

Matt 2: 1-12 – Born is the King

Exegetical Big Idea: Jesus is the true King of both the Jews and the Gentiles, and reigns with power and grace forever.

Homiletical Big Idea: **The eternal, gracious, King of kings was born at Christmas**

Fallen Condition Focus: It's too easy to see the meek and mild side of Christ at Christmas, but fail to see him as King and Lord, to whom all honour and glory and praise is due.

Background:

There are only two gospel accounts that give any kind of details regarding the birth of Jesus. John simply writes that "the Word become flesh, and dwelt among us." He focuses more on the theological implications of Jesus becoming human, not specifically the event of his birth. Mark just skips it altogether and begins with John the Baptist. It's only Luke and Matthew that give us the account of Jesus' birth.

Most of what we consider to be the Christmas story comes from Luke. His account is the longest before Luke starts writing about the ministry of Jesus as an adult. Luke records the angel coming to Zechariah and John the Baptist's birth. He tells us of the angel appearing to Mary, and the census in the land and that Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem. Luke is the one that tells us that there was no room for them in the inn, and so Mary had to give birth to Jesus in probably a stable type building with animals, since a manger is a feeding trough for animals. It's Luke who writes about the angels appearing to the shepherds in the fields at night.

Matthew starts with a genealogy of Jesus, and then records (like Luke) the angel appearing to Mary and Joseph. But then Matthew jumps right in the visit of the magi. There's no census in Matthew's account. There is no stable, no manger, no shepherds, and no angels in the night sky.

How is it that these two accounts are so different?

The reason is that they are focusing on different things. Luke's primary focus for us is to show us the meekness and humility of Jesus. Jesus is born to a poor family, with shepherds to welcome him. There's not even enough room to give the God of the universe the luxury of a bed! Luke wants us to see the meek and simple birth of Christ.

But that's not Matthew's concern. Matthew wants us to see the birth of Christ from a different perspective. We'll see what that is today.

Intro:

There are many Christmas traditions that most of us in our culture celebrate. Probably about 90 percent of us have a Christmas tree up in our houses right now, or will have one shortly. The vast majority of us are going to give some kind of gift to someone else. Maybe there are certain albums you like to listen to at Christmas, or cookies that you make.

But then there are some Christmas traditions that are a little more unique. These traditions just don't "fit" into the Christmas scene like others do. Chinese food isn't exactly "Christmassy" but for years my wife and I would order Chinese food in the afternoon on Christmas eve, bring it home and put it in the

fridge, and head off to the our Christmas Eve service. When we got back from the service we'd put the kids to bed and microwave our food that we bought hours before. I learned a few years ago that in Japan, it's a huge thing to order KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken) on Christmas. KFC doesn't exactly give off Christmas feelings.

One tradition that maybe is gaining in popularity is the pickle ornament. The idea is that leading up to Christmas, parents would hang a green pickle ornament on the Christmas tree. In the morning, the kids would search the tree for the ornament, and whoever found it first would receive a small gift. Every night the parents would hide it in a different location for the next day.

As we talked about earlier, most of things that we would consider "regular" parts of the Christmas story come from Luke's gospel. In a way, Matthew's account is kind of like those Christmas traditions that seem at first not to quite fit. The magi just don't fit with the shepherds and the manger scene. In fact the magi probably don't show up until months, if not even a year later that Jesus' actual birth.

And sure, we make cookies in the shape of stars, and sing "We three kings or orient are...", but we don't even know how many magi there were, if they were true kings, or if they were from the orient. I don't know how many people make cookies in the shape of Herod, or do some pagan astrology at Christmas. I certainly have never heard a Christmas song about Herod's decree!

And yet, Mathew chooses to include all this in his telling of the Christmas story. Mathew does this because his tell of the Christmas story gives us a different view of Jesus' birth. If Luke is primarily concerned with showing us the meekness and humble nature of Christ, then Mathew is primarily concerned with showing us the royalty of Christ.

Both views of Jesus are correct! He is the God who humbled himself to be born in a stable among animals, to a poor family, and who is good news to the lowly shepherds. But he's also the King of kings and Lord of lords, who rules forever over all the universe, and whose kingdom shall never end.

And in these verses we are reminded that he is the gracious King over all the earth.

