

The Revelation of Jesus Christ to the World

A Sermon for Epiphany Sunday

[Trinity Episcopal Church](#), Dallas, Texas

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The Visit of the Wise Men, English Standard Version

Matthew 2:1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men [\[1\]](#) from the east came to Jerusalem, **2** saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose [\[2\]](#) and have come to worship him." **3** When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. **5** They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. **8** And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." **9** After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. **11** And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. **12** And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Epiphany

- The revelation of Jesus Christ. The festival of the conspicuous manifestation or striking appearance of Christ to the gentiles celebrated on the sixth day of January, the twelfth day after Christmas, in commemoration of the appearance of our Savior to the magi or philosophers of the East, who came to adore him with presents; or as others maintain, to commemorate the appearance of the star to the magis, or the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles. Jerome and Chrysostom take the epiphany to be the day of our Savior's baptism, when a voice from heaven declared, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased." The Greek fathers use the word for the appearance of Christ in the world, the sense in which Paul used the word. 2 Tim. 1.10. Webster's 1828 Dictionary of the American English Language

I would like to unpack the story of the magi and the meaning of Epiphany in three major points

- The revelation of Jesus Christ to the gentiles
- The coming of the Gospel of the Kingdom to the whole world
- The call for all Christians to press the crown rights of Jesus Christ the King of Kings in all of life

1. The Revelation of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles

a. Who were the Magi?

- i. They were wise men from the east-probably Persian or Arabian. Job was considered to be a man of the east. They were not Jews, but gentiles; they were not the descendants of Abraham to whom were given first the law and the promises.
- ii. They were magi or magicians, sorcerers, astrologers, philosophers or wizards-wise men in the context of communities with mystical beliefs.
- iii. They were those awaiting the rise of a great King because they recognized the star as an announcement of his coming. Though this sounds unusual to westerners, steeped in a scientific view of life, the historical record of the time shows many references to this expectation and astrological confirmation would have been normal.

b. What did they do?

- i. They followed the star; when it no longer guided them they asked for directions from the chief magistrate in the capital city (Jerusalem) and being undeterred traveled to Bethlehem to find the star reappear over the place where the child

Jesus dwelt with Joseph and Mary. Where were the representatives of Herod's court or of the Temple? Why didn't they join the magi? These gentile wise men were more interested in finding the king in Bethlehem than they.

- ii. They "fell down and worshipped Him." They presented gifts of real monetary value, welcome to the impoverished family of the Christ child and of symbolic meaning:
 - 1. Gold - as tribute to a king
 - 2. Frankincense – as an offering of the smoke of incense to God
 - 3. Myrrh - as for the embalming of Christ the man upon his death
- iii. Being warned in a dream they did not reveal the location of the child to Herod, as he had requested of them, but returned to their own country by another route

c. What does this symbolize?

- i. Although a fictional formation, I like how Lew Wallace in Ben Hur, shows three Magi as representative of all the populations of the whole world coming together by divine appointment to worship the King. It was the Year of Rome 747, (the legendary founding of Rome including the story of Romulus and Remus was 753 BC) when three wise men, guided by a star met in the Arabian Desert before continuing to Jerusalem. The first man to arrive was of admirable proportions, not so tall as powerful. Loosening the silken rope which held the kufiyeh (ku-fe' u) on his head, his strong face, almost black in color; yet the low, broad forehead, aquiline nose, the outer corners of the eyes turned slightly upward, the hair profuse, straight, harsh, of metallic lustre, and falling to the shoulder in many plaits, were signs of origin impossible to disguise. So looked the Pharaohs and the later Ptolemies; so looked Mizraim, father of the Egyptian race. He represented all the populations of Africa
- ii. Tall, with lean face, the next man with white hair and beard, and a complexion between the hue of cinnamon and bronze; over the skull-cap a shawl was wound in great folds, forming a turban; his body garments included flowing breeches gathered at the ankles, his feet were clad in half-slippers of red leather, pointed at the toes. Save the slippers, the costume from head to foot was of white linen. He represented the populations of Asia-who also originally populated the Americas.
- iii. The last comer was slighter; his complexion white; a mass of waving light hair a perfect crown; under the folds of the

Tyrian blanket appeared a tunic, short-sleeved and low-necked, gathered to the waist by a band, and reaching nearly to the knee; sandals guarded his feet. If he came not himself from the groves of Athens, his ancestry did, representing the populations of Europe.

- iv. "...so [after introductions] the Egyptian proceeded [to say], "He we go to find was called 'King of the Jews;' by that name we are bidden to ask for Him. But we may know Him to be the Redeemer, not of the Jews alone, but of all the nations of the earth. The patriarch who survived the Flood [Noah] had with him three sons, and their families, by whom the world was repeopled. From the Region of Delight in the heart of Asia, they parted. India and the far East received the children of the first; the descendants of the youngest, through the North, streamed into Europe; those of the second overflowed the deserts about the Red Sea, passing into Africa."
- v. Symbolically in the Magi, Wallace shows us the populations of the world streaming back to worship the newborn King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

2. What of the coming of the Gospel of the Kingdom to the whole world

a. Who is this Jesus?

