

GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY - Part three

Christmas Day - December 25th, 2022, 10:00 a.m.

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THE KIND OF PEOPLE LED TO THE BIRTH OF THE REDEEMER

IPAD TEXT - 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."

Now keep this account in mind as we turn to another passage from the prophet Isaiah. And think especially about the nature of those wise men Matthew refers to:

IPAD TEXT - Isaiah 47:10-15 - "You felt secure in your wickedness, you said, "No one sees me"; your wisdom and your knowledge led you astray, and you said in your heart,"I am, and there is no one besides me." [11] But evil shall come upon you, which you will not know how to charm away; disaster shall fall upon you, for which you will not be able to atone; and ruin shall come upon you suddenly, of which you know nothing. [12] Stand fast in your enchantments and your many sorceries, with which you have labored from your youth; perhaps you may be able to succeed; perhaps you may inspire terror. [13] You are wearied with your many counsels; let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you. [14] Behold, they are like stubble; the fire consumes them; they cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. No coal for warming oneself is this, no fire to sit before! [15] Such to you are those with whom you have labored, who have done business with you from your youth; they wander about each in his own direction; there is no one to save you."

While we don't usually think of these words at the Christmas season, they have strong relevance to our opening text from Matthew chapter two. God through the prophet Isaiah gives such a strong warning of divine judgement that is going to come upon Babylon. These Babylonians don't know the role they're playing in God's plan. He is using them to punish Judah. Their might is both **temporary** and **God given**. But they don't think about that. Isaiah tells them that when their role is played out God will punish them for their persistence in their ***idolatrous practices***.

And then Isaiah gets very specific. What God hates most of all is the way they consult and listen to their **magicians** and their **sorcerers** and the **stars**. They look to the **stars** for their direction and wisdom, while they ignore the God who **made** the stars - “**You are wearied with your many counsels; let them stand forth and save you, those who divide the heavens, who gaze at the stars, who at the new moons make known what shall come upon you**”(Isaiah 47:13). - IPAD TEXT

All through the Old Testament God warned His people about participating in these “**abominations.**” Consider this. By divine decree, **astrologers** and those who **consulted** astrologers were to be taken outside the camp and put to death. And if that wasn’t enough, even their **bones** were to be removed and buried so there would be no memory of their wickedness among the people.

Now we come back to our Christmas text. We consider the visit of the “**magi**”(verse 1). That’s the Greek word translated as “**wise men**” in many translations. There is no reason, other than the familiar carol, to think of them as “**kings**”. These were not **political** leaders or **monarchs** in that sense. They were the **magicians** who served their kings by determining the wisdom of the stars and planets. They were consistent practitioners in **sorcery**.

That's the very same word - "**magi**" that's used throughout the whole account, starting in **verse 1**, and repeated in **verse 7** and **verse 16**. In fact, the only other reference to this type of person in the New Testament is the story of **Simon the magician** in **Acts chapter 8**, and **Elymas, the false prophet** in **Acts chapter 13**.

So that helps set the stage. These three "**wise men**" weren't so called because of their natural intelligence or their university education. People came to them with their problems and dreams and questions - like Nabuchadnezzar did of his wise men - and they would consult the stars for an answer. That's why these "**wise men**" in Matthew's Christmas account are looking up into the sky when the star appears. God sees their wickedness and still comes to meet them where they are. He actually interrupts them while they're at their wicked work. They can't reach Him, so He comes to them.

It's only our familiarity with the story that hides the shocking edge of truth in the Christmas account. We've all seen it acted out so many times it's just possible it's the truth we **think** we've heard that keeps us from hearing the amazing truth we **need** to hear.

What kind of people should be invited to the holiest being ever to enter the world? Have you noticed the list of invitees to the major historic events - like the funeral for a queen or the inauguration of a President? It's a very exclusive list. The bigger the event, the tougher it is to get in.

So think about it. If Jesus - God the Son - Creator of heaven and earth - were born into today's world who would be the first to get invited? And when I say "invited," I mean invited by **God Himself**. And why on earth would God invite traders in occult darkness instead of a Martin Luther, or a Billy Graham? What's going on here? Why are these sooth sayers and astrologers heading up the guest list in Matthew chapter 2 - especially considering God's scathing condemnation of these acts as "**abominations**" through the lips of Isaiah and a host of other Old Testament prophets?

We need to think through what God is doing here. And I think there are **two lessons:**

- 1) **GOD REMOVES ALL THE MORAL BARRIERS BETWEEN HIMSELF AND MAN**

O, of course sinners must repent. Pardon for any sin is never automatic. But by inviting these pagan idolaters to Himself **God demonstrates no one need stay away because of uncleanness or sin.**

Think about it. If only the lovely and the clean and the beautiful were invited to the manger we might easily get the impression they were there because somehow they **qualified** to be there. And God doesn't want anybody thinking he or she qualifies to come to Christ.

But if He wanted to demonstrate as clearly as possible that the Christ is here precisely for those who so obviously **don't** qualify - who have a whole stubborn track record of disobeying and displeasing God, then certainly He did the right thing in pausing that guiding start right over these lovers of darkness rather than light.