The eternal gracious King of kings was born at Christmas

Understanding the Story

Vv. 1-2: The Royalty of the Magi

These verses are all about royalty. There are three ideas of royalty in these verses, and the first one we meet are the magi. Matthew writes that these events take place sometime after the birth of Jesus, during the time of king Herod. At this time, certain men from the east came to Jerusalem. The word used to describe them are "magi". It's not known exactly what that means, but more than likely they were people of great wealth and power. While they were probably not kings in the sense that Herod was a king, they nonetheless probably had lots of influence and power. Think of the magicians and advisors that a king like Nebuchadnezzar had around him to decipher his dream. Remember that Daniel was able to, with God's help, tell Nebuchadnezzar what his dream was and meant, and as a result became a top advisor. Think of how Mordecai in the book of Esther became second in command to Xerxes at the end of the book. That's probably what these guys were.

And we simply don't know how many there were. Just because there were three gifts, does not mean there were only three men. And we are also not told where they came from, except that they come from the East. But that in itself is very interesting, because it means there were *not* Israelites.

These were gentiles!

Somehow, and we're not told how, they recognized that God had placed a special light in the sky and that it meant that the King of the Jews had been born. Many people have gone into detail trying to figure out what this phenomenon was, and as interesting as that is, we simply have to admit that we're not told. But what is very interesting about this, is that God used their pagan practices to lead them to Christ!

Somehow, they recognized God's hand in this, and set out to see the baby. They had one single purpose in mind when they found him. We see it in verse 2, to worship him.

So they set out. When they arrive at the land of Israel, they do the obvious thing and head to the capitol city of Jerusalem. If a king is going to be born, it will likely happen there. Now it seems they didn't go directly to Herod, but instead asked around town. But eventually Herod got news of the visitors in verse 3.

Vv. 3-8: The Royalty of Herod.

Herod is the second royalty in these verses. Herod is a king in the normal sense. He has ultimate authority in Israel. Whatever he says goes, and nobody can tell him otherwise.

In verse 3, as soon as he hears that these visitors were looking for the "King of the Jews" he became troubled. Now why would Herod be troubled at this? Well, because Herod considered himself to be the king of the Jews! Herod himself however is not an Israelite. He is an imposter, but nonetheless in Herod's world, there can only be one king of the Jews. He's disturbed because he's threatened by this king! We also read that all Jerusalem was troubled along with Herod. I think this is a different kind of troubled. Herod is troubled because he feels threatened, but all of Jerusalem is troubled because they know what Herod is capable of if he decides to do something crazy. And to their credit, he does.

The fact that Herod does not simply dismiss the threat shows us that he too recognized in some sense the kingship of Jesus, or maybe it's better to say he recognized the potential kingship of Jesus. So he assesses his threat and calls together all the scholars of Israel in verses 4-6. Interesting enough, Herod is smart enough to see the connection between the Messiah and the title "King of the Jews". He understands that this is one and the same person. So he asks the scholars about the prophecies, and sure enough, we read in verse 6 that indeed the Messiah and King were to be born in Bethlehem.

So Herod also wants to find this child, but whereas the sole purpose of the magi was to worship the child, the sole purpose of Herod is to get rid of his threat. So he comes up with a plan. He lies to the magi in verse 8.

[Have you ever received a gift at Christmas that wasn't your favourite? I know as a kid I wanted the cool things for Christmas, like the toys and games. But I would often get boring clothes. Now as a kid I was taught to be polite and to say thank you and give grandma a hug for the nice sweater. But it happens as an adult as well. Maybe you've received a gift at Christmas, and you open it and pull out a sweater and think to yourself, "There's no way I'm wearing this". Now, you know to be polite and say "thank you"

and “how thoughtful” and all of that. But secretly, trying your best not to make it obvious, you’re searching the bottom of the bag for the gift receipt.]

Herod is looking for the gift receipt on this baby. He brings the magi in and pretends like he wants to join them in finding and worshiping this child, but the reality is he want to find the baby so that he can make sure he poses no future threat to his kingship. Fast forward to verse 16 in this same chapter when Herod finds out he has been tricked, and he issues an evil decree to have all the male children two years and under, in Jerusalem and the surrounding area killed.

That’s the kind of king Herod is.

Vv. 9-12: The Royalty of Jesus.

