

“A Foreshadowing”
Matthew 2:1-12
October 15, 2017

INTRODUCTION:

Foreshadowing, which is the title of this sermon, is a literary term describing an indication of something before it actually happens. The prefix *fore* means before, and the last part of the word, shadow, refers to something that is only in outline form, like a silhouette. So to foreshadow something is to state it beforehand, but only in a vague way.

Let me give an example. My wife and I met in 1979, when she visited the church in Philadelphia that I had been attending. Wendy had been in a church where there was only one single man, and she wasn't interested. I was attending a church with dozens of eligible, single men, and it was also the same church Wendy's roommate was attending. So this roommate said to Wendy, "You should come to my church. There are many single men there." Then she went on to say to Wendy, referring to me, "And there's one guy there from the south that I think you might be interested in." That's foreshadowing. It's just a hint of something in the future, but a shadowy hint without any detail.

Today's passage is another example of foreshadowing. Jesus makes his first appearance in the world, and there are two basic reactions to this. One group, the wise men, upon finally finding Jesus, fall down on their faces and worship him, giving of their most precious treasures to him. The other group, King Herod and the scribes and chief priests, oppose him either overtly or apathetically. Not much has changed in the 2000 years since Jesus' birth. The wise still seek him and worship him, and his enemies still oppose him.

I. Unexpected Worshipers

One of our Christmas carols sings of the incident described here, but gets a couple of facts wrong. The first error of "We Three Kings" is that they were not kings, but wise men or Magi. The word that is translated "wise men" in our Bibles is the word Magi, from a Persian word that means "Great ones." The Magi were advisors to kings, something like a presidential cabinet in our context. They were well-educated, but in a way different from well-educated people today. Their specialty was in supposedly being able to read the stars in a way that would guide the decisions of the king they served. Though our word "magician" comes from this word Magi, their work was closer to what we call astrology today.

The second error of that Christmas carol is in the number. Nowhere does the text say that there were only three visitors. That is an inference drawn from the fact that three gifts are specified, but most likely an inaccurate inference. It is far more likely that this was a relatively large retinue, complete with soldiers and servants. Remember that these were important people. That's why Herod noticed when a large retinue of important foreigners showed up in Jerusalem. Matthew tells us that they were from the east, by which he is likely referring to what is today Iraq and Iran. They had made a journey approaching one-thousand miles.

Our sentimentalized view of Christmas portrays these wise men as righteous and noble. The truth is that they were Gentile idolaters. The Old Testament consistently condemns astrology. The prophet Isaiah mocks astrologers who make their predictions by looking at the stars, saying they can't even save themselves. Why then does God guide them to Jerusalem through a means that is condemned in the Bible? Out of his heart of grace, God is stooping to speak the language of Gentiles in order to bring them to Jesus. He is speaking to stargazers through stars. I have read that God is doing the same today in giving dreams to Muslims in which they see Jesus. Dreams are not as good as the Bible, but many Muslims are completely cut off from the Bible, and dreams are better than nothing. It is important to notice in our text that their stargazing wasn't enough to get them all the way to Jesus. It got them to Jerusalem, but it took the prophet Micah to get them to Bethlehem.

So these Magi see something significant enough in the stars to undertake this lengthy and expensive journey. They were given enough light to know that a mighty king had been born in Israel. So naturally, they arrive in Israel's capital city, where they eventually find out that this king they've come to see can be found in Bethlehem. Then, as they get closer to Bethlehem, God directs them to Jesus by the appearance of a star. They go to Jesus, worship him and give their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Matthew has surprised us already with the names of the four Gentile women he mentions in the genealogy of Jesus back in chapter 1. Now he surprises us again with the report of the first people to recognize who Jesus is and worship him. Gentile idolaters are the first ones to arrive at the party, but they will not be the last. God does it that way to show his grace.

Let me highlight a couple of thoughts from this story of the Magi. When the Magi find Jesus, this is Matthew's first account of someone encountering Jesus. Notice the effect it has upon the Magi. When they saw the star and it rested at the place where Jesus was, **“they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy”** (v. 10). It would be hard to state this more forcefully. Matthew could have written, “They were filled with joy,” which would have required only one word in the original Greek. Instead, he uses four words. Two words would render a translation, “they rejoiced exceedingly.” Three words would have been, “they

rejoiced exceedingly with joy.” But he uses four words, resulting in this translation. Matthew’s message is clear. Jesus is the source of joy for the human race. To leave Jesus out and look for joy elsewhere is to set yourself up for great disappointment.

