

God Is Among Us

Matthew 2:1-12

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God has come to earth.
The Son of God has been born as a human.
God is among us.

That, friends is the central and astounding message of Christmas.
That is the Christmas FACT.

Standing alongside that Christmas fact is the Christmas QUESTION -
How will I respond?

Will I carry on as if the birth of Jesus really doesn't matter?
Or will you be able to see that Jesus matters by how I live?

Matthew 2 provides two possible responses.

First there is the response of rejection.
That's the response of Herod and the Jewish religious leaders.

Herod's the aggressive one.
The religious leaders are passive.
But **both** are negative.
Both have no real place in their lives for Jesus.

Now, here's my suspicion.
I sort of suspect that the very fact that you dear people have chosen to come here on this Christmas morning
that fact suggests to me that you're really not that interested in learning much more about Herod or his religious friends.

You're here because you acknowledge that he is a very important figure in history.
THE most important figure in history.

That's an assumption that I'm going to make today.
Tell me later if I'm right or not.
If you're not sure that's the zone of life you're playing in, and you want to kick it around some, give me a call.
I'll pay for the coke and fries and we can talk.
Deal?

Any rate, for now I'm going to assume that you'll be much more interested in spending a bit of time with the Wise Men.
You'll be wanting to understand more about their response.
Because you're figuring that maybe it lines up closer to your own.

So - the Wise Men.
We know very little about them.
They came from somewhere "east." That's all the Bible says.
Nothing about three of them. Or that they're kings.

The bible calls them "wise men" or *Magi*.
Magi were a cross between astrologers and astronomers. They were also magicians . In Eastern nations they read the stars and dispensed the prophecies to the leaders and the faithful among the people.

The bible condemns activities like these.
Both ancient Jews and Christians had no use for *Magi*.

They were not the sort you'd quickly invite to a holy occasion.
Yet there they are - front and centre at the birth of the Saviour.

We could come up with some theories as to how these astrologer-wise guys got it into their heads that a special star meant a king was born for the Jews. At the end of the day it wouldn't really matter.

What **does** matter is that they come.
It took a lot of effort.
It cost them a great deal.

Tom Shepherd imagines a conversation between the wise men and their neighbors as they were loading their camels:

"Are you going on a journey?" "Yes."
"Where are you going?" "We don't know for sure."
"How far is it?" "Well we don't know that either."
"How long are you going to be gone?" Well were not quite sure on that either."
"Boy for wise men you sure don't much do you?"

And - well, anything I've seen about riding a camel doesn't seem too terribly comfortable. No reclining bucket seats. No climate or cruise control.

Just mile after mile they go.
Until finally!!

A difficult, deliberate sacrificial trip.

Led by God's finger at work in the heavens.

As Psalm 19 says, *The heavens are telling the glory of God...*

The star points to the glory of God in a baby.
God is among us!

And the wise men get it.

While the bible leaves out lots of details about these mysterious people, one thing it **does** tell - right up front it describes their response.....

*"Where is he?
We have come to worship him."*

They bowed in a little house before a baby.

There are no halos.
No angel choirs around Jesus' bed.

But these wise guys worship.

And they present their gifts to the One who is Himself the greatest gift of all, God's gift to the human race.

Yes, they worship.

That's the first encounter with Jesus in Matthew - one of worship.

Which, by the way, is also what happens at the last encounter with Jesus - worship (see ch.28).

Worship is what brackets the whole gospel of Matthew -

bowing before the Son of God in devotion and love and honour.

Does it bracket our lives?

The wise men knelt.

Have you ever knelt?

Perhaps before your girlfriend when you asked for her hand in marriage.

Know what that means?

Complete surrender.

All you have is hers.

*(By the way - is that how you've been living out the subsequent years of marriage?
Or have you forgotten about that first moment and your symbolic act of surrender?)*

Kneeling.

Do you ever kneel when you pray?

How does it make you feel?

There can be no pride, no sense of independence or control when you kneel.

Right?

The wise men - smart, rich, having a capacity to travel and meet with powerful kings....
they kneel.

Do you kneel before Jesus?

Never mind how many people work for you, or how many vehicles you own, or how big your house is, or how many degrees and titles you have or how impressive your CV is.

Do you kneel before Jesus?

Or is there a bit of Herod the rebel inside?

[pause]

They kneel and give Jesus the respect he deserves.

