

January 3, 2016

A Mangerside Gospel  
*Matthew 2:1-12*

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A woman was doing her last minute Christmas shopping at a crowded mall. She was tired of fighting the crowds; she was tired of fighting her way down long aisles looking for a gift that had sold out the day before; her arms were full of bulky packages when an elevator door opened, revealing it was already full. The occupants of the elevator grudgingly tightened ranks to allow a small space for her and her load. As the doors closed she blurted out, “whoever is responsible for this whole Christmas thing ought to be arrested, strung up and shot.” A few others nodded their heads or grunted in agreement. Then, from somewhere in the back of the elevator came a single voice that said: “Don’t worry. They already crucified him.”

The lights are off, the decorations are down, and the tree is untrimmed. For most of the world Christmas just sort of ends after December 27<sup>th</sup>. The world that two weeks ago was singing carols and honouring the birth of a baby has by now all but forgotten about him.

Even in the church, when the Advent Candles are all put away we move on to other seasons and other ideas. Today a huge number of churches will be reading, not from the Gospel of Matthew but from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians to hear that if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation; or even from the Book of Revelation to hear God declare that He is in the business of making all things new. This is, after all, a new year. The old has gone and the new has come. 2015 is behind us in all of its fullness and now is the time to look ahead to 2016.

But when we do that we're prone to forget that for the Church, Christmas isn't over. Christmas, the shortest season in the Liturgical Year encompasses the twelve days from the 26<sup>th</sup> of December to the 6<sup>th</sup> of January. That this season encompasses the New Year's celebration I don't think is by accident, because it serves as a reminder for the Church that everything new we begin today we do in the shadow of Bethlehem's manger, and a reminder to the world that for all our talk about Resolutions, new leaves, and a new better you in 2016 – the only thing that has the power to change you is the one who wrestled with Jacob so he could become Israel; who turned Simon the fisherman into Peter, the fisher of men; and who appeared to Saul on the Road to Damascus turning him from a persecutor of the church into its greatest evangelist. So this morning I want you to remember your resolution for 2015. Did you lose the weight you planned to lose? Did you quit smoking or save money? When was the last time you used your gym pass?

As a species, we're not good at changing ourselves. Less than 1 in 10 people keep their new years resolution and yet almost 80% of us make them every year. We get in our own way, and think about it: if you are trying to change you, then whichever way you slice it, you is going to be your biggest obstacle. You aren't good at changing you, and that's not a bad thing because you never have been. Think about times in your life where you've learned something profound or changed some part of yourself. Think about how many of those times coincided with something momentous happening in your life that you had no control over – a funeral; an injury; an accident – its always easier for something other than me to change me.

That's why Matthew invites us to linger at the manger for a little bit longer. He wants us to see that this isn't just a child lying there – even one for whom angels sing and stars shine. Matthew's vision is so much bigger. He sees in that makeshift crib in Bethlehem the whole Gospel wrapped in swaddling clothes.

It is a Gospel that is sought by magi

We see the first glimpse of it in Matthew's term for the men from the east who come. *Magi*, from which we get the word mage, magic and magician. They were not kings, as the song would help you believe, from some lofty position, or prophets with special supernatural inclinations. The word best translates as seeker of knowledge. They are men who have devoted themselves to comprehending the universe around them, to studying the natural world in all of its majesty – and it is this study, not a divine revelation or a supernatural nudge, that draws them to Bethlehem's Christ. They are you and me, wired to seek answers to universal questions It's the same impulse that led the Psalmist to write: The Heavens declare the glory of God, the earth declares the work of his hands.

As the only Gospel writer to include the magi, Matthew is whispering to us that the Gospel began being good news for us before we ever darkened the doors of a church.

As people, it's our thirst for knowledge that drives us deeper and wider, but at the same time it's that same thirst that leaves us with unanswered questions.

Because science can tell us when the universe began, and how we got to this point in our evolution, but the first question a child learns how to ask isn't when or how; it's why? Why is the foundational question of human kind and science,

with all the tools in its belt cannot answer. Why begs the world to seek a deeper truth, and deeper meaning. Why is the reason that churches across the world were full on December 24<sup>th</sup>. Because lingering at the manger invites us to ask the questions of why, trusting that all of the answers are found wrapped up in the swaddled child - and believing that in asking 'why', we become more human.

And as with the magi we seek the answers to the universe's great WHYS, Matthew places in front of us three gifts that make no sense if you're visiting a baby – but tell a big story when placed side by side.

Gold: the only offering gift fit for a King; Frankincense: the aroma of God's presence that would burn in the temple, day and night; Myrrh: a fragrant resin with a potent smell that was rubbed on bodies that had died to preserve them from the creeping stench of death. The magi reveal a secret to those of us who linger at the Manger. This is no ordinary child. And so Matthew isn't telling some ordinary story. The gifts are mnemonic, like how the name ROY G BIV helps us remember the colors of the visible light spectrum, the magi' gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh are there to help us remember the whole gospel in a nutshell

This child is royalty; though he is unlike any king born in history before or since, because this king has no palace, throne or armies. When the people gather together and try to hail him as emperor, he will remind them that his kingdom is not of this world. Matthew is reminding us that, like the Magi, those who follow the way of Jesus pledge their allegiance not to the systems of this world: not to democracy, liberty, or any ideology – but to an invisible empire, one without

politicians or stop lights – to the Kingdom of God that’s now but not yet. The gift of God reminds us who this child is.

This child is the temple. Matthew, writing in the about the year 80 had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, including burning the temple to the ground. But whereas other Jewish writers of the time saw their identity go up in smoke, Matthew knew the whole story. He knew that Jesus had predicted this would happen, but he also knew a deeper truth. The temple wasn’t just a building. It was where Heaven and Earth collided, and even though a building could be razed to the ground, Jesus had done something new. He had become that collision, and in him was the convergence of the sacred and the secular. The gift of frankincense reminds us who this child is.

This child is the atoning sacrifice. Easter is the great twist of the New Testament. The King of Kings, God in the flesh, nailed to a Roman instrument of torture and buried in a rented tomb. And here, in the opening chapters of the opening book of the New Testament the twist is foreshadowed. Here, with the gift of Myrrh, Matthew connects Christmas and Easter. The bookends of Jesus’ life define who he is as much as anything in the middle. Easter gives weight to the sentimentalism of Christmas. It’s just that God came in the flesh, but God came in the flesh so he could give everything he was as a gift of Grace. The gift of myrrh reminds us who this child is.

But these gifts work together to serve a deeper purpose. The gifts of the magi are more than just character markers for Jesus. They remind us that as a new year rolls on, that this child is as he was: Emmanuel – God with us. This child is here with us now – God in the present tense, and that changes everything. Where

every other religion in the world offers you eternal life if you change everything about who you are, the Gospel offers to change you through relationship. So as the magi brought gifts, tangible things to remind us of the unfolding story of God, God has furnished the church with sacraments. Visible gifts of invisible Grace that in a moment we will be partaking in. But like those gifts, the bread and wine here this morning tell a story. In them, we celebrate the real presence of God with us – Emmanuel moving among us still. And that God with us gives us the strength to do what we could never do on our own: get out of our own way.

And now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and now to him who is able to keep you from breaking your new year's resolutions, be all glory, honor majesty and authority, now and evermore. Amen.