

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,
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MATTHEW 2:1-18

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WHEN HOPE WAS BORN #2 **WHAT EVIL AND SUFFERING TEACH US ABOUT HOPE**

If you take the time to read through the Christmas story, you will see lots of astonishing things. This video has made quite an impact online the past few weeks. It's a look at what the Christmas story might look like if Mary and Joseph had access to social media. Check it out. (Video: A Social Media Christmas 3:50)

Wasn't that great?

The birth of Jesus brought hope to the world. Throughout these Advent messages we are looking at the hope that Christ brought. There were some, living in Jesus' day that might have argued about whether or not His birth brought hope. The birth of Christ actually brought tragedy to many innocent families living in Bethlehem.

Why do bad things happen to good people? It's a question as old as time.

Skeptics of Christianity have used the problem of evil as an argument against God for millennia. Their reasoning goes something like this: *"If God is good, and if God is love, then He is certainly not all-powerful; because a loving and a good God would not allow the evil that exists in this world to be present. God may be all loving, he may be all-powerful, he may be neither, but he is certainly not both."*

It's not just skeptics who ask these questions about God. Real Christians sometimes struggle with the concept of a loving God when they encounter difficulties in life.

Our text for today is Matthew 2:1-19. If you have your Bibles, open up to that passage.

1 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."

In his book, *God in the Manger*, John MacArthur writes about the Magi. He writes, "The Magi date from the seventh century B.C., when they were a tribe within the Median nation of eastern Mesopotamia. They became skilled in astronomy and astrology (which were more closely associated disciplines in those days) and had a sacrificial system somewhat similar to the Mosaic one. We derive the English words *magic* and *magician* from the name *magi*."

The book of Daniel reports that the Magi, with their knowledge of science, agriculture, mathematics, history, and the occult, were among the highest ranking, most influential officials in the Babylonian Empire. Because of Daniel's own high position and place of respect among them (Dan. 2:24, 48), the Magi undoubtedly learned much from him about the true God and His plans for the Jews through the coming Messiah. Because many Jews remained in Babylon after the Exile, it's likely those teaching remained strong in the region even until New Testament times.

The 'wise men from the East' (Matt. 2:1) who came to see Jesus were true Magi who had learned about the Jews' messianic expectations, likely from the prophetic writings such as Daniel's. They were probably among the many God-fearing Gentiles who lived in the Middle East and Mediterranean areas at that time, some of whom – such as Cornelius and Lydia (Acts 10:1-2; 16:14) – are mentioned in the New Testament.

Matthew tells us that when the Magi – whether three or more, he doesn't specify – arrived in Jerusalem, they began the final stage of their search for the Christ child by asking, 'Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?' (2:2). The Greek grammar of that question suggests the men went around the city posing that inquiry to whomever they met. They evidently assumed that if they as foreigners knew about the historic birth, anyone in Judea, especially Jerusalem, would know where the special baby lived. It was no doubt shocking to the Magi when no one seemed to know what they were talking about."¹

Such was the political and religious climate in Jerusalem when Jesus was born. These foreigners knew more about what God was doing than the people of Israel. You know many people have the misperception that the Magi were kings. We've grown up singing the old Christmas carol, *We Three Kings*, and have assumed that there were three wise men and that they were kings. Again, Scripture doesn't record their number, there may have been more. And, Magi weren't kings, they were the educated teachers who prepared future kings to rule their nation by imparting knowledge to them about a variety of subjects. That's why we call them wise men.

Herod would have immediately recognized the role of the Magi. These distinguished visitors were known throughout the ancient near east world for their knowledge in a wide array of subjects and for their influence with rulers in their lands.

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 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

¹ John MacArthur, *God in the Manger*, (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001)

who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.”

A word about Herod would be good here. MacArthur writes, “Herod was known as a man of intense jealousy and paranoia, so any mention of a potentially rival king of the Jews caused him much fear and anger.

