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The two foundational teachings of the Christian faith are Trinity, and Incarnation. That is, there is one God in three Persons, and God came in the person of Jesus to visit the planet he made. When he did that, God fused himself to human flesh forever. The Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus the Son, holds in perfect unity his two natures, God and human.

We saw in Matthew chapter 1 that Jesus is the Son of David, and that means he is the answer to God’s promise to have a descendent of David reign forever, and he is the Son of Abraham, and that means he is the way God will bless all the nations of the world. Jesus’ name means “God saves,” and he is called Emmanuel, which means “God with us.” God saves us by coming to us in the Jesus, the Second Person of the Trinity.

Matthew chapter 2 tells us about this one who comes into the world, and he also tells us about human nature in the story that unfolds. In our passage for today, verses 1-12, we see humanity in its wretchedness and sin with Herod, and under the power of God’s grace in the story of the Magi humanity. Let me make a couple observations about each character as take-away points for us—about Herod, the wise men, and Jesus.

First, Herod shows us humanity under the power of sin.

The Roman Senate had appointed Herod as King of the Jews, just like they put local rulers in charge of provinces who answered to Rome. Herod was above all an opportunist. He wasn’t even a Jew himself, but an Edomite, an Arab, a man from the kingdom of Edom to the south, a people who were cousins and traditional rivals of the Jews. New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey writes that “he was racially Arab, religiously Jewish, culturally Greek, and politically Roman.”¹ He’s a picture of a divided person.

Not only that, but Herod was a notoriously paranoid tyrant. He had one of his wives murdered, and he assassinated three of his sons who made him nervous about keeping his throne. Caesar Augustus went on record as saying, “It is better to be Herod’s pig than his son.” (Dale Bruner, p. 65) Now, for the wise men to ask Herod if he knows how to find the King of the Jews is a very audacious thing. Matthew says, “Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.” No wonder they were troubled. You don’t want to get a paranoid tyrant riled up.

¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, “Incarnation and the Slaughter of the Innocents,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, December 24-31, 2001, 10.

Bethlehem was only five miles from Jerusalem, and Herod should have rushed to Bethlehem to worship Jesus. But instead he simply said to the Magi, “You go, and then come and tell me where he is.”

Herod is a picture of fallen humanity, of people who lash out and do harm in order to protect themselves. He’s a picture of what theologians call “original sin,” in other words, not just a villain, but of everyone in our darker instincts. He also shows us that if Jesus is King and Lord, then we are not. We can’t be. Notice what Matthew does: when he refers to Herod, he calls him King Herod, until Jesus is named as the promised ruler. From that point on, it’s as if Herod is dethroned; Herod is never again called “king.” You could say that the worship of the Magi is Jesus’ coronation as king.

Sad, isn’t it? Bethlehem is only five miles from Jerusalem. Herod was supposedly a convert to the faith of Israel, so he should have rushed to worship the newborn Son of God, but he missed out. Instead of going to worship Jesus, like he pretended to, we see in verse 16 he tries to destroy him.

Second, the Wise Men show us humanity under the power of grace.

We don’t know what the names of the Magi were, or even how many of them there were; we guess there were three by the number of gifts. They probably came from Persia or Babylonia. In the Middle Ages, people even gave them the names Caspar, who was supposed to be young, Melchior, who was old, and Balthazar, who was black. They said they represented descendants of Noah’s sons Shem, Japheth, and Ham, who were the fathers of the nations. It was a kind of a picture of the nations coming to Jesus.

“Magi” is the root word for magician, and that’s what these pagans are who come from the East. They are astrologers, people who study the movement of the stars to find wisdom. We shouldn’t romanticize them. The Old Testament explicitly prohibits astrology and Magic as a way of manipulating events (see Deuteronomy 18:9-13). God’s people are supposed to trust him, not try to control him.

In the book of Numbers, there’s a story about a man named Balaam. He was a pagan Magician from the East, like the Magi themselves. Like the Magi, Balaam heard God’s Word, and even though he didn’t want to at first, he preached to Israel about God’s plan. Balaam’s king sent him to pronounce a curse on Israel, because he hoped that would help him destroy them. But an angel prevented Balaam from doing it, so instead Balaam prophesied God’s message about a star that would “rise out of Israel”:

"I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel. (Numbers 24:17a).

Balaam is saying that the Messiah who would rise in Israel. The Magi saw the star that symbolized Jesus at its rising. In the Old Testament a light led Israel in the desert on their way to the Promised Land, but here the light is leading the Gentiles, like Matthew says in chapter four. “In Galilee of the Gentiles (4:15),

the people living in darkness
have seen a great light; (Matthew 4:16)

So the visitors from the East are not God's covenant people. But they're the ones who get showered with surprising grace.

