



Good morning! My name is Neal Benson and I'm our Foster City Campus pastor. I'm so stoked to be here with you this morning as we continue our Christmas Selfies series. Last week Rob did a great job at introducing this series and sharing vision for us talking about the different lesser known characters in the Christmas story. Since it's the Christmas season, we've been watching Christmas movies around my house for the last couple weeks. This week we watched *Four Christmases* and it follows a dating couple that for the last few years has avoided their families at Christmas. The movie is pretty spot on about how people think of Christmas, and it shows the dysfunction of families during Christmas.

It makes evident the strained relationship between siblings and parents. It reveals how some people turn to alcohol and drugs to help cope during the Christmas season. It gives glimpses into the stress that Christmas can bring into someone's life, and much more! It does a great job at showing Christmas from a worldly point of view and showing how we've mostly left Christ out of Christmas.

What is your response to Christmas? Have you ever felt like you're celebrating Christmas but actually not celebrating the true meaning of Christmas? Is Christmas becoming more of a routine and less of a joy? Have you felt like you're missing something deep in your soul this year? This morning we're going to look at Matthew chapter 2 and examine different responses to the birth of Christ.

**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....**

**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. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:**

**"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" (Matt. 2:1-12, 16-18).**

### **Herod Responds in Fury**

To help me out this morning, we have a very special guest who has agreed to join us. This morning I would like to introduce you to a man that historians refer to as Herod the Great. He played an important role at the birth of Jesus, and it seemed appropriate to have him here since we are about to celebrate Christmas.

*Welcome, King Herod!*

*Herod: I appreciate the opportunity to be here. I haven't had a chance to defend myself for centuries. I've been insulted and demeaned and I am determined to set the record straight this morning.*

*Neal: Well thank you for being with us. You're going to have to pardon me, but how do I address you? Are you comfortable with the title "Herod the Great"?*

*Herod: Of course I am! The title is well deserved! I was a great builder. During the 41 years of my reign I built theaters, amphitheaters, hippodromes. I introduced athletic games in honor of Caesar. I rebuilt fortresses. You know, it was my idea to cover the temple dome in Jerusalem in gold.*

*Neal: Well, those are impressive accomplishments, but what about the events Matthew recorded about you? You wanted to murder infants?*

*Herod: You had to bring that up, didn't you? You want to skip over my great accomplishments and talk about what that no good tax collector Matthew wrote about me. Fine!*

*Neal: Do you remember the astrologers and the baby I'm referring to?*

*Herod: Of course I do, how could I forget those men who came to visit me and ask about that baby who was to come?*

*Neal: What did you think of them?*

*Herod: They asked me what they'd been asking everyone else: "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? We've seen his star and we've come to worship him."*

*Neal: Did their question worry you?*

*Herod: More like, concerned. Frankly, I didn't know what to make of them. So I assembled the experts and asked about this Messiah. They said according to their Scriptures there was a Messiah who was to come from Bethlehem, a small village about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. None of them thought there was much credibility here and no one wanted to go there to check it out. But you can't be too careful when your power is being threatened. So I gave those astrologers instructions to go to Bethlehem and then report back to me. After a couple of weeks passed and they hadn't come back to see me, my concern turned into worry. I wondered if they'd found something ... or someone.*

*Neal: But King Herod, Matthew says you had the little boys around Bethlehem slaughtered. It sounds like a heartless act for a great leader to commit.*

*Herod: I did what anyone in power would do. One way or another you protect yourself. There were only about 40 boys there anyway. I was threatened. You do all kinds of things when you're afraid. Fear makes you strike out, doesn't it? Have you ever felt threatened by someone?*

*Neal: Yes I have, but I've never responded in such violence...*

*Herod: But you know how I felt. Listen! You ought to feel threatened now. Threatened by that baby. After all, he didn't stay a cuddly cute baby; he changed the world. I should have wiped him out when I had the chance. Not that it would have stopped him. My son, Herod Antipas, conspired with a Roman named Pilate to put him to death, and they succeeded. The 2 of them had him crucified. But they couldn't get rid of him because he came back from the dead. How do you deal with someone like that? He's a king like I could never be a king. He threatens any kingdom builder, I tell you. He's dangerous. I came to warn you. You make Christmas about that chubby man in a red suit or gift giving or holiday parties. You make Christmas into whatever you want it to be about. But you can't make Christmas all about you.*

*Neal: King Herod, that's what you wanted to tell us? What you really wanted to tell us?*

*Herod: I had my opportunity. I had my chance. My choice was clear. I always put myself at the center. Now I'm linked to that choice for eternity. I must go now. They didn't give me much time to be here. But remember Jesus makes you ask yourself, "Who is at the center of my Christmas?"*

Herod shared some of his responses to the birth of Christ, but let's look a little deeper. Herod was obviously threatened by the birth of Jesus Christ; this came out in what he told us. Sometimes it's easier to understand why a person acts the way they do when we know more about their history; it's kind of like scrolling their pictures on Instagram. At the age of 25 Herod the Great was made governor of Galilee. Early in his reign Herod established himself as someone who would go to any length to maintain position and power. Herod was a deeply insecure man

and extremely ruthless. Matthew wrote about the killing of children in his Gospel account.

