



After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “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 shepherd my people Israel.” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route (Matthew 2:1–12).

There's nothing like a road trip. Last week I embarked on one of the longest road trips of my life. We were in Nashville for my daughter's graduation from nursing school and needed to get her car home. That's a long drive—almost 2,400 miles. I was planning on driving alone but at the last minute my son insisted on going with me. That was an unexpected surprise. So we left Nashville at 2:00 pm on Friday and didn't stop until we arrived in San Carlos the following day at midnight.

That was an unexpected surprise too. I'd planned on talking at least 2–3 days to make the trip, but with Matt there to share the driving we could drive straight through. We drove through Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, the panhandle of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Of course, we stopped for food and gas, but that's all. No hotels; lots of bad coffee. But we were thankful we did it that way. The next day a massive storm passed

through much of the area we covered. We didn't expect that either.

The Bible talks about road trips, too, where the unexpected often happens. God called Moses to lead the children of Israel on a road trip from Egypt to the Promised Land. They didn't expect it to take 40 years! Much later, the people of Israel made an unexpected and an unwanted road trip from the Promised Land to Babylon where they spent 70 years in exile. But my favorite of all biblical road trips is the one that takes place around the birth of Jesus. It's found in the second chapter of the gospel of Matthew. It tells of Magi from the east on a journey to find a newborn King. We don't know how long this road trip took, perhaps months or even years, but in the end they reached their destination and found the Christ child.

I think people who find Christ generally fall into two categories. First there are those who Christ just surprises one day. Some people almost get ambushed by Jesus. One day He just shows up and changes everything. The shepherds in the field were like that. They were minding their own business, doing their job, and then the sky lit up and a song broke forth. An angel announced, “*For unto you, a Savior has been born...*” A lot of you experienced that. You were minding your own business, and then somebody told you about Christ. Something in your heart woke up, you said yes to Him and everything changed.

But then there's the kind of people the Magi represent. These people are on a lifelong journey to find the meaning of life. Some of you have been spiritually hungry from birth. You aren't just hoping to get through life; no, you want to know the meaning behind it all. You want to find out if there's some truth out there worth living and dying for. The Magi were like that. They were on a journey; a road trip of the soul. Much like other road trips, this one included the unexpected.

### **Unexpected People**

First of all it included unexpected people. You might be surprised to know there may have been more than three Magi. Tradition said there were three because there are three gifts mentioned, but we don't for sure how many there were. It's likely these Magi came from Persia or Babylon and were from a priestly or even royal lineage. They most likely came as part of an elaborate entourage. This wasn't some inconspicuous little excursion. There would be a caravan of camels and servants to carry supplies for

the long journey. Notice how they caught everyone's attention, including Herod's, when they rode into Jerusalem.

But no one would have expected Magi to be searching for the Messiah. These guys weren't Jews. They're not part of God's chosen people. Not even close! They're thoroughly pagan magicians who worship false gods. The nation Israel condemned such people. There are outsiders and insiders, especially when it comes to religion. These are outsiders. But in this story the outsiders are the ones searching for the Child.

It should be no surprise to us then this Child grew up to be one who was always getting in trouble with the insiders because He was so welcoming of outsiders. Later in Matthew 9 Jesus was being criticized for hanging out and eating with the wrong kind of people. He responded by saying, "*It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick...I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners.*"

Jesus is still reaching out to those who for one reason or another feel on the outside. I think of 13 women I had the honor of getting to know this summer in Niger. Each of these women were injured in childbirth and leaked a constant flow of urine. As a result, they were exiled to little huts on the edge of their village. In almost every case their husbands abandoned them. Without surgery, there was no way back in for them; no way to belong. One of the most moving moments is the dress ceremony after the surgery when each woman is given a beautiful new dress and they come out singing with joy in their hearts because they'll now be welcomed back into their family. In a spiritual sense, that's what Jesus does for us. He welcomes us in. He says you belong.

I've talked to men and women over the years who tell me they don't feel comfortable coming to church. When I ask them why they say something like this, "You know, I've done some terrible things. I'm really ashamed. And all those people there seem to look so good. I just don't feel like I belong."

But Jesus came to cleanse us and make us belong. The Magi remind us God still reveals Himself to the most unexpected people. Don't count anyone out! Don't count yourself out! There are people here today and you're not sure you belong here. You don't think of yourself as religious. You've done things you're ashamed of. Maybe you drink or smoke too much, or maybe you use the wrong kind of language. I want you to know you can join the Magi and run to Bethlehem and find the Child we call Jesus.

### **Unexpected Guidance**

But the people involved aren't the only unexpected thing in this story. The guidance with which they were led was unexpected as well. They were led by a star. The Magi believed falling stars predicted the fall of rulers and rising stars the rise of new ones.