This Herod, known as ‘the Great,’ is the first of several New Testament Herods. Under their occupation of Judea, the Romans had appointed his father, Herod Antipater, governor of the region. Antipater then managed to get his son named prefect of Galilee. As prefect, Herod successfully quelled the rebellious Jewish guerillas that still opposed Rome, but he had to flee to Egypt when the Parthians invaded Palestine. Herod returned to Palestine a short while later with stronger backing from Rome as the newly proclaimed ‘king of the Jews.’ That’s when he fought the Parthians for two years, defeated them, and set up his own kingdom.

Because the Magi were either Parthians or closely associated with Parthians, Herod likely had an extra cause for concern. He no doubt viewed the impressive entourage (it probably numbered more than the traditional ‘three kings’), with its wealth, prestige, and powerful-looking royal demander, as a renewed political and military threat from the East.”²

Herod wasn’t the first power-hungry leader the world had experienced, and he wouldn’t be the last. What is it about power that can become so corrupting? What is it about power that can become so intoxicating? Maybe you’ve held a position of responsibility in your life and found that you didn’t like the person that you became when you took hold of that power. Maybe someone you know has become a different person because of some newly held position of authority. I don’t know what Herod was like before he became the King of the Jews, but I know what He was like after becoming King, and it was disgusting. So, what does power hungry Herod do?

7 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.”

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. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The wise men do a beautiful thing when they find Jesus. They worship him. They present Jesus with gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. These are extremely symbolic gifts.

² John MacArthur, *God in the Manger*, (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2001)

Remember, Jesus was the baby that was born in the shadow of a cross. Gold was a gift that was given to kings. It was the gift of royalty.

Frankincense was a gift that was much more unusual. David Dewitt writes, “Frankincense was a highly valued commodity and somewhat rare. The Jewish people had a common use for frankincense that was directly connected to the worship of God. In the Temple, the Jews prayed before the Altar of Incense which was always kept burning. The substance burned on that altar was frankincense. When frankincense is burned it gives off a sweet smelling white smoke. The smoke rising from the altar of incense represented the prayers of the people rising to God in heaven. The only use of frankincense for Jews was at this altar and it was reserved for the worship of God. The Magi presenting this gift to Jesus represents the fact that He was indeed divine.”³

Now, myrrh demonstrates that Jesus was not only royal and divine, but that he was born to die. Dewitt writes, “Myrrh was extremely valuable and had a number of uses. The most common use was a perfume. Sometimes myrrh might be used in the homes of the wealthy to create a pleasant fragrance but was normally reserved for special instances. The major use of myrrh was for burials. Myrrh was placed on the cloths used to wrap bodies for burial to help prevent the smell of decay following death. The Magi presented this gift to Jesus as a representation that He would one day die. The gift almost seems to convey the fact that Jesus was born to die.”⁴

What unusual gifts the wise men brought. We don’t know if there were more gifts, but there very well may have been. Perhaps the greatest gift was pure, unadulterated worship. These pagan men, from a pagan country, worshipped Messiah.

And sometimes I wish that Matthew finished the Christmas story right there. Then, like the video we watched earlier today, we could just be left with good feelings. Jesus had come. The world was somehow different. God, in the flesh, had made His dwelling with mankind.

But, the story doesn’t end there. I believe that Matthew wanted his readers to see that we needed the Christ-child to come into the world. We needed Jesus to come so that we could find hope. The world, left to our own devices, is an evil place.

Look at what verses 13-15 tell us:

13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up,” he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.”

14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

³ <http://www.helium.com/items/1258365-meaning-behind-the-gifts-of-the-wise-men>

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Poor Joseph. He had been through his share of angelic announcements in the last couple of years. Now, he received another disturbing bit of news from heaven's angelic messenger. It wasn't enough that he and Mary had to endure ridicule at the hands of friends who thought that the two had been immoral, now their baby's life was in danger. But, Joseph heeded the instruction from the angel and left that very night to take his family to safety.