**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 (v. 16).**

I have a seven-month-old son right now. If this happened today and I lived in Bethlehem my son would be dead. During Herod's reign he had the High Priest Aristobulus drowned while he was bathing because of fear of an uprising of the Maccabeans. Herod also had his brother-in-law Joseph killed. Later, Herod executed his wife Miriamne. And the violence didn't stop there; he went as far as having his own sons killed when they suspected him of treason!

It's astonishing to hear the ruthless behavior and fury exhibited in his life, because on the other side of the coin he also did some great things for the Jews. Maybe he did these to appease his conscience, or maybe he was mentally ill; we may never know. Herod built the Jews a Temple to worship in. He also respected their place of worship and never entered into the Holy Place or interfered with the function of the priesthood. Even though he did some great things, the Jewish scholar Alfred Edershiem sums up Herod's life with these words: "So long as he lived, no woman's honor was safe, no man's life secure."

Earlier this year I had a chance to go to Cambodia with Mark Mitchell to teach the book of Revelation to pastors. We had a free day while we were in Phnom Penh, which was a day to get adjusted before the conference started. On that day we visited a place we will never forget: The Killing Fields. Under the communist reign of Pol Pot, people were slaughtered and thrown in mass graves. It was horrific. As we walked around the grounds, there were bones from the victims left on the ground. All of this was tough, but the worst part was a tree in the middle of the fields. It has a sign that reads "Killing tree against which executioners beat children." We almost lost it. Under the Khmer Rouge it is estimated that 3-5 million people lost their lives in Cambodia from 1975-1979.

Herod isn't the only crazy leader the world has ever seen. Herod's response to this newborn was fury. When you think about it, Herod isn't much different than many people today. Herod celebrated the first Christmas in deep fear and jealousy of Christ. Herod wanted it to be all about him. He was more focused on his empire than on the Kingdom of Christ. It makes sense, since Matthew tells us that his first reaction to Christ was that of being disturbed.

**When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him" (v. 3).**

Is this really different than the way some people respond to Christ today? People don't want to follow Christ because He

interferes with their personal choices. Jesus causes people to abandon selfishness. Jesus requires people to change their patterns of behavior, drop their pride, and evaluate their actions.

### **The Religious Leaders Respond with Knowledge**

The next response we're going to look at comes from the religious leaders of the day. Maybe the following group of people will be a better example than that of Herod. Since Herod was so disturbed by the inquiry of the Magi, he went to consult with the religious leaders of the day.

**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!" (verses 4–6).**

These men were the leading theologians of the day. Herod asked them where the Messiah would be born, and guess what? They knew the answer! The religious leaders knew exactly where the Messiah would be born.

They were able to turn to the prophecy from Micah and point to Bethlehem as the birthplace of Christ. *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times"* (Micah 5:2). They knew the Scriptures and were able to pass on information about His coming. What's amazing about this is that they took the information and passed it on to Herod, who passed it on to the Magi, who went to visit the Messiah. The religious leaders didn't make the journey themselves to see the Messiah. Do you know the town of Bethlehem is about five miles south of Jerusalem? This is the modern equivalent of us hopping in a car and driving to SFO after the service is done; it's about a five mile drive to SFO from here. If we were to walk, it would take us less than two hours!

You might be wondering, How come the religious leaders responded like this? The reason their response is simply informational is because Jesus didn't come the way they expected Him to come. They expected the Messiah to come as a conquering king, not a humble servant. They were looking for someone who would oppose the Roman injustice and establish Himself as a worldwide ruler. They were unaware that Jesus came to free them from a greater enemy; to free them from sin, death and grip of Satan. For this freedom to happen they needed to humble themselves and step away from their pride, but they couldn't do it. Hence their response was purely out of knowledge.

Have you seen this response in people before, or could this be your response to Christ? It's the response of someone who knows the Bible but has just conformed to comfortable Christianity. It looks like someone who has been a Christian for such a long time that they've forgotten about the sin God saved them from. They've been warming a chair for so long in church but have stopped serving, stopped listening to God, stopped dreaming about reaching lost people at work, and wouldn't even consider a mission trip because there is no passion left. Now I'm not suggesting this is a person who is living in sin, but I am saying this is a person who has lost their passion for the truth of God. They have forgotten that Jesus came on the greatest rescue mission ever known to mankind.

### **The Magi Respond with Awe**

We've seen how Herod's response to Jesus was one of fury and the religious leaders responded with knowledge but no passion. In case you missed it, these are not the ways we want to respond. We want to have a response of awe just like the Magi.

**When they saw the star, they were overjoyed (v. 10).**

Historically we've called this group "The Wise Men." Let me quickly clarify four myths about the Magi. The first myth is that there were three of them. Nowhere in Scripture does it give any numerical count of how many there were. It's more likely that there were many more than three of them. Some people have even suggested that they had a small army traveling with them! The second myth is that they were kings. Once again, where does Scripture say that? The Magi were actually priests of an ancient form of Zoroastrianism. They practiced things that were forbidden by Scripture such as astrology and sorcery. We actually get our modern day word "magic" from the Magi.