It is forever indelibly recorded in sacred Scripture. You don't have to **qualify** to come to Jesus. Indeed, **He** comes to **us**. And He comes specifically for those whose hearts are bleakest and blackest. He seeks out the most stubborn rebels **first**. He takes all the initiative.

Baby Jesus grew up, but this truth never left His heart. The self-righteous crowd could never figure Jesus out. “You claim to be the Son of God - you say you’re the Messiah - yet you’re always hanging around with the wrong people! You’re always seeking out **bad** people. How can you expect us to take you seriously?”

And here’s what Jesus **did** say, and would **still** say: “A doctor doesn’t spend His time looking after **healthy** people, but **sick** people. I’m here to bring light to the **blind**. If you already think you can see just fine, then you won’t have any use for me. And you are truly then the **most** blind. Blind beyond help!”

Here is Christmas truth in a nutshell. There is nothing - absolutely **nothing** - to keep anyone away from God’s saving grace in Christ Jesus today except **pride**. Other than those who are too proud to come, “**whosoever will**” still applies.

I said there were two important lessons from this text. Here’s the second:

2) **THERE'S ALSO A MISSIONARY LESSON HERE FOR THE CHURCH**

We learn the Christmas story has to do with reaching our world with this same message of grace. True, all sinners must still forsake their sin humbly and repentantly come. But no one ever ***qualifies***. And God forgive us all if we give one outsider the impression he or she must produce the kind of righteousness only Jesus in His grace can freely give. We must invite and pursue and receive the stubborn and unclean and ungodly in exactly the same way God does.

O how we need this reminder from the manger to boldly proclaim our invitation to the godless and the blind! These aren't the people to ***keep out***. These are the people to ***invite in***. The twisted and the sick still need the great Physician.

Let me give you my opinion on an interesting tid-bit. I find it fascinating to remember who wrote this account of the Magi. **Matthew** must have smiled as he scribbled these thoughts. I think he probably looked back with a glad heart as the Holy Spirit prompted his mind about those strange, exciting events around the coming of the ***magi***.

You see, Matthew of all people probably rejoiced at their inclusion in the account of the birth of the Savior. Matthew knew that it was like to be brought in from the **outside**. The New Testament tells us he was a “**publican**.” Not a “**republican**,” but a **publican**. He was a **tax collector**, and probably a **crooked tax collector** to boot - perhaps after the likes of Zacchaeus. He was hated by all the hard-working middle class and poor of his day. And for some reason, **Jesus picked Matthew to come and follow Him and share in His life and ministry!**

But there's more. At the end of his Gospel, Matthew - more than anyone else, **Matthew** - records the Great Commission of Jesus Christ. Try to picture his face as he writes those words - “**Go into the whole world - don't leave anybody out - you don't know who will respond - go into the whole world, all the time, and make disciples of all nations!**”

I'll bet those words burned a hole right through his heart. “**Don't leave anybody out! Don't exclude anyone. Don't write anyone off! Get this done! Be as wide and gracious as the Father was with those three** (we assume three because of the three gifts) **early cultists! And as wide open in pardon, Don, as He was with you! Do tell them they must repent. But tell them anybody can, and anybody can come!**”

There is a truth to cherish here. We must never allow its grip to loosen around our hearts. The church dare not ever give the impression anyone must ***qualify for Jesus' love.*** And the way we show the world that is by showing it must never qualify for ***our*** love. That's now how ***we*** got in and it's not how ***they*** get in either. God proved it with the ***magi.***

People come into the fold with all sorts of rough edges. They don't dress the way you do. They make the sanctuary messier than you'd like. They aren't as quiet as you think they should be. Their kids don't know how to behave in church. ***Blah. Blah. Blah.***

But the next time you find yourself thinking about all of those things ask yourself this question: ***"In all likelihood, would I have even invited those three cultic magicians to come into my church to worship Jesus?"***

I think Jesus knows my tendency to simply rejoice in what ***I*** have ***received*** of God's grace. That's why He reminded His disciples that because they had ***received*** without qualifying, they were to ***give and extend*** to others who didn't qualify.

People need this Christmas picture of God's reaching heart. ***The whole world has got God all wrong.*** A clear presentation of His loving good will ("good will toward men?") is needed. The Mormons are wrong. There are no other testaments to Jesus Christ. Perhaps we can think of it this way. The work of the Church is still the same as the assignment of that first star: "***It came and stood right over the place where the child lay***" Just bring people simply and clearly to Jesus.

We need the simple, amazing, gracious story of the magi. We're so used to thinking about a **Santa** who keeps track of the "**naughty and nice**" that we think in terms of **merit** at Christmas. ***But santa has it all wrong.*** Christmas is the invasion of **grace**. It's for the naughty, not the nice. The naughty can repent and receive brand new life! It's Jesus Christ, the Son of God, man's only Redeemer, coming to die for the ungodly. Praise God for this record of His strange guest list.