The story continues with some of the Bible's saddest words.

16 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."

It sure doesn't feel like Matthew has chosen to end the Christmas story in a good way, does it? I mean, it doesn't feel like he has gift wrapped the story and put a nice bow on it. It feels more like something terrifying, which causes us to question God and His goodness. It makes me wonder, where God was on that horrific night in Bethlehem. Where is the equity in this story God? Why is Herod allowed to act this way? Aren't you the God who appoints leaders? Aren't you the God who is supposed to work things out for the good of those who love you and live according to your purposes?

Michael Treston writes, "The scripture we read this morning is quite a grim text isn't it, but in the Eastern Orthodox church they use this same scripture to celebrate the end of the Christmas story. In that church, they have set aside the 29th of December as a holy day. A holy day where they commemorate the lives of the son of Bethlehem whom were slaughtered by Herod as he was hunting for the Christ child. To the eastern Church the sons of Bethlehem are martyrs; people who died for the faith, young children whose lives were given as a sacrifice. So for this reason they use this story as part of the Christmas story, they use it as the final chapter."⁵

You might say, "Isn't it a bit of a stretch to call children who are two and under, martyrs?"

I don't think so. I believe the Eastern Orthodox Church may be onto something here. The Apostle Matthew wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. His words in the Gospel of Matthew were God's words. God could have said, "Let's sweep the whole Bethlehem genocide under the rug. In a few years there will be other tragedies. There

⁵ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=36801

will be things that will make people forget about all of those deaths in a small village in Israel.” But God didn’t do that. Now, our God is a God of order. Everything that is in Scripture is there for a reason. Why would God include a passage that would naturally cause us to ask difficult questions?

Michael Treston has addressed this question in a marvelous way. Treston talks about how Matthew’s Gospel invites us to join the Magi on a journey of hope in which they worship Messiah. The picture is beautiful. And then, Treston writes:

“No sooner have we worshiped the Christ Child, no sooner have we placed our offerings before him then he is taken away from us. His life is in danger and so he and his family must flee to Egypt, all that is left is the aroma of worship in our nostril and the memory of how we worshiped the Christ child.

For that small moment we joined the Magi for one small moment we too worshiped the King of Kings but now we are just as quickly we have been drawn back to a grim dark reality, a reality that makes the Christ child a political refugee, a reality that sacrifices the lives of children for power and sovereignty, and the reality of a frightened King who fears that a child may take his throne.

But apart from the sudden foreclosure on the Christmas story there is something else about this text, something else that doesn’t seem quite right. Not only does it seem like Matthew wants to bring a sudden end to our Christmas celebrations but it seems like he wants to make us uncomfortable too. He wants to make us so uncomfortable that we start to ask questions, awkward questions. Questions that under normal circumstances we wouldn’t really want to ask, questions that may damage our faith, but questions that we feel drawn to anyway. Questions like ‘where is God in this? And how could a God of love allow this to happen?’

There is something in this story that demands us to ask these questions. I think that exactly what Matthew intended. Despite how dangerous these questions may seem. Because if he didn’t want us to ask them then why didn’t he do the magic rug trick with the whole incident.

You know the trick where we take something and sweep it under a rug in the hope that we can avoid it?

I don’t know about you but when it comes to my Faith I often use the magic rug trick, it makes me squirm when someone says those words ‘how could a God of love allow this to happen?’

I’ve had nightmares over the difficult questions and I have since come to the realization that the magic rug trick doesn’t really work. You see when we perform this trick we have to jump up and down for hours on the questions in the hope of quashing it.

Either that or we try and change the subject from the why and how questions to the isn't the weather nice statements, or the did you see the news last night conversation changer. All in the hope that people will not notice the lump under the carpet.

Matthew though is a man of integrity would rather tell it like it is, and face up to the awkward questions.

Of course the awkward question still remains 'how could a God of love allow these innocent children to be killed?'

