

December 21, 2008
The National Presbyterian Church

The Town Called Bethlehem

Matthew 2:1-12

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This is now the fourth in the series of messages my colleagues and I have been preaching in this Advent season. We have titled this series the “Visited Planet” and we started with a quote from G.K. Chesterton in his little book, *The Everlasting Man*. “Right in the middle of these things stands an enormous exception. It is quite unlike anything else. It is a thing final like a trumpet of doom, and yet it’s a piece of good news, good news that seems too good to be true. It is nothing less than this loud assertion that the mysterious maker of the world has visited his world in person.” That is at the heart of advent. The word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. That’s how St. John puts it. And Chesterton ends his book with these words. “I have not minimized the scale of the miracle as some of our milder theologians think it wise to do ... rather; I had deliberately dwelt on that incredible interruption as a blow that broke the very backbone of history. I have great sympathy with the monotheist to whom this seems a blasphemy, a blasphemy that might shake the world.” And then he has this last line, “But it did not shake the world. It steadied the world.”¹

The coming of Jesus Christ steadies the world, gives meaning, purpose, wholeness, safety to the world. That’s what we’ve been thinking about during these last weeks. And also on Wednesday nights, we’ve been looking at the great prophecy in Isaiah 9, “the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” in which we have contemplated the fact “that for unto us a child is given, a son is given, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Last week, we saw that people were invited to come and visit the Holy Family--shepherds, come to visit the Holy Family. This is St. Luke’s narrative in the second chapter of Luke. But they’re not the only ones who are invited to come. And now

we look at Matthew's account, chapter two of Matthew. Chapter two of Luke and chapter two of Matthew both portray for us the Nativity accounts. In Matthew's account he tells of other visitors who come as well. But let's pray first.

Heavenly Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight. O, Lord, our strength and our redeemer, Lord teach us from this wonderful text as we watch those who are invited to come to visit the Holy Family and to visit Jesus Christ in his birth. Bless us in this holy season as we come to visit Jesus Christ at his birth. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

Listen to Matthew as he narrates his account. "Now, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King—" have you noticed? Luke anchors the birth of Christ into secular history. Luke, we know, is writing to the Greek world. He begins his book by saying "O most, excellent Theophilus, I'm writing you an orderly account." It's a Greek man who receives Luke's book, and Luke is trying to help the Greek world understand the significance of Jesus Christ. So he anchors the birth of Christ, the ministry of our lord, into the secular history of that first century world. "In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled."

Matthew is writing his book to a Jewish audience. He's endeavoring to make the same case for the significance of Jesus the Messiah to Jewish readers. And so, he began his book by anchoring it into the secular Jewish history of that day. In those days, Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King.

The irony of Herod is that Herod is really not Jewish, he's probably Nabatean. His father, Antipater, was Nabatean and was the prime minister under the last of the Hasmonians who were the House of Judas Maccabaeus. And then, when he was assassinated, Julius Caesar, the predecessor of Caesar Augustus (which was Roman custom to name a king or to set up local kingdoms so they could be more orderly, organized, and controlled by the Roman Empire). So, Julius Caesar named the son of Antipater as king and he became "Herod the Great." He came to Jerusalem and married a young woman in the Hasmonian house in an attempt to legitimize his reign. Her name was Miriam. He later arranges for the murder of Miriam. Herod is a very powerful and brutal man. He even murders two of his own sons by Miriam because they looked like they were going to be rival pretenders to the throne.

Josephus tells us all about this man. He was the King of the Jews for some 38 years; he died 4 B.C., four years before the Christian era. That's an irony of dates and calendars because when the calendar was established finally, it turns out that our Lord was born 4 or 5 B.C. which seems ironic, but because we know from this text that Herod was the king when Jesus was born and we know from Josephus and from the calendars of the time that Herod died in 4 B.C.

Listen to this text, "So when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of

Herod the king, behold, wise men.” The Greek word that’s used here is *magi*. Wise Men from the East, where are they from? They may be Nabateans themselves from Petra, we don’t know; because they were people very much interested in astrology and astronomy. But it says from the East--by the way, the Greek word for East is *Anatolia*, the Greeks always referred to the East are those who lived where the sun rose as the area of “Anatolia,” and that’s why what today is called Turkey, was always called by the Romans and the Greeks, “Anatolia;” and if you go to Turkey, you’ll see one of the prominent cities in Turkey is Anatolia. It means “the East.”