These Gentile idolaters show us the way into joy and even into the central meaning of life. It is to center ourselves on Jesus as our Lord and King. Notice that there is an “all-in” nature to their actions. They worship Jesus by falling down before him. The idea is not that they just dropped to a knee and bowed before him, but that they fell to their faces. And they give of their treasures to Jesus. We all know the value of gold. Frankincense and myrrh were materials of great value as well. It is a great joy and privilege to give to Jesus. Our gifts are well-used by him. Though the Magi were not aware of it, it is likely that their gifts financed Jesus and his family during their time as refugees in Egypt.

People sometimes ask, “What is the cost of following Jesus?” The answer to that question is something of a paradox. It costs both nothing and everything at the same time. All the blessings of our salvation come as a gift without cost. We have forgiveness of sins, a loving relationship with God, a bright and secure future, and so much else. All of this is a gift that comes without cost to us. But it is also the case that this gift that costs us nothing also costs us everything, because the gift is given to those who trust in Jesus as their Lord and King. That means that you are not your own Lord and King. To trust in Jesus is to be “all-in” like these Magi. This is the path to “rejoicing exceedingly with great joy.” Do you believe that?

II. Unexpected Enemies

Herod had been Israel’s king for about thirty years by this time. He was known as a great builder, including Jerusalem’s great temple. But he was also known as a paranoid and ruthless king. He ordered the execution of his wife and three of his own sons when he came to consider them as rivals to his power. So it is no surprise to read that he was troubled when these foreign dignitaries show up with the news that a new king has been born in Israel. We also read that all Israel was troubled along with Herod. The people had learned many times over that Herod’s troubles inevitably meant trouble for the people.

Herod was a man of action. So he calls upon the Jewish leaders to learn from them where this Messiah was to be born, according to the Scriptures. That was an easy question for them, and they answer with a quote from the prophet Micah, stating that Bethlehem was that place. Herod next summons the Magi back to inquire when the star had appeared, in order that he might know the approximate age of this child. He then pretends to be sympathetic to their cause and says that he too wants to worship this new king, asking them to return and notify him of the child’s whereabouts after they find him. But

Herod's heart had no room for a rival king. It becomes clear in the text we will look at next week that there was murder in his heart for this new King.

There is a tendency when we read stories like this one to villainize people like Herod to the point that we fail to see how we might be like them. Herod shows us something of the nature of all sinful humanity. We don't want to give ourselves fully to King Jesus because we see in that (and rightly so) a threat to our rule over our own lives. It is in our nature to be just as desperate to cling to rule as Herod. We hold on to our money, our schedule, and our right to choose what is right and wrong for ourselves. It has become clear to me over the years that this is the central reason most people don't believe in Jesus after hearing of him. They might tell you (and probably believe it themselves) that they have some intellectual or moral problem with God. But in most cases it's a "found" problem that simply provides an excuse not to give up their own self-rule. The heart of the problem, for Herod and for all of us, is that we naturally rebel against the rule of God.

Are you threatened by the rule of King Jesus? The test is to ask a question suggested by verse 3, where we read that Herod was troubled by the news of Jesus' birth. It is a word that means to be agitated and even frightened. Is there some loss of control in your life that produces that strong emotional response? For many people, myself included, I have something of that response when I lose control of my schedule through the inevitable interruptions of life. I feel out of control, but the truth is that Jesus is still in control. And there is great freedom and joy when we finally come to the place of being okay with that.

We need to be like Jonathan, the son of King Saul, in his attitude to David. Jonathan was the heir to the throne of his father, Saul. But when it became evident to him that David was God's anointed king, not the house of Saul, he responded in a manner completely different from Herod. **"Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that was on him and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt"** (1 Samuel 18:4). These things were indicators of Jonathan's status as the king's son, as heir to the throne. But he gladly surrendered them all to the king God had chosen.

