

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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AFTER JESUS WAS BORN

Matthew 2:1-18

The second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, which recounts events that took place “after Jesus was born in Bethlehem” (2:1), is kind of like a four-act play. Act One – the one with which most of us are most familiar – centers on the wise men from the east who came to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem in search of Jesus, the long-awaited Savior and newborn King of the Jews (2:1-12).

Act Two, in verses 13-15, chronicles the flight of Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus to Egypt in order to escape from Herod and his plan to put Jesus to death.

In Act Three (2:16-18), we read of the “slaughter of the innocents” – the massacre of all the male children in Bethlehem and the surrounding countryside who were two years of age and under. This was Herod’s maniacal attempt, with malice aforethought, to make sure the one born “king of the Jews” would never grow up to usurp his (Herod’s) throne as Rome’s appointed ruler over Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, the regions over which Herod considered himself “king.” Herod carried out his plan. He murdered all the boys of Bethlehem under the age of two. But Jesus, along with Mary and Joseph, escaped Herod’s murderous plot by taking flight to Egypt. This “slaughter of the innocents,” as you can understand, resulted in a tsunami of grief in Bethlehem, an unbroken chorus of weeping and mourning over the unimaginable evil of this deliberate massacre of innocent little boys. Though Matthew speaks of “Rachel weeping for her children” (2:18), it was not just mothers who wept over the loss of their sons, but fathers, too. Brothers. Sisters. Grandparents. Aunts. Uncles. Cousins. The whole community. Everyone who heard about it.

It reminds one of the slaughter of the innocent children at Sandy Hook Elementary School, and the horror and grief over the deaths of twenty precious children and seven adults at the hands of a single shooter in Newtown, Connecticut. Unimaginable grief enveloped – continues to envelope – that entire community, and our nation as a whole. Paul reminds us in 2 Corinthians 1 that our calling as God’s people in times like this is to comfort those who grieve with the comfort we ourselves have received from God, pointing to the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comes to us and comforts us in all our troubles (1:3-4).

Finally, there is Act Four, in verses 19-23, which tells of the return of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus from Egypt following the death of Herod. Here we learn of Joseph’s decision, prompted by a message from God in a dream, not to settle in Bethlehem but to return to Nazareth in Galilee, where Joseph and Mary had lived before Jesus was born. Nazareth is where Jesus would grow up. So, as Matthew says, He would become known as “Jesus of Nazareth” or “Jesus the Nazarene” (2:23).

CONTRASTING RESPONSES

There are several things I want you to notice as we reflect together on these events that took place after Jesus was born. First, notice the stark contrast in the different responses to the birth of the Christ-child. You don't have to look hard to see the eagerness of the wise men (or Magi) to find Jesus and pay homage to Him, even to worship Him, despite the limits of their knowledge.

When it comes to the wise men and the star that guided them, *our* knowledge is more limited than we sometimes think. Many people *think* they know more than they really do know. For example, how many wise men were there who came from the east in search of Christ the newborn King? We don't know for sure. Matthew simply says "wise men" or "Magi" – plural. It is traditionally thought that there were three wise men because of the three gifts they presented to Jesus – gold, incense, and myrrh. Tradition has even given the wise men names: Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar. It may be so, but we don't know. Matthew, it appears, was less interested in the wise men themselves than in the fact that here were *Gentiles* who came to worship the Jewish Messiah, and they came bearing gifts for Him.

What, we may ask, was the "star in the east" that prompted the wise men to make their pilgrimage to Jerusalem? We don't know for sure. A number of theories have been proposed over the years. What we do know is that God used it to get the attention of these Gentile scholars and to lead them to Jesus. And when they found Him, when they saw Him, as Matthew tells us in verse 11, they knelt down before Him, they worshiped Him, and gave Him gifts as a sign of His worth.