So Wise Men came from the East to Jerusalem saying, “Where is he who has been born King of Jews? For we have seen his star.” These mysterious men have been studying astronomy and studying the stars “we’ve seen his star in the East and we’ve come to worship him, to pay him homage. When Herod the King heard this, he was troubled.” The word for trouble here means stirred. It’s interesting when the shepherds saw the angel--the Greek word *phobia* is used there. It’s used twice in the text. We showed you that last week. When the shepherds saw the angel, they were afraid, *phobia*, mega afraid, the word is repeated twice. That’s a very strong word. They were very afraid. Now, a different word is used here in the Matthew text, “They were troubled, stirred up.” It’s a little different. Not as much in panic as the shepherds were when they saw the angels, but they were stirred up.

So when Herod the King heard this, he was troubled or stirred up and all of Jerusalem with him. The word got around. After all, you don’t have Wise Men, these foreign visitors very often coming into town asking questions. And so, all Jerusalem was troubled with him. And then, assembling all the chief priests, that would be Sadducees, the Sadducees party controlled the high priesthood, they are the priests. And the scribes, that would probably include a great number of Pharisees because the Pharisees are a lay movement that are often identified as scribes so the clergy and the scribes or the Pharisees of the people. He inquired of them where the Messiah would be born and they told him, now they quote to him the Prophet Micah. You’ll see this is a quote that would not be too comforting to Herod when he hears it, “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 govern my people, Israel.” As you know, the messianic hope has to do with David and the City of David is Bethlehem. He is from that city; it’s called the City of David. And so, the Micah text says, “A ruler in the household of David will reign.” This would not be comforting for Herod to hear since he has always been uneasy in his kingship because he’s not from the house of David. By the way, the latest issue of *National Geographic* has a major story on Herod the Great and shows pictorially his wealth. The wealth of that man Julius Caesar and then--all of the Caesars continue to protect, right straight through to the whole period of the house of Herod. So, he had wealth and power but not because he was a properly-anointed Jewish king; he was a king because the Romans made him king.

So then Herod summoned the Wise Men secretly. Now, we're beginning to feel in the text the beginning of the possibility of conspiracy or a plot; Why the secrecy? "He questioned the Wise Men secretly to ascertain from them what time the star appeared 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.'" And so, with that the Wise Men leave, with that word from Herod, perhaps the word spread also in Jerusalem, so the people heard that Herod plans to go and visit this child because perhaps the Wise Men shared that with others. We don't know but they leave.

"And so, when they heard the king, they went their way and lo, the star that was seen in the East, it went before them. Until it came to rest over the place where the child was, and when they saw the star they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." The same word "joy" that appeared when the shepherds heard the great carol, is now used for the magi, they had joy as well, and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother "and they fell down and they worshipped him." They paid him homage, and then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Frankincense and myrrh are both fragrances. They are ancient pitch fragrances. In fact, frankincense is used to this day as one of the main ingredients in almost every perfume that's made. Frankincense is that powerful. It's a pitch that is used as a fragrance. And so, they brought those two fragrances and gold.

And being warned in a dream, and now the mysterious part sets in. "Being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way." You know, what's interesting is that how the hand of God has been protecting the Holy Family. At first they weren't aware of it, in fact I think it's probably true that Mary and Joseph after their initial encounter with the Angel Gabriel who comforted them, then the dream that Joseph had when Mary is assured that this pregnancy she has is of the Holy Spirit. Joseph is also comforted. But from that time on, they don't have very much to go by. One little experience with the mother of John the Baptist, who is a cousin of Mary also comforted her, but really they go all the way the 90 miles from Nazareth and when they get to Bethlehem, no one is prepared for them.

No one is waiting for them. It doesn't look like God has been protecting them there. There was no place for them in the inn though they found a place in the stables. And it isn't really until the shepherds showed up that they get a comforting sense of the fact that God is hovering over them and protecting them, this precarious birth. And there is no more precarious moment in your life than when you're born. The human birth, the child of human beings is the weakest thing in all creation at birth. We absolutely are dependent on our parents for survival. And yet in this precarious, vulnerable moment, there is a sense in which it is shepherded by God, protected. It didn't look like it at first. No room for them in the inn but there was room near the inn. And then the shepherds come and they shared the song with Mary, which is one more sign--notice it's called the "sign" and Mary pondered

it in her heart, we're told in the text. It comforted her. It comforted Joseph. This shepherding that they've sensed.

