

CHRISTMAS AND THE FLOW OF KINGDOM HOPE - Part one

Sunday, December 17th, 2023 - 10:00 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

Matthew 2:1-12 - “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, [2] saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” [3] When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; [4] and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. [5] They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: [6] “‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’” [7] Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. [8] And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” [9] After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. [10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. [11] And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. [12] And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.”

After Jesus was born, his parents took Him to the temple in Jerusalem in accordance with the custom of Jewish law regarding the firstborn of any family. Dear old, godly, dying Simeon took the Christ Child in his arms and said these words to Mary, His mother:

IPAD TEXT - Luke 2:28-35 - "...he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, [29] "Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; [30] for my eyes have seen your salvation [31] that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, [32] a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." [33] And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. [34] And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed [35] (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed."

It's almost as though Simeon had some special knowledge of the birth events as recorded by Matthew. ***What a separation and revealing of hearts colors Matthew's account!*** People coming to the Christ-Child with ***worship in their hearts***. And people enquiring of the Christ-Child with ***murder on their minds***.

I think there are five truths underscored by Matthew in these first twelve verses of chapter two:

- a) **Jesus is the King of the Jews, the Messiah, and is to be honored and worshiped as such**

- b) **Jesus is to be received and worshiped, *not just by the Jews, but by all the nations of the world***
- c) **It is the ultimate priority of Father God that His Son be *known and acknowledged by all peoples***
- d) **Jesus is *troubling to those who don't want to worship Him* and becomes a root of *opposition for those who do***
- e) **True worshipers *bow before Jesus*, understanding the **uniqueness of His Person, and moving on in transformation of character****

Those are the themes of today's Christmas message.

- 1) **JESUS IS THE *KING OF THE JEWS, THE MESSIAH, AND IS TO BE HONORED AND WORSHIPED AS SUCH***

The Magi from the East come to Jerusalem and ask the question, ***"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?"*** (2). There we have Matthew's introduction to this official title.

This, in itself, really isn't all that amazing. Right now, in Canada, there are probably three or four children who, one day, will grow up to be Prime Minister of our country. There would be at least that many children living right now in the United States who will one day be President. ***But nobody really cares about this, or sets out to find them or honor them in some special way.*** We just let time take its course.

But **verse 4** makes clear that this is not all that the Magi had in mind by the way Herod restates their question as to the location of the baby Jesus - ***"...and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born."***

Now, Herod had been the Roman appointed King of the Jews for almost 40 years. The Jewish people called him their king for a long time. ***But nobody ever called him "Messiah."*** Messiah means ***God's own anointed Ruler - the One who would overcome all other rule - the one who would bring in the last reign in history - who would establish the Kingdom of God and never lose that Kingdom again, ever!***

So the reason Herod is so curious, and, as we will see in a minute, so upset, is he understands these wise men aren't searching for some mere human successor to the throne after he is off the scene. They aren't just looking for a *king*. They're looking for the ***King of kings***.

So immediately Herod asks where he can find this Child. We see, in **verse 4**, that his scribes and wise men look up the answer right where anyone who wanted to know could have found the answer. They turned to the Old Testament book of Micah, chapter five, and read these words:

IPAD TEXT - Micah 5:2a - "...But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel...."

That answered the *where* question. But what if Herod had asked "***Who?***", instead of "***Where?***" Then the Scribes would have kept reading from the very same passage in Micah:

IPAD TEXT - Micah 5:2 and 4 - “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.....[4] *And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth.*”

That’s what Matthew means for all of us to see and understand. This Baby, this King of the Jews, this is none other than God’s Anointed Messiah. This King was a king like no other. He didn’t begin his existence in the womb of His mother. Micah, long ago, had pointed out that ***“his coming forth is from old, from ancient days....”***

This Baby, fresh from his mother’s womb, was, in fact, the same One who had ***formed His own mother in the womb of her mother!*** Or, as John’s gospel says, ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”***

This is the first and primary truth of this passage. This is the ***reason*** the wise men were on their way to worship this baby. This baby is the ***long awaited Messiah, the Son of God.***

2) **JESUS IS TO BE RECEIVED AND WORSHIPED, NOT JUST BY THE JEWS, BUT BY ALL THE NATIONS OF THE WORLD**

This is the significance of the Magi. Imagine, the very first ones actually invited and led by God Himself (through the leading of the star) - these ones first invited to come to worship the King of the Jews - ***weren't Jewish at all***. They were ***gentiles***. They were the pagans, the outsiders of all previous covenants.