This leads us to our third picture of royalty. That is of course King Jesus. In verse 9 the magi leave Herod and follow the star until it stops over a house. They had finally come to the place they were looking for. They had not even entered the house yet and were overcome with joy. In verse 10 we read that they “rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”. The first thing they do when they come into the house is fall down in worship. It would have been an amazing sight if you think about it. Here is a poor family, with a young child. In walk a number of people probably dressed in fine clothes, and probably with a number of servants and other people who accompanied them on the trip. This group of grown men then bow down and worship this baby. Here is a King that kings worship. It’s no coincidence that Jesus is indeed the King of kings!

Not only that, but they give this baby extravagant gifts. These are not normal gifts. These are gifts that are fit for a king. I don’t know about you, but I’ve never been gifted a gold bar for Christmas. There are many who have tried to explain the significance of the frankincense and myrrh, and there might be something there but the picture that Matthew is showing us is clear. These royal men are giving royal gifts to Jesus because they recognize that he is royalty.

But that’s not all! This baby also has divine protection and approval. God knows of Herod’s plan and warns the magi in a dream to return home by another route. God has his hand on this baby.

Sure, Jesus is still a baby and not yet on a throne, but his royalty in these verses is unmistakable. He has been worshiped by kings, he has received kingly gifts, and he has divine blessing and protection.

What it means for us today:

If we can see what Matthew is showing us about the pictures of royalty in these verses, we can start to understand what that means for us today. There are a few things that jump out from these verses as we look at the royalty of Jesus compared to the royalty of the magi and Herod.

Implication 1 - Jesus is King over all peoples, and for all time.

It’s not by accident that God reveals the birth of Christ to Gentile royalty. Remember that the magi are coming to look for the “King of the Jews”. The awkward thing is...they themselves are not Jews! They’re foreigners and guests to Israel,

And yet, they are not just coming to congratulate the nation of Israel on the birth of their King. They are coming to worship him.

Jesus yes is King of the Jews. But he's more than that. Jesus is King of the gentiles as well! Which means he's King of you and me. Salvation has come not just to a single nation, but to the world. In Luke, Jesus' parents bring him to the temple and meet Simeon there, a man who is waiting for the consolation of Israel. When Simeon sees the baby he gives praise to God because Christ is the salvation for Israel and "the light of revelation to the gentiles".

The true King has come. And this is a problem for Herod, who is the false "king of the Jews".

He's going to desperately try and stop it, but he's not going to be successful. He's fighting against an everlasting kingdom of an eternal King. We know that because we know the end of the story, but in fact we've already seen a hint of that in Matthew' gospel.

Matthew starts his gospel off with a genealogy of Jesus. Matthew divides Jesus' genealogy into three segments. The first segment is from Abraham to David, the second segment is from David to the exile, and the third segment is from the exile to the birth of Christ. But why segment the genealogy of Jesus like this? Why make a cut at David? Because David was king over Israel. And not only that, but it was with David that God made a covenant that one day from David would come a King who would rule forever and ever. Matthew is showing us that Jesus is in fact that King! Herod is going to try his best to stop it, but he won't.

[At our house we have an artificial tree, but I know many people go out every year and cut their own trees. I remember as a kid, before my parents got an artificial tree, we got real ones. I can remember putting it in its stand and watering it. The smell of real Christmas tree takes me right back to early Christmases as a child. But that tree doesn't last forever does. It can die pretty fast if you forget for a day or two to water it. It doesn't take long for it to dry out and all the needles fall off. Really you just need to get it to Christmas day. It's hard enough to keep the tree healthy until Christmas, can you imagine if one year you decided you were going to try and keep it alive until next year? Maybe you decide that it's too expensive to buy one every year, so you're just going to water it, or maybe replant it for next year. Of course that won't work! By mid-January, there are brown and dried Christmas trees at the end of many driveways.]

Herod is trying desperately to keep his reign alive, but he's fighting a losing battle. Herod's reign is not eternal. In fact, in the very same chapter, Matthew records that Herod dies.

Jesus' reign however, is eternal. Remember back to the book of Daniel when king Nebuchadnezzar had a dream of a giant statue that represented different powerful kingdoms of the world. In the dream however a rock was cut from a mountain, but not by human hands. This rock came tumbling into the statue and pulverizing it to dust. Then the rock grew into a giant mountain that filled the earth.

Jesus is that rock. Jesus' reign smashes all other kingdoms, and his kingdom fills the earth with its rule and glory.