Matthew is doing something by telling us the story of including the pagan Magi, astrologers, people outside the covenant community of Israel. Like in chapter one, where Matthew includes Gentiles in Jesus' genealogy, he's telling us God overcomes national and racial barriers to save the world. Jesus comes to people who don't deserve him. And the Magi are living illustrations of God's undeserved kindness towards people. Like God tells the prophet Hosea,

"I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.'
I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people';
and they will say, 'You are my God.' " (Hosea 2:23)

Jesus didn't come to the strong, to the upright; Luke's gospel shows he came to uneducated shepherds, and Matthew's gospel shows he came for idol-worshipping Magi.

It's interesting to see exactly *how* they find Jesus. We call the Magi "wise men," and that's what they were, because they became wise by following Jesus. But they needed help. God revealed himself to them as they followed the stars, and that's what we call natural revelation, like we see in Psalm 19:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.

Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they display knowledge. (Psalm 19:1-2)

Paul says the same thing in Romans:

What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...(Romans 1:19-20a)

That is to say, the Wise Men stumbled onto the truth about God because God chose to show them, but look where it leads them: the star brings them to Jerusalem, but they can't get any further. When they get there, they consult with Herod, and they ask him if he can help them find the King of the Jews. So, Herod brought together the religious leaders of Israel and the Bible scholars, and they searched in Scripture to find where the promised king was supposed to be born. And they came up with this answer from the Old Testament prophet Micah:

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:
" '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." (Matthew 2:5b-6)

Isn't it interesting? Natural revelation only took the Magi so far. They became wise men when they turned to God's word in the Bible, and it revealed the Savior to them. Psalm 19, that talks about the heavens and the way they speak to us about the power of God, doesn't leave us there, either; it ends up as a celebration of God's word, that speaks more clearly.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul.
The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy,
making wise the simple. (Psalm 19:7)

The heavens lead them so far, but the Magi really become wise, and they discover Jesus, when God speaks to them in the Bible.

The point of the text isn't, I think, how good the Magi are, but it's the surprise they get invited to the party at all. They're interesting, exotic people who have the right instincts, but the glaring fact is they're pagan idolaters, not members of the covenant family of God. They could have been the last we'd expect to see Jesus, but God showed himself to them. They become a picture of how God calls the world to the Messiah. The prophets promised that:

Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isaiah 60:3)

Chapter one already showed how God brings in the outsider with the names of four Gentile women in the Jewish genealogy. The promise to bless the world is a universal one—the offer of God's love is for everybody. The Magi show us when we come to Jesus we want to bring our best. It's what's behind the principle of tithing. We're bringing our gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Maybe the gifts represented Jesus' kingship, his priestly service, his death and sacrifice. In any case, it had a practical benefit; selling the gifts was probably what funded the family's escape to Egypt, and their life there for several years.

The Balaam story from Numbers ends, "Then Balaam got up and returned home" (Numbers 24:25). And the Matthew story ends, "and the Magi went away to their own country" (Matthew 2:12). Matthew is impressed with how the Old Testament story was preparing for the mega-story of Jesus.

Third, Jesus shows us the way to receive the promises to David and Abraham.

Now, sometimes people say that Matthew doesn't have the high Christology, or doctrine of Christ, as John or the epistles of Paul, but I think that's wrong. I think Matthew is making the claim that Jesus is God, but just in the language that would've made sense to first-century Jews.

Remember the names given in chapter one? Jesus means "God saves," because he will save his people from their sins. Once, Jesus when a paralyzed man was brought to

Jesus, he told him, "Friend, your sins are forgiven." The reaction of Jesus' adversaries helps us understand the importance of what Jesus did:

The Pharisees and the teachers of the law began thinking to themselves, "Who is this fellow who speaks blasphemy? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"
(Luke 5:21)

For Matthew to say, "He will save his people from their sins," is to claim a right that only God has. It is to say, this is God come in the flesh. And that's why he has the name Emmanuel, "God-with-us." And it's why three times in the text, he stresses worship of this baby. He knows, as a faithful member of the Jewish covenant family, only One is worthy of worship; as every service of worship in Israel opened with the words of the *Shema*:

"Hear, O Israel: the LORD your God, the LORD is one." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

For Matthew to portray worship of Jesus as the object of worship is to suggest he is worthy of receiving what is due only to God. Jesus is God come to be with us.

Every expectation of the Old Testament is fulfilled in Jesus. Every promise comes true in him. He's behind the natural world, and all creation bears witness to him. He's the center of the Bible, the living Word himself.

So what's your response to the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel? In a sense, we see three options with the reactions of the actors in the story: Herod is antagonistic, Jerusalem is apparently indifferent, because its people don't stream down to Bethlehem to worship him. And the surprising outsiders go to worship him. Where do you fit in this morning? Are you resistant to his claim on your life, suspicious of what it might mean? That you might have to give over control? Or are you too distracted to care, bored, need to wake up? The Magi really were wise men, and they remind us of the beatitude we looked at a few weeks ago: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

One last thing: we can't predict who might hear the good news about Jesus and who won't. We can't say what the result will be. There are some surprises when we just tell people about Jesus, or when we see God at work, and ask him, "Can I help." The people we might never expect to trust in Jesus might worship him.

Go to the manger and you'll see God. He's waiting for you.