We also don't know exactly when the wise men arrived in Bethlehem and found Jesus. We can be pretty sure it was *not* on the night Jesus was born. The wise men did not find Jesus and Mary and Joseph in the stable where Jesus was born. They did not find baby Jesus lying in a manger. They didn't arrive with the shepherds to whom the angel had announced the Savior's birth (Luke 2:9-12). No. They found Him and His mother Mary in a house (2:11), not in a shelter for animals.

Something else we don't know is how old Jesus was when the wise men found Him. As we have just noted, it was not on the night of Jesus' birth. Judging from Herod's decision to kill all the boys of Bethlehem under the age of two, it seems likely that Jesus was less than two years old when the wise men arrived and saw Him.

These are among the things we have to admit that we don't know for sure. What we do know is that there was a great disparity in attitude between the wise men, on the one hand, and both Herod and the Jewish priests and scholars, on the other. Despite the things they *didn't* know, the wise men stepped out in faith and embarked on a long journey, perhaps as much as a thousand miles one way, driven by their belief that God was doing something big and by their eager desire to see this Heaven-sent Savior and King for themselves. Their pilgrimage was powered by faith and hope.

Contrast the wise men with the indifference of the Jewish religious leaders who had the Scriptures, who knew the Scriptures, who knew where the Messiah was to be born, but couldn't be bothered to travel the five miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem in order to see Him for themselves. They were too busy, I guess, being "religious." Too busy guarding their "turf" and protecting their interests. They didn't really want some Messiah to come along and interfere with their lives. So, they chose to ignore Him. Later on, of course, when Jesus became an adult and began His public ministry, when they could ignore Him no longer, they would oppose Him and look for a way to get rid of Him.

Then there is Herod, who, even in Jesus' infancy, viewed Him as a threat and went to such terrible lengths in his desire to kill Jesus. While the religious leaders were indifferent, Herod was decidedly hostile and ruthless in his attempt to get rid of Jesus before He could pose a threat to Herod's kingship. Herod pretended to want to go and worship Christ the King. But it was all an act, all an attempt to trick the wise men, all a part of his plan to find Jesus and eliminate Him. When Herod realized that, instead of snookering the wise men, they had snookered him by sneaking out of town, his response was one of unspeakable cruelty and violence – the cold-blooded murder of all the little boys in and around Bethlehem, infants and toddlers two and under.

What do you say in response to something like that? What *can* you say? It is evil. Pure evil.

But we know that Herod didn't get Jesus. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus escaped. Just in the nick of time. They left under cover of darkness and made it safely to Egypt, which was outside of Herod's jurisdiction. Egypt is where they stayed until they received word that Herod was dead and it was now safe to go back to Israel.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

A second important thing to notice in these events that took place after Jesus was born is the providence of God in arranging and overseeing circumstances to insure the fulfillment of His plans and purposes. One way God would reveal Himself or speak to individuals in those days was through dreams. In Matthew 1, after Joseph learned that Mary was pregnant and considered divorcing her, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream to explain to him what was going on and who this baby really was. So, as a result, Joseph took Mary home as his wife, but had no union with her until she gave birth to a son, who was given the name Jesus (1:18-25).

Four more times in Matthew 2, the Lord spoke through dreams – once to the wise men, warning them not to go back to Herod after they found Jesus (2:12), and three more times to Joseph. First, in verse 13, an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream instructing him to take Jesus and Mary and to take flight to Egypt without a moment's delay, because of Herod's intention to kill Jesus. Second, after Herod's death, in verses 19 and 20, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and tells him it is time to take Jesus and Mary back to the land of Israel, because Herod can no longer do them any harm. Then, after hearing that Archelaus has succeeded his father Herod as ruler of Judea, Joseph receives yet another visit from an angel in a dream, warning him not to settle in or around Bethlehem but to go back to

Nazareth, where he and Mary had lived prior to their journey to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born.

In all these angelic appearances and messages, and in the ordering of the events and circumstances of Jesus' birth, infancy, and childhood, we see the guiding, protecting, providing hand of God the Father, whose gracious, loving, redemptive purposes in the saving work of His Son would not, did not, and will not fail.