Notice that Matthew doesn't focus his attention on the ***shepherds*** in the hills near Bethlehem. He doesn't even mention those **Jews** coming to find the baby. ***He focuses on these foreigners.***

How clearly Matthew emphasizes the ***nations*** when he writes his account of Jesus. He ***opens*** his book with the gentiles coming to Jesus. Then he ***closes*** his book with Jesus sending His Jewish disciples out to all the ***nations***.

This all fits perfectly together with what the prophets - the Jewish prophets - had always said about the Messiah:

IPAD TEXT - Isaiah 60:3 - "And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising."

IPAD TEXT - Psalm 72:11 - “May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!”

So Matthew immediately shows us *the nations coming to the birth of Jesus, the Messiah.*

3) **IT IS THE ULTIMATE PRIORITY OF FATHER GOD THAT HIS SON BE KNOWN AND ACKNOWLEDGED BY ALL NATIONS**

This follows from the last two points. If Jesus isn't actually the Messiah, the Son of God, the King of Kings, and the Savior of the world, it really doesn't matter all that much what we do with Him.

Almost everyone gives **some** place in their thinking to Jesus Christ. The question is, ***what place should He have in a world full of other religious options?*** That *is* the crucial Christmas question. And the Scriptures give a clear answer to it:

IPAD TEXT - Matthew 2:2, 7-10 - “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him”.....[7] Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. [8] And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” [9] After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. [10] When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”

I can't explain all that those verses reveal. I don't know how God used that star to bring those foreigners to the manger. But we must never lose the ***big picture*** for the amazing nature of the ***details***.

Four specific times those five verses state that ***God was so committed to bringing the nations to Jesus, He actually used His power to orchestrate the solar system to advertize Jesus' birth.***

And this was not the only time God did something like this. **Luke** shows God orchestrating events with the entire Roman Empire to create a tax census so that Mary and Joseph would be forced to come up from Galilee to Bethlehem for Jesus to be born (**Luke 2:1-6**). **Why does God go to all this trouble?**

He goes to this trouble because God wants the world to have the witness of **Micah's fulfilled prophecy**. Micah said the Messiah would be born, not in Galilee, but in Bethlehem. And God wants to have the written record point to the **unique identity and importance of Jesus Christ**.

Certainly, in our world, everyone has his or her own opinion of how important the birth of Jesus is. The real question is, **what is Father God's opinion of Jesus Christ?** How important is the birth of Jesus in God's eyes?

Answer: **He, quite literally, rearranges the solar system to make this event known**. He **shuffles the agenda of empires** to make the conditions align with His own promise about Jesus' birth. His agenda then, and His agenda now, is that the nations worship His Son. This is still the will of God for everybody in your neighborhood, at your office, in your school.

The proclamation of the Christmas message calls for courage. In a recent article John Piper sums it up like this:

“Today, the call for courage arises especially from the pluralism of our times. In this relativistic atmosphere a call for repentance and faith in Christ is not seen as *love* but as *insolence*. Judaism, Islam, and New Age spirituality stake equal claim to the soul. Saying in public, “Whoever denies the Son does not have the father (1 John 2:23), will not win you the reputation of *compassion*, but *conceit*. If relationships and good will are your only measure of love and success, you will not stand.”

For over a decade now, we have always received a missionary offering at our Christmas Eve service. This is more than a warm, sentimental event. It goes beyond simply **“*giving something back*”** to people less fortunate than we are, as good as that may be.

