



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

The Magi Found Him!

SERMON BY REV. STEVEN GRANT ■ JANUARY 7, 2024

Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.”

⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

Matthew 2:7-12 (NKJV)

Epiphany is the 12th day of Christmas; the Feast of Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th and is sometimes referred to as the “Twelfth Night.” It is the day we celebrate the visit of the Magi bringing gifts to the Christ Child in Bethlehem. These Magi were learned in stargazing, among other things. There is no evidence they were kings in the ruling sense and the Bible

doesn't say there were three of them. I think it's become the tradition that there were three because of the reference to the three gifts. Whoever they were and however many, they had confessed to King Herod that they had heard the King of the Jews had been born. They had observed a star in the sky that wasn't supposed to be there, so they had traveled a great distance to investigate for themselves. They were considered "wise men" because it is always the case that to seek the Lord Jesus to great lengths is true wisdom.

The word *epiphany* means "a revelatory manifestation of a divine being." For Christians, Epiphany is a festival in celebration of the manifestation of the divine nature of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi. Why is this event of the Magi coming to visit Jesus important enough that Matthew would include it in His birth narrative? What lessons can we glean from the fact that some astronomers from the East joined the shepherds to adore the Christ child? We will start by connecting some dots.

Let's go back to Genesis 12. At the beginning of Genesis, we read about Adam and Eve's sin. Humanity was left with a relationship problem with their Creator due to sin. God had revealed Himself as being a God of holiness and justice who will not and cannot tolerate sin. Ultimately, this is a good thing because it assures us that there will eventually be justice in the world, but that justice extends to us all, not simply to the most terrible few. This relationship problem that we have with our Creator impacts our lives and our understanding. So, what do we do about our sin problem?

We read in the early chapters of Genesis some stories that eliminate some other possibilities of how to deal with our sin problem, but they proved to be unsatisfactory solutions. We

finally arrive at chapter 12 where we read about God's call to Abraham. This is the beginning of salvation history. In Genesis 12:3, God said to Abraham *"And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* He told Abraham that in their old age, he and Sarah would have a child and that He would draw from their descendants a "whole people." He will create the Chosen People who will then be His instrument.

Notice that from the very beginning, it is not simply about those Chosen People. They are, of course, the Jewish people who He formed into the Nation of Israel. From the beginning it's not only about the Chosen People, but *"all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* From the very beginning salvation history was intended to be a worldwide effort as "all the families of the earth" were to be blessed.

God's purpose in forming these Chosen People is confirmed many times throughout Scripture. For example, the prophet Isaiah wrote in chapter 60, verses 3 and 6:

The Gentiles (*meaning the non-Jews*) shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. ⁶
They shall bring gold and incense, and they shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

And then when the angel was giving his message to the shepherds in Luke 2:20, *"Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.'"* Then further on in verse 32 when Simeon had the great privilege of holding the baby Jesus in the Temple, he prophesied that Jesus is *"A light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel."*

Jesus Himself gives us many, many examples of this. Consider the story of the woman at the well. When Jesus was passing through town He came to a well where a Samaritan woman

was drawing water. Remember that Jews and Samaritans did not get along, nevertheless, Jesus engaged her in conversation and shared with her about salvation. Right after the Sermon on the Mount, the first person Jesus encountered was a leper who had no business being there because lepers were the outcasts and untouchables, yet Jesus reached out and touched him and healed him. Jesus set the example of reaching out to the untouchables, the least among us. A Roman Centurion, a pagan and an enemy, sent messengers to Jesus to seek healing for his servant which Jesus proceeded to do.

All of this gives us just a glimpse of the purpose of Christ's church. Why are we here? Why are we engaged in ministry? Why have those who have gone before us established this congregation in this place? It is to continue Christ's work of building up His kingdom, bringing people to repentance and into a saving relationship with Jesus. We are a part of the church for our own edification and our spiritual growth because we are a part of building up His kingdom. If Christ rules in our hearts, we are already citizens of that kingdom and that is our highest allegiance. But it is not only about us. This cause, the mission of the church, is something greater than any one of us or any individual church; it transcends all denominations. It includes us, but that is only half the story. We are a part of something much greater than ourselves.

Communities of faith are established all over the world. Missionaries travel to places where the Christian faith is not well known or perhaps not even known at all, but it doesn't just include missionaries going far and wide. Each one of us is called by Christ to be part of building up the Kingdom of God. We are all called to be salt and light, as Jesus called us, to be His hands and feet in our sphere of influence. Some, like the Kim family, were called to go all the way to Bangkok. We may

not be called to do something like that, but we have our own sphere of influence. We must hold this vision of what we are a part of clearly in our minds, and we must heed Jesus' call to the Christian life. In our daily living, each one of us is a part of building up the Kingdom of Christ as the Father draws people to Himself. Each one of us has our own giftedness and the opportunity to make a difference. Each of us, however insignificant it might seem, is vitally important to the mission.