- i. Emmanuel; God with us
- ii. A Savior, Christ the Lord
- iii. The King of the tribe of Judah, the son of David, the inheritor of the royal throne and he who arrived to deliver the Jews from their long exile. He who fulfilled the long held expectation of a messiah to deliver. He is the reigning King of the whole earth, Jew and gentile, the Son of God:
 - 1. Isaiah 9:6 "For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given;
and the government shall be upon [4] his shoulder,
and his name shall be called [5]
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
7 Of the increase of his government 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 hosts will do this.

2. **Luke 1:31**...you shall call his name Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."
3. **Psalm 24**...the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and [all] they that dwell therein. [both Jew and Gentile]

b. What is the nature of His coming and the Gospel of the Kingdom of God?

- i. Jesus announced, introduced and inaugurated the Kingdom of God on earth:
 1. **Matthew 4:23** And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.
 2. **Mark 1:15** and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel. [the good news that the long anticipated King has arrived to establish His rule]
 3. **Matthew 24:14** And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. [the kingdom will spread around the world until He returns to consummate that Kingdom at the end of the age]
- ii. Jesus displaced all other kingdoms; both the pagan and the prevailing Jewish order redefining the kingdom with himself as king.
 1. N. T. Wright, a luminary of the Anglican Church, and the foremost scholar of Jesus in the English speaking world says this best in *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is*. Intervarsity Press, 1999. 202 pages. "N. T. Wright is Canon Theologian of Westminster Abbey and was formerly Dean of Lichfield Cathedral. He taught New Testament studies at Cambridge, McGill and Oxford Universities. The author of many works, his full-scale work *Jesus and the Victory of God* is widely regarded as one of the most significant studies in the contemporary "Third Quest" of the historical Jesus.

2. The key thing was that the in breaking kingdom Jesus was announcing created a new world, a new context, and he was challenging his hearers to become the new people that this new context demanded, the citizens of this new world. He was offering a challenge to his contemporaries to a way of life, a way of forgiveness and prayer, a way of jubilee, which they could practice in their own villages, right where they were. (Page 46)
3. Jesus announced the kingdom, He told the story of the kingdom in such a way as to indicate that Israel's long exile was finally coming to its close. His retelling of the story was deeply subversive, with sharp polemic reserved for alternative tellings of Israel's story. He was, in short announcing the kingdom of God – not the simple revolutionary message of hard-liners but the doubly revolutionary message of a kingdom that would overturn all agendas. It is because he inaugurated the kingdom that we can live the kingdom...we can now implement that work today. (Pages 52-53)
4. He [Jesus] believed that Israel's God was in the process of judging and redeeming his people, not just as one such incident among many but as the climax of Israel's history. This judgment would take the form of destruction by Rome. [AD 70] It would not be followed by the rebuilding of a new physical Temple. It would be followed by the establishment of the messianic community focused on Jesus himself that would replace the Temple once and for all. His aim was to reconstitute the people of God around himself, to accomplish the real return from exile, to inaugurate the kingdom of God. (Pages 65, 66 and 73)
5. Salvation is of the Jews, and from the King of the Jews it has come. God's covenant faithfulness has been revealed in the good news of Jesus, bringing salvation for the whole cosmos. (Page 124)
6. Early Christianity thought of itself as a kingdom-of-God movement. When Paul said "Jesus is Lord," it is clear that he meant that Caesar was not. This is not Gnostic escapism (the Jewish Essenes, who with drew to Qumran by the Dead Sea) but Jewish-style no-king-but-God theology with Jesus in the middle of it.

And this theology generated and sustained not a group of Gnostic-style conventicles but a Jewish-style new-covenant community.

7. ...within Judaism the coming kingdom of God meant...the end of Israel's exile, the overthrow of the pagan empire and the exaltation of Israel, and the return of YHWH to Zion to judge and save. Looking wider it meant the renewal of the world, the establishment of God's justice for the cosmos. It was not about private existentialist or Gnostic experience but about public events.
8. Paul explained that the kingdom was coming in a two-stage process, so that the Jewish hope-for God to be all in all-would be realized fully in the future, following its decisive inauguration in the events concerning Jesus. [The resurrection] was the central driving force, informing the whole movement. [Jesus] is not in an intermediate state, awaiting a time when he will finally be raised from the dead. He is already risen; he is already, as a human being, fulfilling the destiny marked out for the human race from the sixth day of creation. (Pages 131-133 and 143)

- c. This is the Gospel of the Kingdom of God ruled by the King the Magi came to worship, the King of the whole earth revealed for the whole world to see and celebrated on this day we call Epiphany.
- d. But, as Wright says, "So what?" What is incumbent upon us now as followers of Jesus Christ, as those who are now part of this messianic Kingdom? Since Jesus is currently reigning now what? As Francis Schaefer said, "How Should We Then Live?"

