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Sermon Notes

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The Visit of the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

Three weeks ago, we gave you this prayer guide from the International Mission Board ... a week of prayer for missions. On day 7, there was an amazing story of a woman named Dilara (not her real name), who had seen Jesus in a dream pick her up from her bed and lead her through the streets of her Central Asian town. In the dream, he has asked her if she was ready to believe, and she'd seen three men standing in front of the church. When she found the building a few weeks later, it looked exactly like what she'd seen in her dream! She walked inside and was greeted by one of those same men she'd seen in her dream! Today, she is a believer in Christ, in large part because of the supernatural power of God's use of that dream, with its specific details, in drawing her to Christ.

I was AMAZED by that story... but not surprised! I have collected stories like that one for years.

Two weeks ago, I met with a woman, a missionary who is serving in a Muslim country in the Near East. She told me a similar account of a Muslim man who had come to Christ within the last year. He had been operating in her country as a part of an ISIS cell group plotting terrorist attacks. The time had come for him to give his life in a suicide bombing in service to Allah. Before that, he was to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca to cleanse his soul. When he arrived in Mecca, he had extreme difficulties getting transportation to the Kaaba, the black stone where all the pilgrims go to bow down and worship in concentric circles. No matter what he tried, he could find no bus or taxi or any kind of conveyance to take him there. Finally a vehicle, a small bus, stopped and opened the door for him. He got on, and the driver asked him where he wanted to go. Without telling the man his purpose, he said to the Kaaba to complete his pilgrimage. The bus driver looked at him for a long time in the face, and said, "You are off the path. You are going the wrong way. That is not where you should go." This completely unnerved the man, but he went anyway. When he returned to his home country to complete preparations for his attack, he had no peace in his heart. Several days before he was to do it, he went to the home of a Christian man for dinner. As he entered the home, he saw on the wall a picture of the LAST SUPPER. The man was stunned. He had no idea what the picture was or what it signified. But he recognized one man... the man right in the center of the table. "WHO IS THAT MAN?!" He asked his host. "That is ISA... Jesus"... the man said, "No it's not... it's the bus driver in Mecca!" The exact same face, appearance, clothing, everything. The man gave his life to Christ, and then later told the whole story.

FOR CENTURIES, God has been using dreams, visions, miraculous forms of guidance, to bring Gentiles to Christ all over the world.

This has been going on for centuries... but the first story is perhaps the most famous; the journey of the MAGI to see the newborn Christ child.

I. Endless Fascination with the Magi

A. Christmas a time of powerful images

1. Children grow up with an almost magical feeling about Christmas
2. Christian parents do well to feed their kids with the biblical accounts of the birth of our Savior from an early age... the true theology of what his birth meant for us

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

1 Timothy 1:15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners

3. The Biblical images are powerful enough
 - a. An angel appearing to a Jewish virgin named Mary with this amazing news:

Luke 1:30-33 "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever

- b. An angel appearing to shepherds outside of Bethlehem where Jesus was born with this triumphant message:

Luke 2:11-12 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

This is the theology of Christmas... the true story of who this baby in the manger was...

B. But there is no escaping the overwhelming images, icons, myths, symbols, songs, heritage, stories, and accounts attached to this season

1. Many of them are secular... Santa Claus, Rudolph, Frosty the Snowman, the Grinch, chestnuts roasting on an open fire, the “most wonderful time of the year”, silver bells, Ebenezer Scrooge and the Ghosts of Christmas
2. But many of the threads of the tapestry that makes up Christmas are spiritual... some of them very powerful and helpful
 - a. Some of the best Christmas carols capture well the theology of the birth of Christ... the incarnation
 - b. Hark the Herald Angels sing
 - i) Charles Wesley’s powerful Christmas hymn weaves incredible theology together with a beautiful tune written by Felix Mendelssohn—a Jewish convert to Christ

Christ, by highest heaven adored
 Christ, the everlasting Lord,
 Late in time behold Him come
 Offspring of a Virgin's womb:
 Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
 Hail the incarnate Deity
 Pleased as man with man to dwell
 Jesus, our Emmanuel

Hark! The herald-angels sing

"Glory to the newborn King"

C. The Magi... the Wise Men... Hold a Powerful Place in Popular Imagination

1. Many misconceptions
 - a. Nativity sets often include them and place them at the stable looking at the baby in the manger along with the shepherds... but the Matthew account says they went to a house where Joseph, Mary and Jesus were staying... and the command of Herod to kill all the babies in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old or younger implies that their visit came a good deal after Jesus was born
 - b. The number of the magi is unclear... because they gave three gifts, it is often assumed that there were three of them; but we have no idea how many there were