And, just as Jesus would not fail to accomplish His saving work by giving His life for us on the cross, bearing in His own body the punishment for your sins and mine, so you and I can be completely assured that in His loving providence and sovereign grace, God will not allow any of us who belong to Him to be snatched away by the enemy of our souls. Though we go through many hardships and encounter many obstacles in this life, the Savior and Guardian of our souls will not allow us to fall away, but will bring to completion the gracious work His Spirit has begun in our hearts (Philippians 1:6). If you belong to the Lord Jesus Christ through faith in Him, He will not let go of you. Ever. Nothing that ever happens to you will be able to separate you from God's love for you in Jesus Christ our Lord. Nothing.

Friends, if you have not put your trust in Christ alone, if you have not yet come to Him in humble repentance and trusting faith, let this be the day you receive from the Lord Jesus what only He can give – the gift of eternal life and a place in God's family as His beloved child. In His providence and love, God has provided you with this opportunity. Don't waste it. He has brought you to this point in your life for exactly this purpose. Open your heart to Him today.

THE DARK SIDE OF CHRISTMAS

There is one more thing I want you to notice in this passage of Scripture. As the angel said to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born, the birth of the Savior in Bethlehem was and is "good news of great joy" that is meant for everybody (Luke 2:11). To celebrate His birth, the heavenly choir of angels sang of "glory to God in the highest" and of "peace on earth to all those on whom His favor rests" (2:13-14). But the long-awaited arrival of the promised Messiah did not bring an end to hardship or trouble or malice or evil in the world. Christmas did not and does not mean that all of our problems have suddenly gone away. Hardly. After Jesus was born, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus did not just "live happily ever after." There remained, and remains today, stubborn resistance to Jesus, rejection of His kingship, and rebellion against Him. There remains hatred, violence, and evil of all kinds. As it was with Herod, so it remains in many places in many hearts today. Christmas is not all peace and goodwill. Not yet. Darkness persists. Which shows why the coming of Christ at Christmas matters so much.

N. T. Wright, in his book *For All God's Worth: True Worship and the Calling of the Church*, says: "For many, Christianity is just a beautiful dream. It's a world in which everyday reality goes a bit blurred. It's nostalgic, cozy, and comforting." Is that how you picture the Christian life? Is it how you think it is supposed to be? "But real Christianity," writes Wright, "Isn't like that at all. Take Christmas, for instance: a season of nostalgia, of carols and candles and firelight and happy children. But that misses the point completely."

“Christmas is not a reminder that the world is really quite a nice old place. It reminds us that the world is a shockingly bad old place, where wickedness flourishes unchecked, where children are murdered, where civilized countries make a lot of money selling weapons to uncivilized ones so they can blow each other apart. Christmas is God lighting a candle; and you don’t light a candle in a room that’s already full of sunlight. You light a candle in a room that’s so murky that the candle, when lit, reveals just how bad things really are. The light shines in the darkness, says John, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

“Christmas, then, is not a dream, a moment of escapism. Christmas is the reality, which shows up the rest of reality. And for Christmas, here,” says Wright, “read Christianity” – the Christian faith. “Either Jesus is the Lord of the world, and all reality makes sense in His light, or He is dangerously irrelevant to the problems and possibilities of today’s world. There is no middle ground. Either Jesus was, and is, the Word of God, or He and the stories (we) Christians tell about Him are lies.”

(Some of you may detect a hint of C. S. Lewis in Wright’s writing here.)

The coming of the true light of the world shows how truly dark the darkness is in the world. Both then and now. And how desperately needy both we and our world are for Jesus. The birth of Jesus did not fix everything that is wrong with the world. But it set in motion the gracious plan of God to overcome the darkness and to bring salvation not only to the Jewish people but to the nations. That, dear friends, is something to celebrate. And a reason for hope.

Lord, let it be so. Now and always. Amen.