3. The Call for All Christians to Press the Crown Rights of Jesus Christ the King of Kings in all of life; That's How We Should Live

- a. We must understand we live in the presence of a renewed and reinvigorated story of life and of the world, the big picture, the metanarrative of a world in which Jesus Christ the Lord, the creative Word made flesh, the redeemer worshipped by the magi who purchased us not only as individuals or even as humankind for some future state of disembodied bliss, but the redeemer of the cosmos, the very world in which we live incarnate and our job is to bring that world under His feet. As Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch theologian and statesman articulated a century ago, "There is not one square inch of this world over which Jesus Christ does not say, "that is mine, that belongs to me."

- b. We should labor with Him to establish the Kingdom in all of life; in church and family life, in public life, in vocational life, as well as in all aspects of entertainment, leisure, academic and civil life; everyday in every way
- c. We should retell the story of life, the metanarrative of creation, fall and redemption; the fact that Jesus Christ came to inaugurate the Kingdom, and is the currently reigning King. We must reject a sappy, thin, ineffective gospel and preach the whole counsel of God to the whole world in old and new ways.
- d. We should reject the crumbling overarching modern explanation that all of life is material and economic and the meaning of life is to find one's place in that system as cog in the modern wheel where only the cold-hard-facts rule, where there is no faith, no belief in those things outside of, bigger than and transcendent over life. We should care about and deliver those still trapped in this dehumanizing kind of a life.
- e. We should listen to the heartbeat of a modern world in the agony of its own demise, where most people are now more post-modern than modern. A world where people care about transcendence but don't know what to believe so as echoed by Chesterton, they will believe in anything. Penn Jillette of Penn & Teller, eccentric magicians with a psychotic twist, whose stage show played Broadway and played to packed houses all over the country, said, "Believing there is no God gives me more room for belief in family, people, love, truth, beauty, sex, Jell-O and all the other things I can prove and that makes this life the best life I will ever have." If someone does not believe in something they will believe in anything.
- f. We should understand many post-moderns are suspicious of institutions, they don't trust the government, the church the family or the business corporation. They unconsciously reject the modernist metanarrative but replace it with a confusing individualized hodgepodge. They are the prophets of whom Simon and Garfunkle sang who wrote of their longing on the subway walls. They know Eisengard fell, they know Frodo still lives but may not know where to find him. Since they do not possess an organizing system of belief they believe in anything, feeling lonely and adrift they long for something but know not what it is.
- g. We should tell a hopeful story for them, one of a God who cares, who is merciful and just, sovereign and can be trusted, who is the reigning King establishing his benevolent rule over time.
- h. We should also strategize to carry the reign of Christ into every arena of life in the most practical of ways.
 - i. We should support or become poets, musicians, film makers, artists, ministers, educators and journalists that tell the

redeeming story, that seek to recontextualize human beings with in the true hopeful metanarrative.

1. No wonder men went away with their blood up for liberty when they heard Wallace cry "freedom." There is a time to pick a fight; to wisely strategize how to liberate our families, practice our faith in all of life, and defend our homeland and communities, this is part of maleness.
 2. How interesting the movie pundits predicted *Lord of the Rings* would fail, while its wild success tells us of those that long for identifiable right and wrong, good and evil, nobility and ignobility, who love heroes and do not need antiheroes, who long for a world of transcendent values, of hope and are willing to rise up and work for it!
 3. I say go, tell the story, find a way to bring it to every people group and every arena of life!
- ii. In business we should profit yet gain motivation from the higher principles of mercy and justice, love of neighbor. My own son has risked his personal capital to build entry level housing, with intelligently designed lease/buy arrangements so those with little means or a past riddled with credit mistakes can start over and raise their families in their own homes, in safe neighborhoods. Hopefully he will also profit so he can go out and do it again for more people.
 - iii. We should build communities within communities that place people back in relationship with neighbors.
 - iv. We should assure tranquility in these communities both as law enforcement professionals and as those that watch out continually for the welfare of our neighbors in our own neighborhoods.
 - v. We should seek and accept responsible positions in civil government holding these positions in trust for God the great governor of all and for those in the community refusing the corruption that so commonly entraps those in positions of authority.
 - vi. We should build and plant churches that enact the whole counsel of God.
 - vii. We should marry and remain married in covenant each of us in relationship as the husband of one wife and a wife that stays with one husband
 - viii. We should bear and rear children seeking to train them up in the way.

- ix. We should educate them to think well, to think broadly and feely, to think Christianly so that they will never become enslaved to their culture but influencers thereof. We should agree with R. L. Dabney, Southern Presbyterian minister of the 18th century and the first President of what is now the University of Texas when he said, "The education of children for God is the most important business on earth."

We should not live as thoughtless consumers, or in wimpy withdrawal, but in thoughtful engagement with our culture loving our neighbors and bringing the reign of Christ in every possible way.

Yes, this is Epiphany, the revelation of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God to the whole world.