- c. The magi were not said to be kings in the biblical account... more likely, they were counsellors to kings at best (I'll say more about that in a moment)
- 2. These last two misconceptions have been captured in the famous Christmas carol, "We Three Kings"

We three kings of Orient are
 Bearing gifts we traverse afar
 Field and fountain, moor and mountain
 Following yonder star

- 3. In the 14th century, a cleric named John of Hildesheim wrote a work called *The History of the Three Kings*...
 - a. He included some details about the star they followed... details which are not found in the Bible
 - b. And he related their names: Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspar
 - c. He said they were kings of "Ind, Chaldea, and Persia"
 - d. They chanced to meet on the outskirts of Jerusalem, having travelled from their lands in great haste
 - e. They proceeded together to Bethlehem, and presented their gifts
 - f. They departed together back to the border of the ancient realm of Ind where a watchtower was maintained... it was there that the star was first sighted
 - g. On and on this fanciful account goes... it turned out in the account that all three of the kings returned to that watchtower on the border of Ind and there they built a large and ornate tomb for themselves, and they all died on the same day and were buried there
- 4. So much for John of Hildesheim's account
- 5. In the city of Cologne, Germany, there is a shrine which supposedly holds the bones of all three kings... how that German city obtained those relics is another story for another day... if you think it's worth pursuing
- D. Today... Let's study the biblical account and glean from it the spiritual lessons we need... to prepare us to celebrate the birth of Christ tomorrow!... and more importantly, to extend his Kingdom to the ends of the earth!

II. Walking Through the Biblical Account

A. The Magi Come to Jerusalem with a Question

Matthew 2:1-2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

1. This occurs some time after the birth of Christ... the only account we have of that is Luke 2... the account of the shepherds and the angelic army and the glory of God
2. The time is set: during the reign of King Herod... "Herod the Great"
 - a. Herod was a thoroughly evil man... paranoid... insecure... but very powerful
 - b. Under his rule, the temple was refurbished and expanded with mighty stones... the temple of Jesus' lifetime was generally called "Herod's Temple"
 - c. He was given the title "King of the Jews" though he was actually Idumean, not a Jew at all!!
 - d. His father, Herod Antipater, had done some favor for the Romans and as a result, Herod's family was given the right to rule Judea under Roman rule
 - e. Herod was the consummate politician, and he did everything to curry Roman favor and maintain his power
 - f. In return, the Roman Senate gave him an army and with it, he extended his reign to Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon
 - g. He was also ruthless and pitiless as a ruler; he slaughtered Zealots who opposed any Gentile rule over the Promised Land; Herod wanted to be guaranteed they wouldn't do that to Roman rule, so he simply slaughtered them all
 - h. Herod had ten wives and twelve sons; one of his wives, Mariamne, had a brother named Aristobulus, who was high priest; Herod felt threatened by him, so he had him murdered; he then killed her as well!
 - i. He was so paranoid that he had his two eldest sons put to death... his entire life was one of plots and assassinations designed to keep him in power
 - j. One of the final acts of his life was to arrest a number of the leading men of Jerusalem and command that they be slaughtered the moment he died. His reasoning: "The people will not weep when I die, and I want them weeping, even if they weep over the death of someone else."
3. So, this is the setting, this is the king the magi came to visit

4. Who were the “magi”?
- a. As we’ve already said, they were almost certainly not kings... and we have no certainty about where they were from or how many there were
 - b. The word “magi” links them to a priestly caste of the Medes... according to the ancient historian Herodotus
 - c. They were active throughout Babylon, Persia, and the entire Mesopotamian region during the Old Testament era
 - d. The original magi were priests of the Zoroastrian religion
 - i) Zoroastrianism was the official state religion of Persia and the dominant religion throughout the ancient near east in the centuries before Christ
 - ii) It is amazingly still practiced today by the Parsees of India, who fled Persia when the Muslims came to power
 - iii) Zoroastrianism has some parallels to Judaism: monotheism, animal sacrifice, a hereditary priestly class like the Levites who would offer the blood sacrifices for the sins of the people
 - iv) BUT the religion was a Satanic counterfeit: the Zoroastrian priests employed the occult—sorcery, wizardry, astrology, witchcraft... things directly forbidden in the scripture
 - e. The ancient world tended to BLEND superstition and science... there was little difference in their mind between the science of **astronomy** (studying the position and movement of the stars) and **astrology** (the occultic use of the stars to predict human affairs)
 - f. The Magi were experts at both... and they were so highly esteemed that they came to be greatly desired as counselors to the kings of the ancient Near East... they rose to positions of power in the courts of the kings in the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, and Greek empires... we get the word “magistrate” from the word “magi”... so also the Latin word for “teacher” is “magister”... again related to the MAGI
 - g. From them we also get the word MAGIC and magician
 - h. We meet them in the Book of Daniel as counselors to King Nebuchadnezzar
 - i) The King had had a terrifying dream

Daniel 2:2 the king summoned the magicians, enchanters, sorcerers and astrologers to tell him what he had dreamed.