The answer to this question is not an easy one, of course it's not an easy one and that's why we often try to sweep it under the carpet.

But the reason that it is not an easy question to answer is not for the reason that we may think.

The main reason we often try to avoid answering the how and why questions is because we think it might knock our faith. We think that maybe the tragedy of these Boys was down to God. Maybe God was responsible. To be quite honest though that is absolute nonsense, its nonsense to try and shift the blame on to God. Its nonsense to simply throw all responsibility for a tragedy on to God's shoulders. In fact shifting the responsibility on to God is just another way of doing the magic rug trick.

When we say, 'why did God allow those innocent children to die?' we are blaming God, and all the while the real villain is running free. The real cause of the tragedy is left to continue the evil work. It's the same today when people blame God for drunk drivers These tragedies like the death of the children of Bethlehem are not a part of God's plan or God's will.

The responsibility for these deaths must come upon the shoulders of the person who performed the act. In the case of the Bethlehem massacre, Herod, the ruler who used the sword to secure his thrown.

This is the thing that Matthew wants us to grasp hold of in this text. This is what Matthew wants us to take away with us. The sinful nature of Herod, and our sinful nature too.

Matthew wants us to ask the hard question. He wants us to toss and turn at night as we search for the answer. He wants us to see that the answer lies with us not with God. Matthew wants us to realize that we are responsible and because we are responsible the joy and peace of Christmas must come to an end.

You see it may have felt good to worship the Christ child in the stable, but that is only a part of the story. In closing the Christmas story in this way Matthew is seeking to remind

us of the reason for it happening in the first place. The reason being because we are sinners in need of salvation.”⁶

Did God know ahead of time that there would be a massacre at Bethlehem? Yes. It was in fact, prophesied. Nothing surprises God. He’s not surprised when you and I choose to dishonor him and sin. He is not surprised by the evil that lurks in the hearts of every person on planet earth. Some evil looks more heinous than other types of evil, but ultimately all sin is evil, and any sin is enough to condemn us to eternal punishment. Matthew’s Gospel teaches us that Jesus is the hope for the world. The baby who was born in Bethlehem came to bring victory over sin and death. He came to conquer evil, vanquish the devil and all of his demons and take our place on the cross. Evil and suffering can bring us hope. It can help us long for another world. This world is not all that great. We were born with a longing in our hearts for a place we’ve never been. When I was preaching on heaven a few weeks back I said that we’ve all got a GPS system that is directing toward heaven. But, we can’t get there apart from Christ.

King Herod was content to rule a small kingdom here on earth. He was threatened by the birth of Christ, for as Messiah, Jesus will one day rule over the nations. In one of history’s most barbaric acts, Herod oversaw the genocide of Bethlehem’s baby boys and somehow through the pain hope was born. Very few knew it at the time, but God’s eternal plan was at work despite the evil all around. We too are surrounded by evil, tragedy, the effects of the fall, but God the Father, through Jesus, His Son and the power of the Holy Spirit is working for our eternal good despite all that the devil throws our way.

Let the evil and suffering that is around you strengthen your resolve to store up treasure in heaven, not earth. Only one life twill soon be past, only what’s done for Christ will last.

I’ll close with these words from Michael Trenton.

“Matthew has shown us why we need to take a step outside the warmth and security of the stable in Bethlehem, He is asking us to put away the things of Christmas, to close the pages of the Christmas story and to step out into the cold reality of the world as it is; a world where power and greed come at the price of innocent lives. He is asking us to take the light and the love that we felt in the stable out into the cold dark world. Because that light is the light of hope and that love is God’s love for all humanity, and without them the world is going to perish.

You see there are just too many Herods in the world, and there is too much of what drove Herod in us, each of us. It took the slaughter of the children of Bethlehem to remind us of why we need a savior, and that is why the Eastern Orthodox Church calls them martyrs. The sacrifice they made was to remind us that we are all sinners, each and every one of us.”⁷

⁶ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=36801

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