Of course, rulers like Herod feared signs like these. But we see here what great lengths God will go to to chase down those He's calling. The Bible condemns astrology, yet God was willing to use even their study of the stars to reveal Himself. You just can't put God in a box. He'll always break your rules. He'll go to great lengths to reveal Himself. He will stoop to what we can understand.

Let me put it this way: There's only one way to God and that's through His Son, Jesus. But how many ways are there to Jesus? The fact is, God uses all kinds of people and circumstances and all kinds of hints and glints to lead people to His Son. Some of those might even be offensive to you. I was talking to one of our pastors, Rob Hall, and he reminded me how he became a follower of Jesus in high school. Someone invited him to an event where the Gospel would be explained. To get Rob to come he promised there would be food and girls there. Rob followed that star—food and girls! That night he heard about Jesus and became a Christian.

But the star wasn't the only guide they had. Once Herod learned that the Magi were searching for a newborn King, he asked the religious leaders where the Messiah was to be born. They pulled out a scrap of Scripture from the Old Testament prophet, Micah, who said he would be born in Bethlehem. They were right about that. Say what you want about them, they knew their Bible. Without the Scripture, I doubt the Magi ever would have made it to Bethlehem.

So God uses a star but He also uses the Scripture. Theologians talk about two ways God reveals Himself to us. One of them is called *general revelation*. That's when God reveals Himself through His creation or what we call nature. Have you ever looked at a brilliant sunset or majestic rainbow and thought to yourself, "That can't just be a random mistake. There must be Creator; a designer." That's general revelation. But that can't specifically tell you about Jesus and how He came to save us from our sins. For that we need *special revelation*. Christ-followers have always believed the Bible to be the Word of God. To really come to find Christ and understand who He is and what He's done for you, you need the Word of God. It was the Scripture that directed them to Bethlehem.

Again, some of you are on a journey. You're seeking. Let me encourage you to keep your eyes open. There are some very unexpected ways He might draw you to Himself. But also open the book and read it. Start right here in the Gospel of Matthew. It will lead you right to the feet of Christ.

### **Unexpected Gifts**

That's where these Magi ended up. It says the star led them to the place the Child was. We don't know how old He was but

they weren't in the manger any more. By this time He and Mary were in a house. So the Magi went inside (did they knock on the door?) and saw the Child. And you know what happened next: they presented Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Scholars throughout the ages have found symbolic value in the three gifts. Gold, the most precious metal known to man, suggested His royalty. Frankincense was an expensive fragrance. The Jews sprinkled it on offerings to God. Myrrh is the most surprising of the three gifts because it was used to prepare a body for burial. Was this a portent of the death and burial of Jesus?

But the real unexpected gift here was what it says before that. It says, ***"when they saw the Child with his mother Mary they bowed down and worshipped him."*** Worship is the dominant theme in this story. When they first came to Jerusalem, they asked, ***"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."*** Later, it was Herod who sent them to Bethlehem and said, ***"Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."*** We know he was lying. He's not going to worship; he's going with a sword hidden in his cloak. But that's exactly what the Magi did; they worshipped Him. You may give gifts to a superior, but worship is reserved for divinity. Somehow they saw that this Child was more than a human king; He was the Son of God!

This story speaks to all of us. Some of you are still searching. You've come here for that very reason. It may sound weird, but let me encourage you to listen to Herod. He gives the best piece of advice in the whole story: Go and make a careful search for the Child. And when you find him, worship him. That's the greatest gift you can give Him: seek Him with all your heart and when you find Him, worship Him. If you're still searching, I suggest the

One you've been searching for is Jesus. He's God's Son sent into the world to save us from our sins. He doesn't want you to try to clean up your act; He wants you latch onto Him as a drowning man clings to a life preserver. The greatest gift you can give Him today is simply to trust Him as your Savior.

But some of you have already found Him. You know the truth of who this Child is. This story presents to you a stern warning. You see, in this story the people who knew the truth were the ones who did nothing with it. The Magi travel hundreds of miles on an tough, dangerous journey across the desert on a hunch. Herod and the religious leaders have five miles to travel between Jerusalem and Bethlehem and can't be bothered. This story is warning against complacency to those of us who know the truth. It's a dangerous thing to possess the truth and do nothing with it. So I ask you, what are you doing with the truth that you have? What are you offering up to Him? Jesus calls each of us to shine for Him in a dark world.

Here is a wild thought: You and I are called to be the star of Bethlehem today. Paul says this in Philippians 2:14–15: ***"Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life."*** God wants us to be the star of Bethlehem in a warped and depraved generation. People out there are searching and we can be their star. We can be a light shining in the dark place, that when people follow us they find Christ.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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