Missions is at the heart of God’s plan for Christmas. Right from the very beginning, He laid down the pattern for calling the nations to Jesus Christ.

And our World Impact emphasis is not something pulled out of thin air. Father God lays this patten of ***reaching the world with the grace of Jesus Christ.***

4) **JESUS IS TROUBLING TO THOSE WHO DON'T WANT TO WORSHIP HIM, AND IS THE ROOT OF OPPOSITION FOR THOSE WHO DO**

I think Matthew *intentionally* sets two kingships in opposition to each other in the first three verses of this second chapter:

IPAD TEXT - Matthew 2:1-3 - "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod *the king*, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, [2] saying, "Where is he who has been born *king of the Jews*? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." [3] When Herod *the king* heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him...."

Herod and *all Jerusalem* were troubled. Why so troubled? Because, if Jesus is truly King, their reign was over.

It is still the same today. Such is the true meaning of the birth of Jesus, the Son of God, for each one of us. If Jesus is truly **God with us**, what we thought was our own sovereignty is over. And Herod serves as a graphic reminder of what we all are, more subtly, within. Herod, though an **extreme** case, is by no means an **isolated** case. People who want self-rule, who don't want to **bow in humility** before their Maker and Redeemer, will always have a tough time with the real Jesus.

People of other faiths will hate the message of Christmas for the very same reason. God makes **His choice** about redemption and worship at the birth of Jesus. He casts **His vote**. When people want to choose differently, Jesus must be ignored at all costs. **Christmas must be secularized or silenced**. It is not an extreme statement to say it's not an accident that "**Merry Christmas**" has increasingly been replaced with "**Happy Holidays**." There is a measure of push-back that disciples of Jesus Christ, then and now, must **expect**.

5) **TRUE WORSHIPERS BOW BEFORE JESUS, UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUENESS OF HIS PERSON, AND MOVING ON IN TRANSFORMATION OF CHARACTER**

IPAD TEXT - Matthew 2:11-12 - "And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. [12] And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."

This is the goal of everything. This is why God is so intent on honoring the Name of His Son, Jesus Christ. This is why He moves heaven and earth to make the nations know. ***The divine mission of Christmas is to have all peoples everywhere bow before Jesus in adoration, obedience and worship.***

There are many things we **know** that don't **affect our lives**. When I was young I read and reread **The Adventures of Huck Finn**. It's still one of my favorite fictional works. I'm reminded of the part of the story where Huck would have supper at the Widow Douglas' house. She was constantly trying to reform poor Huck. After supper, she would try to teach him lessons from the Bible:

“After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him. Then, by and by, she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, cause I don't take no stock in dead people.”

Lots of people know about the birth of Jesus like Huck knew about Moses. It's just ancient history. It never reaches their lives.

Just how important is Jesus Christ?

Well, if He's dead and gone, He's of very little importance at all, other than historical interest, and perhaps a bit of a good example - though **not really the latter**, because if He was just a good human teacher, then He really isn't a good example because He said He was the Son of God. **Liars aren't good examples to anybody.**

But the Bible gives us a very different picture of why Jesus is so important. The Bible says we will all stand before the living Christ again. It is absolutely inevitable. And Jesus is going to make some very important pronouncements about each one of us - Christians, Jews, Muslims, New Agers - **everybody**.

Here's what your Bible says:

IPAD TEXT - Revelation 20:11-21:7 - "Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. [12] And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done.[13] And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. [14] Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. [15] And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. [1] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. [2] And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. [3] And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. [4] He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

[5] “And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.[6] And he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. [7] The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.”

So, the wise men are an **encouragement** to all of us to come and bow and worship and surrender, no matter how far removed or unqualified we may feel. Herod, on the other hand, is a **warning** not to rebel in your heart.

And here you and I stand today, facing an inevitable appointment with the Baby born in the manger, who is coming again to judge the world.