And now, we come to the Matthew account and we hear of the strange foreign visitors who come. They come to Jerusalem first. The word is out. They asked where the King is to be born. They hear the Prophet Micah account, so does Herod, so does everybody else, and we realize immediately that Herod is planning a conspiracy, a plot to solve this challenge to his reign.

By the way, we know from Josephus of Herod's murder of his own children by Miriam because he was afraid they would be a pretender to his throne, so it's not hard to understand the massacre of the innocents that occurred when Herod realized that the wise men had betrayed him. He then tried to kill the children born in Bethlehem. Herod was that cruel. But there is this hand of protection over the Holy Family and now the Wise Men. The Wise Men, they are a part of that protection too. You know, I'm intrigued. We always think of three magi but it doesn't say three magi, it just says three gifts. And so, we think that there are three magi; there may have been more. But they brought three gifts. Have you ever thought of the gifts that they brought? In fact, I once thought that their gifts seemed impracticable gifts for this little family from Nazareth. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Two fragrances and gold? But, folks, those are equal to three foreign currencies.

And the next sentence says that Joseph is told by the Lord to flee and go to Egypt. And where did they go in Egypt? Probably Alexandria. Alexandria, the second largest city of the Roman Empire, was a huge Jewish city. Many Jewish people are in Alexandria. I can prove it to you. 100 B.C., 70 rabbis went from Jerusalem to where? Alexandria, to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek. That's the *Septuagint*. Philo, the first century Jewish philosopher, lived in Alexandria. The early childhood of Jesus is in Alexandria. Read Anne Rice's book *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*.² She goes into great detail about the Jewish settlements in Alexandria. She's done a lot of research. She's right. It's probably Alexandria where the Holy Family fled and that's where Jesus learned to speak Greek, and our Lord spoke Greek in his ministry. I can illustrate that to you, too. There are so many illusions that only make sense in the Greek language in our Lord's teaching. Our Lord could speak Greek because his early childhood was spent in Alexandria. And then, the Holy Family, probably when Jesus was around seven, moved to Nazareth where he grew up.

So the family is protected, and what do the Wise Men give as gifts? Aren't you glad they didn't give the Holy Family an aquarium? I've always thought of that as the most useless gift unless you're a big fish lover, but imagine if you don't even like fish and somebody gives you an aquarium for Christmas. Don't give an aquarium unless they requested it. The magi didn't do that; they gave three foreign currencies. They didn't give Jewish shekles. What are they to do with those in Alexandria? Gold, the universal currency of all currencies, and two fragrances that were very valuable in every ancient city.

Remember when our Lord was anointed in Bethany by Mary? And after the anointing, she was criticized for using pure nard to anoint the feet of Jesus and it's Judas who tells us that the pure nard that was wasted on Jesus' feet at Bethany was worth \$9000 (that's the equivalence of taking the denarius currency and putting it into dollars). That's how valuable fragrances were. They're as valuable as cash, and they're valuable throughout the Middle Eastern world. And that's what the Wise Men gave the Holy Family. That's how they finance their trip to Egypt, and wise people ever since have been giving useful gifts. If there was ever a case for giving useful gifts, the Wise Men are the example. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And for the Holy Family, they made their getaway with those hard currencies.

I want to reflect on the visitors. We have two sets of visitors in Luke and Matthew. Think about them for a minute. The shepherds. The shepherds aren't even looking. They're out with their sheep. They're even night-shift shepherds. They're not even the first level of shepherds. That night, they are the guys that have to be at night. And they're the ones the angel appears to. They weren't looking for it, it's by total surprise, and then they go over and see this glorious thing. And I have thought in a way that the shepherds represent one kind of people who make the discovery of the reality of Jesus Christ at Christmas. People who aren't really or even looking, and suddenly, it dawns on you who is there. It dawns on you, how important is this great moment is. And it wasn't that you were looking for it, it just happened. But now, the Wise Men.

In the Matthew account, we have something different. These are men of mystery. These are men who bring with them pieces of a puzzle that they've been working on for a long time. And that's another whole category of people who find Jesus at Advent and who find the Lord Jesus Christ on Christmas morning. They're looking for answers and they're prepared to pay homage to what they find, you see it so clearly in his text. And they come looking for answers and they find them and the text says they worship Christ and then they obey this vision or the dream that was given to them and they do not go back and tell Herod.