- ii) None of them could do it... but Daniel could; God supernaturally revealed Nebuchadnezzar's dream to Daniel, then Daniel interpreted it to the King
- iii) It had to do with the unfolding of history, and the coming of a Kingdom that would never end... and such a Kingdom must have a King:

Daniel 2:44 In the time of those kings, the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever.

- i. It is quite possible that Daniel (and other Jews scattered throughout Persia) instructed the Magi on the Jewish prophecies of a coming king
5. The Magi spoke of "one born king of the Jews...": there is little doubt that they were thinking of prophecies, for there was no other indication that a newborn babe in Judea would rise to be king

B. The Star They Had Seen

Matthew 2:2 "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

- 1. The Magi were stargazers... both astronomers and astrologers
- 2. They were also led by dreams and visions; so they realized this was no ordinary star... it was "HIS STAR"... i.e. the newborn's star
- 3. This star was utterly unlike anything they had ever seen in the sky
 - a. It rose, and moved and guided them directionally
 - b. Many have wondered and tried to link it to Jupiter or a comet
 - c. But how could such a thing led them to Bethlehem in particular, and specifically to the house where the baby Jesus lay?

Matthew 2:9 the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

- d. Perhaps the best understanding of this was a heavenly being... a light shining from the heavens which cast down specific beams to earth guiding them from the east
- e. Somewhat like the *shekinah* glory of God in the tabernacle and temple, and the pillar of fire that guided the Jews out of Egypt

C. King Herod's Jealous Reaction

Matthew 2:3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

1. This is very much in line with what we have already said about Herod... he was paranoid, insecure, and jealous for his position
2. The question: "Where is the one born KING OF THE JEWS...?" would have shattered him to the core
3. He was shaken, deeply, and he made sure that all Jerusalem was shaken with him...

D. The Biblical Scholars Unveil the Prophecy

Matthew 2:4-6 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

1. This is amazing! They knew right away where the Messiah, the Son of David was to be born
2. Also during that time, the census was going on and huge populations had migrated back to their towns of ancestral origin
3. Bethlehem was the "City of David"
4. The words come from Micah 5:1-2, and they speak of a ruler whose origins are from ancient times, who will rule all Israel as a shepherd does his sheep

E. King Herod's Secret Plan

1. The paranoid, wicked tyrant will not let this sit
2. He was evil, but he was hardly passive, lazy or indolent... he was a man of action when it came to protecting his throne
3. He hatched a plan to use the magi to lead him to the baby

Matthew 2:7-8 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

4. Obviously, his intentions were dark... he had no intention of worshipping the child

5. He knew the location; he just wanted to get a sense of the time frame
6. This would tell him how urgent this issue was, and in the end determined the span of the murder he would commit to be sure he killed this tiny helpless threat to his throne

F. The Star Leads them to Bethlehem... and to the House

Matthew 2:9 *After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.*

1. The word Matthew uses in verse 11, “house”, implies Joseph, Mary, and Jesus were no longer in a stable, Jesus was no longer lying in a manger!
2. So much for most of our nativity sets that always put the Magi alongside the shepherds!
3. But what is really amazing is the accuracy of this traveling star, how specifically it led them to exactly where Jesus was
4. This is a beautiful picture of the way our sovereign God leads people even today to find Christ as Savior

G. The Joy of the Magi

Matthew 2:10 *When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

1. The whole reason for Jesus coming was the joy of the nations in the salvation he alone could bring

Luke 2:10-11 *the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*

Isaiah 9:3, 6 *You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. ... For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

2. JOY!! Sheer, unadulterated HAPPINESS... at the consummation of their quest
3. But their joy at finding the child is just the beginning... there would be an eternity of joy at finding out how great Jesus really is
 - a. Finding baby Jesus in answer to the star’s movements, and their own leadings was amazing

- b. Discovering who Jesus really is and how he came to die for their sins and bring them to eternity in heaven is INFINITELY GREATER JOY

H. The Worship of the Magi

Matthew 2:11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.

1. Clearly this worship is the point of our salvation
2. God sent his son into a world that was worshipping idols, false gods, to turn them to worship the true God
3. To worship Christ is to worship the true God

John 14:9 Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

And anyone who worships Christ is through him worshipping the Father, the true and living God!