Herod's opposition to Jesus is unexpected from one perspective. He was Israel's king, and he should have welcomed the action of God in bringing the promised Messiah. There is another unexpected enemy in our text. The Jewish leaders who were summoned by Herod to tell him what the Scriptures said about the birthplace of the Messiah act in a way that eventually makes them Jesus' enemies as well. They know the Scriptures that speak of Bethlehem as the place of the Messiah's birth. And now, in the arrival of the Magi, they have reason to think that perhaps the time of fulfillment has come. Wouldn't you expect them to travel with the Magi to Bethlehem? It was a short trip, less than

ten miles in distance. They did not act on what they knew from the Bible and in the process ended up aiding Herod in his opposition to Jesus.

These leaders show us by their negative example the importance of acting on what we know from the Bible. When we fail to do so, our hearts grow hard against God. Application of what we learn in the Bible is critical to our lives. Let me encourage you with something specific that you can do here. Whenever you are reading the Bible, ask God to speak to you about the actions he wants you to take. And when he does so, plan on following through with that and actually doing it. Don't make the mistake of thinking that the intention of doing what God says is the same as actually doing what God says.

I like what Frederick Bruner says about the irony of this story.

The despised astrologers who have nothing but their natural idols are led to Israel, who has the written Word of God, and when this Word is heard (by both groups!), it is the pagans who follow it, while the leadership of the people of God (not the people of God itself, note well!) sit complacently or conspiratorially at home. Outsiders believe the Word; insiders ignore it... The leaders of the people to whom the promises were given do not now believe these promises enough to walk the ten kilometers to receive the promises that lie present and breathing in the Child.

CONCLUSION:

There is a famous Leonardo da Vinci painting titled, "Adoration of the Magi." The interesting thing about the painting to me is its background. The foreground shows the Magi bowing before baby Jesus, presenting him with their gifts. The background shows destruction and chaos. Soldiers are fighting against one another and buildings are in ruins. That's the world Jesus was born into. And it is also the world Jesus will set right.

It was customary in Bible times for a king also to give gifts to those who came to honor him with their gifts, as the Magi had done with Jesus. But Jesus was too young here to give any gifts, and his parents were too poor. A gift would be given nonetheless. Jesus would put this world right, and he starts by bringing healing to the sin-wrecked lives of people, whether Jew or Gentile. His gift would be far more costly to him than the gifts he received from the Magi. The gifts of the Magi were not insignificant. But the gift of Jesus would require his life, through which fallen humanity can be restored fully. The chaos of our lives can and will be healed by Jesus. Let us join these transformed Gentile idolaters and fall down before King Jesus, giving him our lives and our hearts.

Small Group Discussion Questions

Matthew 2:1-12

1. It is surprising that the Magi should be the first Matthew describes to visit Jesus and worship him. What is the most surprising conversion story you've ever heard?
2. What was so surprising about the visit of the Magi and their worship of Jesus? [Answer: they were Gentile idolaters focused on astrology, something forbidden in the Bible. Also, they had little knowledge of the words of God's prophets, and they lived far from Israel]. Does Matthew intend to tell us something about Jesus and his ministry through this, similar to what he told us through the four Gentile women he listed in the genealogy of Jesus in the previous chapter?
3. Do you see any applications in the area of missions to this truth of God reaching unlikely and remote places with his gospel truth? We tend to assume that if Christianity is in decline in America, then it must be in decline everywhere. Is that the case? Where is it on the rise?
4. The Magi gave of their treasures to Jesus, and these gifts were likely used to finance the time Jesus' family spent as refugees in Egypt. This would not have been known to the Magi. We often pray in church before the offering is collected that God would bless both the giver and the gifts given. What do we mean when we ask God to bless our gifts? How does it encourage your giving to consider that God might bless your gifts by using them in very significant ways that might be unknown to you?
5. Herod felt threatened by news of another king in Israel. Do you see any ways you're like Herod, feeling your own power and control threatened by Jesus' reign?
6. In the sermon, Brad mentioned that most people's stated problems with believing in Jesus after hearing about him is different from the real reason, a reason that is probably hidden from them as well. The stated reason is often some intellectual or moral problem they have with God, while the real reason is that they simply don't want to give over rule of their lives to God. Do you agree or disagree with this? Can you think of examples?
7. The religious leaders know from the Scriptures where Israel's Messiah is to be born, but don't go to worship him. This speaks of the need to apply God's word to our lives. Why do we find it difficult to do so? Do you ever substitute an intention to obey with actual obedience?