One of my favorite poets is T.S. Eliot, the great poet in the English language for the last century probably is T.S. Eliot. He went to Harvard University as an undergraduate and he wrote one of his greatest poems as a junior at Harvard called "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". It could be seen as an atheist poem; it's a poem of disappointment and despair. He writes it as a young man in college but as if he were an old man looking back in his life wasted. "I measured out my life with coffee spoons,"³ he says; it's a sad poem. And then he continued that sadness in writing "The Waste Land" and "The Hollow Men", again two absolutely powerful poems by T.S. Eliot.

One is so cynical and sad that the protagonist in the poem ends the poem by trying to do the Lord's Prayer but can't even get through the Lord's Prayer and then finally

T.S. Eliot says, "Ah, this is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends. This is the way the world ends. Not with a bang but a whimper." And then T.S. Eliot had a nervous breakdown when he was in Switzerland and in the midst of that, he had an amazing experience and discovery of Jesus Christ and from then on he wrote amazing Christian poems and was powerful in his own way as he wrote absolutely majestic and powerful Christian poetry.

He wrote *Murder in the Cathedral*, he wrote *The Cocktail Party*, two plays that share the Christian faith. And then when he was relaxing one day, he wrote a few poems about practical cats which, of course, became the musical *Cats* on Broadway. He wrote those poems. But his first Christian poem was "Journey of the Magi" and, in fact, today in *The Washington Post* they have printed in poet's corner, "Journey of the Magi"; it's one of my favorite poems. It's the poem where T.S. Eliot announced to the world that he had become a believer. It's about these Wise Men that came to see the Christ Child and it has all of the Eliot marks of mystery and murkiness, Eliot's not easy to read. But he tells in the early part of the poem how they made the journey and it was not an easy journey either to get there, all the way to find this king. And then he says at the end, "When we saw it, it was finally--it was satisfactory, we saw it, and then, "All this was a long time ago," I'm reading T.S. Eliot now, "I remember and I would do it again, but set down, this set down, this: were we led all that way for a birth or death? There was a birth, certainly, we have evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth, I have seen death, I thought they were different." And then he ends up the poem by saying, "No, I saw death because now I return to my country and all my idols had died, all my Gods have died." That's Eliot telling us that he's found the meaning of life at that crib. It was like a death, the death of all my Gods; that's a good death. In fact, he ends the poem with, "I should be glad for another death like that."⁴

What do we find when we come to Bethlehem? Why do you come? A lot of us will come just by surprise, we weren't even looking and yet we came. Thank God for that. Thank God that the Gospel takes us by surprise. Some of you and many of us who spent years looking and like young T. S. Eliot was really searching when he wrote "Prufrock" he was searching. In "The Hollow Men", in "The Waste Land" he was searching and then he found the One who deserved the finding, and it all made sense and the pieces came together. You know the sad part of this whole story is that the scribes and the Sadducees just like Herod they heard the prophecy of Micah. Bethlehem is only seven miles away and none of them budged to go the seven miles down maybe because they were scared since Herod planned to go. Remember he said, "I'll go," and so they don't dare move or maybe they're just too busy, they don't go; of course, they weren't invited yet.

There is a sense of the sovereignty of God over this whole event, the people who get there were invited--shepherds and Wise Men; and the Pharisees are going to have to wait 30 years and then they'll come and they're going to come but its going to take 30 years. They could have gone; its only seven miles away. Don't miss it, don't miss

going because we know the story now.

I put in the front in the bulletin a little Christmas note from our staff wishing all of you a Merry Christmas and I included the poem by Ursula Vaughan Williams from the *Hodie* because I love this poem so much, let me close with it. "Promise fills the sky with light," Ursula Vaughan Williams writes, "Stars and angels dance in flight; Joy of heaven shall now unbind chains of evil from mankind. Love and joy their power shall break, and for a new born prince's sake," and then this last line is so powerful, "Never since the world began, such a light such dark did span."⁵

Merry Christmas. Heavenly Father, thank you for Christmas that your light spanned the darkness. That these shepherds found it, the wise man found it and later some Pharisees will find it, too. Lord, thank you that we can find it. In Christ's name. Amen.

1 Chesterton, G.K. *The Everlasting Man*. New York: Image Books, 1955.

2 Anne Rice, *Christ the Lord: Out of Egypt*. New York, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005.

3 Eliot, T.S. "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1952. Page 3.

4 Eliot, T.S. "Journey of the Magi." *The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1952. Page 68.

5 Williams, Ursula Vaughan "No Sad Thought His Soul Affright" *Hodie*. Art Song Text Archives 2008. University of California - Davis, Music Department, 1999.

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Sunday Worship at 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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