The eternal, gracious, King of kings was born at Christmas

The reality of Jesus' eternal reign is only truly good news is his reign will be different than the reign of all other kings before him. We see the damage of the reign of an evil king in Herod. Remember we read that when Herod heard the news of the birth of Jesus he was troubled and "all Jerusalem with him".

They feared what Herod would do because they knew the kind of king Herod was. Herod was a taking king. Herod was a selfish king. Herod was king for his own benefit. There is some historical evidence that at one point in Herod's reign there was a famine in Israel. Now to Herod's credit, it's recorded that he sold off some of his personal gold to buy food for the people of Israel. But do you really think that he did this out of the kindness of his heart? No way! Even in this seeming kindness Herod was buying for himself political power. Herod was sly and selfish.

Is this the kind of king Jesus was going to be? If so, his eternal reign is not good news at all!

But read again verse 6. Jesus is going to rule. Make no mistake about it, Jesus reigns with power and authority, but he uses that power and authority for shepherding. The picture here of a shepherd is the picture of a strong protector of his flock of sheep. Like David who fought bears and lions when they came for the sheep, Jesus cares for and protects his people from enemies. There's also a leading aspect to this. You know Psalm 23. Christ is that shepherd Christ leads his people green pastures and quiet waters. He leads in paths of righteousness. His rod and staff bring comfort. Goodness and love follows us because of him. And he makes his people to dwell in his presence forever.

He is a servant King who rules with grace and mercy.

Here's why his rule is one of protection and care. Because unlike Herod, he doesn't need anything.

[As I get older, I get harder and harder to buy for. My parents and my in-laws ask me year after year what I want for Christmas and honestly it's hard to come up with things! When I was a kid this was an easy task. I could have lists and lists of toys and other things that I wanted for Christmas. But as I get older, I find not only do I not care for things like that, but I don't need much. As an adult, if I need something I can just go get myself. It's cliché, but this year when asked what I wanted to Christmas I said socks. And even then, I don't truly need socks as a gift (thankful as I am for them!) because I can just go get them myself.]

In an infinitely more true way, this is why Christ is a giving King. God needs nothing from you. God lacks absolutely nothing. And so all that is left is to give.

And that's exactly what Jesus did. He grew up and gave of himself to other. He fed. He healed. He taught. But most of all, he gave of himself. He willingly went to the cross to die and take the penalty of your sins. He offers forgiveness of sins to the one who places his or her faith in him.

Not only that, but he offers true and everlasting life.

It's interesting in this story there is a king who takes life, and there is a King who gives it. Jesus offers everlasting life in his presence, all because he gave his own life for your sake and mine.

It is good news that Jesus is the eternal king, and that he's a gracious eternal King of kings.

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Christmas calls us to adoration and worship of King Jesus

Mathew holds out for us King Jesus. What is left for us to decide is how we will respond. It's no coincidence that there are two pictures of royalty here, and two different ways they respond. One commentator pointed something out when I was studying these verses. He pointed out the reality that

these foreigners and gentiles, having no background in the Israelite religion, would have had such little knowledge of this strange light they saw in the sky. But one thing they were convinced of, and that was that it was God's light. They didn't fully understand, but they humbled themselves, and bowed down to a baby. Coming to God is not about understanding fully all that God does and all that he is. That's impossible for anyone. God does not call us to fully understand all that, though we should strive to understand and grow in our knowledge of God. God calls us to humble faith.

I hope you see Christ in the manger this Christmas as the King of kings, who reigns in power and grace. And I hope your response to that is humble adoration and worship.

Cause he is King even if we refuse to see it. That was Herod's response.

And in a sense, Herod had more information than the magi. He had all the scholars and chief priests opening up the Scriptures to him to show him that this King was also the Messiah.

I never really thought about it this way before, but Herod had the gospel presented to him that day. He had all the information he needed to respond in humble adoration. God brought the message of hope and Herod, and he chose instead to reject it.

There is not a single person in the world, whatever their circumstance, who does not need King Jesus.

If Luke's account reminds us that Christ was born for those of low position in our world, like the shepherds, then Matthew's account reminds us that Christ was also born for those in high position and power.

But the call is the same. The shepherds found the baby and were overjoyed and worshiped. The wise men found the baby and were overjoyed and worshiped.

This Christmas, come and see the baby, and be overjoyed and worship, because

The eternal, gracious, King of kings was born at Christmas.