The third myth is that they traveled from the Orient. This comes from the song by John Henry Hopkins, Jr. written around 1857. The Magi were most likely from Persia, which is more commonly known as modern day Iran. You might ask, "If they were from Persia how would they know about the Christ child?" Great question! Earlier this year we finished a series called The Story and in this series we looked through the entire Bible. When God's people were in exile, they went to Babylon and Persia. During the exile there is no doubt that God's people must have shared the prophecies of the coming Messiah with the Persians. These men passed along this information or continually looked for a sign of the coming of the King of the Jews. When they saw the star in the sky, they followed it so they could worship the Messiah. Some scholars actually think they may have journeyed for nearly two years to find the Messiah. This leads us to the final myth about the Magi, which is that they visited Jesus when he was just a newborn in the manger. Matthew uses the word "child" to describe Jesus in Matthew 2:11, so at this point Jesus is no longer a little baby.

### **They searched**

Having clarified some of the myths about the Magi, we can now examine their response to the newborn king. The first thing they did was to search. When they saw the sign, they dropped everything and made the intense journey to Israel to find this newborn King. Some of you are here this morning and you're searching. You haven't found the truth of Jesus in your life yet, but you, like the Magi, are searching. It's the Christmas season and there is an emptiness in your life that you are keenly aware of. We're so glad you're here and hope you find the truth, peace and hope that only the love of Christ can bring you. I'd like to encourage you to be like the Magi and be diligent and patient in your search. Don't give up too soon and miss the newborn King. Keep seeking, keep praying, keeping asking. Listen and read the Bible.

### **They were overjoyed**

We also see the Magi respond by being overjoyed. I love the use of this word "overjoyed" here. It reminds me of seeing the face of a child who just received what they asked for at Christmas, or the face of a teenager who is surprised with a car for their birthday. Each time I found out Charity was pregnant, I was overjoyed! I imagine the Magi jumping up and down, hooting and hollering because they found Jesus! To be filled with joy is an appropriate response, especially if you've been searching for something for two years!

To be honest with you, my response to Christmas has been a hard fought battle and not completely there. My response is up and down based on sad memories from my childhood. Memories of being moved around by my divorced parents, memories of hating leaving my mom, and memories of not wanting to be with my dad. This time of the year brings out this deep seeded sadness in me. My wife has had to deal with the inner pain this time of year brings and I haven't always been filled with joy at Christmas, but I'm trying. I'm trying to work on this right now.

### **They worshipped**

The third way we see them respond is in worship. They worshipped the newborn King. Matthew tells us in verse 11 that they bowed down and worshipped him. This really means they fell on their knees to worship the newborn King. I'm not sure they fully grasped what they were doing, even though it was customary to worship kings in those days. But they weren't worshipping just any king; they were worshipping the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. They were worshipping Jesus Christ, and they may very well have become the first Gentile believers in Jesus Christ. Their eyes were opened to the truth of Christ and the only response they could summon was to worship him!

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

### **They gave**

Not only did they worship, but verse 11 goes on to tell us they brought him gifts. The gifts were "gold, frankincense and myrrh." The gifts they brought Jesus were nowhere near the gifts we got at the birth of our son. Could you imagine someone handing you a bar of gold when your kid was born? People brought us boxes of diapers and onesies! The Magi brought Jesus gifts fit for a King. Gold was a symbol of royalty. Frankincense was an expensive fragrance. Myrrh was unusual because it was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Some think this gift was a foreshadowing of the crucifixion and death of Christ. This gift was significant because Jesus would one day die to save these men from their sins and usher them into the eternal presence of God the Father.

### **They changed**

The last response we see from the Magi is that they changed. Herod had initially told them to return to Jerusalem and inform him about the location of Jesus. We already know he did this because he wanted to kill Jesus. In verse 12 see that the Magi were warned in a dream not to return by the route they took to get to Bethlehem. They changed their course and returned to their own county by a different route. This might have a dual meaning; not only did they change their physical route, they also changed their spiritual route because of their interaction with the newborn King. Imagine how their whole life's course was changed by their interaction with the newborn baby and his parents! The Magi got it! They understood the only proper response to Jesus was to worship Jesus Christ as the King.

Those are some contrasting responses to the birth of Christ that we've looked at. It would appear we all have a different response to the coming of the newborn King. The last response to figure out now is yours. Who's at the center of **your** Christmas? Will you be like the people in Christmas movies who are coping with family, suppressing pain, frantically buying gifts and wishing Christmas was done only to miss the birth of the King? Or will you take the next few weeks to change your response to Christmas? The response isn't to work more at this time of year. The response isn't to decorate the outside of the house and neglect what's taking place inside. The response isn't to buy more gifts to make it seem like everything in your life is great. The response is to worship Jesus. Through worship a furious heart can be softened. Through worship a dying ember can be brought back to life and passion can return to a passionless person. Don't give up; there is still time to worship Jesus Christ as the King this Christmas!

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