That's called homage.

And then, they give gifts.

They brought the gifts **personally**

Could have sent representatives, but they didn't.

They came **themselves**.

Can't be arms length in serving God.

They also gave it **freely**.

Not out of a sense of obligation (like giving someone a gift because they've first given you a gift).

Not out of a sense of favour (wanting to keep yourself on that person's radar screen for possible goodwill later - like an important client at work)

They gave their gift, well, just because - just because they wanted to bless the recipient with a special something.

Just because they wanted to lavish something on this King.

The gifts they give carry prophetic meaning -

symbolic value for our lives;

way beyond what the magi could have understood but there for us.

Gold

Frankincense

Myrrh

Gold

- a timeless symbol of wealth and power.
- a gift for a king

Frankincense

- the hardened sap of a tree, used as incense and burned on the altar as an offering along with prayer.
- a gift for a god.

Myrrh

- a special spice used to anoint bodies at the time of burial.
- a final gift to someone in death.

You can see the symbolism, right?

Jesus - Son of the King of all the Cosmos.

Jesus - Divine, the one through whom God is among us.

Jesus - the Saviour whose death would free us from death.

Gold.

Frankincense.

Myrrh.

I said that we can measure our response to Jesus by the response of the characters in this passage. And I also wagered that none of us really want to have a Herod-shaped response.

So - if we're wanting to kneel alongside the Wise Men,
well

what do **we** give to him as worship gifts?

On this Christmas Day, please ask yourself -

"Hey, self, what's your version of gold, frankincense, and myrrh?"

The Gold -

What's my gift to Jesus the King?

What in my life does he deserve to get from me?

Is my home open to welcome people on his behalf?

Do I use my car for tasks that honour him?

Will I only enter marriage with someone that can join me in kneeling before Jesus?

Am I sure that the first portion of what enters my bank account goes right on out again in service of the King?

The Frankincense -

What's my gift to Jesus the Divine Son of God?

What's my worship gift?

How has taking deliberate times for worship – private devotional time and corporate group worship time - shown up in 2008?

Or have I been too distracted, too caught up in my own busyness, my own activities of leisure or work?

Too distracted to take time and send up an incense offering of prayers and song and scripture and quiet attention to Jesus the Divine?

What do I need to do to change that in the coming year?

The Myrrh -

What's my gift to Jesus the Saviour who died for me?

What's my gift that acknowledges the worth of that death?

Perhaps in how I choose to see others as valuable people in God's eyes? Valuable enough to die for. So - do I treat them with dignity and respect? Who can I make a special point of affirming in 2009 - and doing so as my gift to Jesus?

Can I see myself as forgiven? And stop laying off on the guilt trip?

If Jesus doesn't condemn, why should I?

What's my gift to the Baby King?

Friends - let our Christmas challenge be this:

that we take some time today to figure out what it is in my life that is an ongoing gift to the Saviour.

And

make a personal pledge,

right here and right now this morning,

a pledge to Jesus about at least one way you will increase your gift giving to him in 2009.

Will you do that?

Giving to Jesus. What will that look like in your life?

There's one more piece of the Wise Men thing that we need to factor in.

It's that they went home by a different route than how they arrived.

Sure, I know - from a pragmatic vantage it was only to stay clear of Herod and his army. Avoid having to see the creep again.

But there's a powerful image there.

Their lives began to take a different road.

After you kneel before Jesus, things change.

You get up and go home a different way.

When the Magi choose to go home another way after meeting Jesus, could that mean something for us, too?

Could God be calling us to go another way after this Christmas service?

A new way spiritually?

A new way morally?

A new way materially?

One more week and a whole new year, 2009, will be here.

What is the new road that you need to travel; the different road home in your life?

We all have one.

Not one of us can say that we've arrived.

If you had to point out, to name or label just one area in your life where you know the Lord would call you to grow in, to deepen in, to become more obedient in, to repent in;
what is that area?

We don't have gold, incense or myrrh.

We **DO** have our lives.

I invite you to pledge a concrete gift to Jesus this morning.

As you see the cross, you see the symbol of God's gift to you -
Jesus, His whole life a divine gift for your soul, for your eternity.

What are you prepared to give Him in 2009?

What concrete step, what deliberate sacrifice are you prepared to make?

What journey will you take in faith?

What gift will you give him?

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