, He was just a teacher, He was just a man. And He said lots of good things and we should follow Him because of that. And my response is no. If that's all Jesus was then, yes what He said was perfectly fine, but

the world is full of philosophers. The world is full of teachers. There are lots of people we could turn to for guidance for how we live. My goodness, a lot of the information you get from Dr. Oz is more relevant than some of Jesus' teachings. At least that's what the world would have us think. But there's a reason why we proclaim that He was God incarnate. And it's not just because it was in fact true. We proclaim that because it means that when we come on Sunday morning and we worship, what we are doing is not idolatry, as some would have it. The One that we worship is genuinely God. When we proclaim Jesus Christ is Lord, which is not just a way of saying Jesus Christ is bigger than me and He's in charge, it is also a way of proclaiming that He is, in fact, the Sovereign of the universe. When we proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord, we're not doing that to a manmade figure. We're doing that to God Himself. So our worship is genuine.

The second difference that it makes is that we can be certain that our salvation is secure. This is of the utmost importance. You see, our salvation was not secured just by a man. And I thank God for that because, as we all know, men or women are limited. Even if you leave aside the fact that they're all sinful, even if you leave aside the fact that they're all fallible, they're all limited. And so, look at the person next to you and ask yourself this question: As much as you love him or her and as much as you depend upon them and would do anything for them and would put your life in their very hands, do you think that the person sitting next to you, even if they were sinless and infallible, could secure your salvation? At best, and this is purely hypothetical, they might be able to save themselves, but that would be it. The crucial reality about Jesus coming as God in the flesh is that our salvation has been secured by Someone who is Sovereign over all things and has power over all things and so, because of that, when He says to you and you and you, "I am going to and in fact already have saved you for all eternity," we can take that to the bank. We need have no worries whatsoever that at some point the One who tells us that is going to turn His back on us, or is not going to be able to carry through on His promise, or is just going to run out of gas before He gets to us. Because of Who Jesus is, our salvation is secure.

And finally, one last thing. Because Jesus is Who He is, because He is God incarnate, we know that our service to Him will be fruitful. Despite our limitations, despite our sinfulness, despite our faithlessness at times, we know that our service to Him will be fruitful because it is not simply on the basis of our ability or our desire or our power that that service gets done. Instead, it is powered by the Holy Spirit of God sent by the Son of God. Sent by the incarnate God to transform us, to empower us, to work through us and to enable us to be fruitful servants of His. All of that, our service, our salvation, our worship, is all wrapped up in the fact that the One whom they came to was who He is – not just was, but is – even God Himself.