I. The Gifts of the Magi

Matthew 2:11 Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

1. These gifts represent sacrifice and worship
2. They are costly to the magi therefore acceptable to God
3. Practically, it could be that Joseph was able to sell these costly gifts and provide for his family in Egypt

J. The Magi Warned

Matthew 2:12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

K. Tragic Epilog

1. (Matthew 2:13-15) An angel warns Joseph to take Mary and Jesus and flee immediately to Egypt; which Joseph obeyed; this was all part of God's infinitely wise plan for the salvation of the world
2. But then, the horror strikes

Matthew 2:16-18 When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. ¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

¹⁸ "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

III. The Timeless Spiritual Significance

A. The Magi: Gentiles and Pagans

1. The Magi were amazingly firstfruits of the worldwide harvest God has planned for the Gentile nations

Matthew 8:11 I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Psalms 22:27-29 All the ends of the earth will remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations will bow down before him, ²⁸ for dominion belongs to the LORD and he rules over the nations. ²⁹ All the rich of the earth will feast and worship; all who go down to the dust will kneel before him-- those who cannot keep themselves alive.

Isaiah 66:19 "I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations-- to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations.

2. God overruled their false religion and used their love of stars and belief in dreams to move them to where their Savior was
3. Also this is the last of the Promised Land being the destination where people have to GO to find their salvation... the Old Testament is a "come and see" religion; the Queen of Sheba came to see Solomon
4. In the New Covenant, it's GO AND TELL... the message of salvation spreads out from Jerusalem and the Promised Land to the ends of the earth

Luke 24:46-48 [Jesus] told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

B. The Star: Supernatural Testimony

1. God crafted in the heavens a highly unusual display of his glory
2. Such a star had never been seen before or since
3. Its unusual attributes are a display of both natural and special revelation

4. It is a symbol of God's desire to use both nature and scripture to reveal his glory... specifically the glory of Christ

Psalm 19:1-4 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. ³ There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. ⁴ Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.

C. The Dreams: God's Unusual Guidance

1. God used the Magi's trust in dreams to guide them and give them key information
2. So also God uses dreams today to guide Muslims to faith in Christ
3. There are so many testimonies of this from Muslims
4. I recently heard the account of the conversion of Nabeel Qureshi, in his book *Seeking Allah, Finding Jesus*; at some key points, it was dreams that confirmed to him the truth of the gospel
5. In other cases, God uses dreams to guide Muslims to PLACES where they will hear the gospel for their salvation

D. The Prophecies: God's Clearest Guidance

1. The clearest proof of the reality of Christ the Savior are the prophecies that point to him
2. This text depended on Micah 5:1-2... the clear prediction that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem
3. Much more significantly is the reason WHY he would come

Isaiah 53:2-6 He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. ³ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. ⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

E. The Priests: Jewish Indifference

1. Isn't it amazing that they had no zeal to come find Jesus?
2. They knew the right answers, but stayed there in Jerusalem

John 1:11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.

Isaiah 53:3 Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

F. The King: Jewish and Royal Hostility

1. Herod represents wicked rulers who use their power to resist the gospel
2. They hate God and are jealous of their power
3. God warns them plainly in Psalm 2

Psalm 2:1-2 Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? ² The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One.

Psalm 2:4-6 The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. ⁵ Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, ⁶ "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."

G. The Slaughter: Spiritual Warfare

Revelation 12:4-5 The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. ⁵ She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.

H. The Gifts: Sacrifices of Love

Psalm 72:8-11 He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. ⁹ The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. ¹⁰ The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. ¹¹ All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.

1. Gold: most precious of all metals; a gift fit for a king... as though they were paying tribute to a king
2. Frankincense: often mixed with sacrifices, perhaps in some sense acknowledging the deity of Christ
3. Myrrh: used as a sedative at Jesus' crucifixion, and as a burial spice by Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus... a prophecy of his suffering and death

I. The Worship: God's Ultimate Purpose

1. They came to WORSHIP HIM
2. They BOWED DOWN AND WORSHIPED HIM
3. This Jesus, this infant, was not merely a human king, but was the Son of God, worthy of worship

Philippians 2:10-11 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

IV. Application: The Real Gift of Christmas

- A. The Real Gifts are not the Gold, Incense, and Myrrh
- B. The Real Gift is Jesus... Not the gifts he came to RECEIVE, but the Gifts He Came to Give

Matthew 20:28 the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

- C. All these Gifts Flow from Him
 1. Forgiveness of all sins

Ephesians 1:7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace

2. Reconciliation with God

Romans 5:10 when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son

3. Adoption as sons and daughters

John 1:12 But to all who did receive Him, He gave them the right to be children of God, to those who believe in His name

4. The Indwelling Holy Spirit

John 14:17 the Spirit of truth. ... he lives with you and will be in you.

5. Good works that he will eternally reward

Ephesians 2:10 or we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

6. Heaven as our guaranteed destination

Revelation 21:4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."