This is how each one of us in our own sphere of influence and in our own humble way can live out of the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19 Jesus said, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.*" As we embrace this vision, we recognize that God uses all of us in a multitude of ways to build up His Kingdom. I invite you to consider the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes if you're thinking, "I haven't got much to offer in this kingdom building. I'm not going to get up and evangelize and knock on doors. I don't have a pulpit like you have, Steven, and I can't talk to millions of people like Billy Graham did." You might think you don't have much to offer in building the Kingdom but think of the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes. One of the things we learn from this miracle is no matter how little the offering seems, Jesus can do something extraordinary with it. It might be something as simple as a chance encounter with someone in a grocery store. What does a person experience when encountering you and what seeds does the Holy Spirit plant in that person's heart as a result of that contact with you?

To effectively be a part of this there are two principles we must always keep in mind as we go through our daily living. The first is never to assume someone is beyond salvation. It's too easy to write someone off or to write a whole group of

people off who appear to be too far away from Christ to be reached. Don't you believe it! We have no idea whom God plans to save! He doesn't tell us because He doesn't want us to become judges—that's for Him to decide. We are called to be proclaimers, seed planters, examples, salt and light, and witnesses; there are countless examples of seemingly unreachable people coming to faith.

Consider the Apostle Peter. Perhaps you remember the story in the Book of Acts where Peter was staying at the house of Simon the Tanner. It has a flat roof which is not uncommon in the Middle East. People went up on the roofs to catch the sea air and the cool breeze. Peter was up on the roof when he had a vision from God. A sheet came down from heaven full of animals and he heard a voice from heaven say, *"Rise, Peter; kill and eat."* *14 But Peter said, "Not so, Lord! For I have never eaten anything common or unclean."* (Acts 10:13-14). Peter did not want to eat food that was not kosher; these were unclean animals. *"And a voice spoke to him again the second time, "What God has cleansed you must not call common"* (Acts 10:15). And right at that very moment, another Roman Centurion in Caesarea was looking for the truth and salvation. He had been told that he needed to talk to a man named Peter, so he had sent his messenger to request that Peter go to Caesarea and speak with him.

Perhaps the best example is the Apostle Paul himself, the great persecutor of the church. He not only became a Christian, but he went far and wide spreading the Gospel, planting churches, and nurturing many others. Paul ended up writing large portions of the New Testament.

Consider the Magi themselves. Consider how God prompted these men, though steeped in Eastern philosophies, to inquire and journey a great distance to discover Christ. With

their gifts, God enabled them to prophetically witness who Jesus is. Think about those three gifts. First, there is gold which was a gift that one would bring to a king; Jesus is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The second was Frankincense. Incense was something a high priest would use in worship in the Temple, and Jesus is our High Priest. He is the One who intercedes for us. Incense is used in worshiping God as the rising smoke is symbolic of prayers going up to God. By bringing incense they are worshiping Him as God...He is God in the flesh. Then, myrrh. Myrrh is a very expensive perfume that was used for various things but primarily to anoint and prepare a body for burial. Jesus came to die for us.

Now you might be inclined to say those are biblical characters and that's fine, but what about real people like us who are not in the Bible? Let me draw your attention to a book called *Wounded Tiger*. It's about four people whose lives providentially converge at a point of absolute wonder. First, there is a man by the name of Fuchida who was the lead pilot in the attack on Pearl Harbor. Another man by the name of Jake Deshazer was one of the pilots in the American raid on Japan under Gen. Doolittle. There was a lady by the name of Peggy Covell whose parents were missionaries in the Philippines. And then there was Jake's jailor.

Fuchida hated the Americans. Jake hated the Japanese. Peggy could have hated the Japanese because they murdered her parents in the Philippines. Jake's jailor was brutal. But because of the love of Jesus Christ, their hearts were transformed to the point where both Fuchida and Jake became Christians. Fuchida dedicated the rest of his life as an evangelist and traveled around America preaching to Americans. Jake became an evangelist and preached the Gospel for 30 years in Japan. Jake and Fuchida became the best of friends. In addition to that, the

jailer at the POW camp, without really realizing what it was, providentially gave Jacob a Bible which was instrumental in Jake's conversion. The jailer also became a Christian under Jake's ministry, and they became best of friends. And Peggy spent her life as a missionary ministering to Japanese people. Impossible? Such is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit: changing lives, changing hearts, bringing people together so that men like Fuchida and Jake would learn war no more.

First, never assume that anyone is beyond salvation. Second, we must make sure that we have our act in order. We need to make sure that our growth in Christian discipleship is genuine and continuous. Most of you know that in my former life, I was a musician, so pardon me while I make a musical metaphor here. Itzhak Perlman was one of the greatest violinists in history, and I can guarantee you that his instrument was one of the finest violins on the planet. The reason is that a great artist must have the finest of instruments. When a child starts, the first instrument is adequate, but as the child improves a better instrument is needed. As the child matures into a music major in college, an even better instrument is needed until eventually the artist's level is reached with the best instrument possible. However, a violin is useless by itself, it can't do a thing until it's in a master artist's hands.

There's a story about the great violinist Jascha Heifetz. After one of his performances someone came backstage and said, "Mr. Heifetz, I've just got to tell you that violin of yours has the most gorgeous sound." Heifetz went over and picked up his violin, held it to his ear, and said, "I don't hear anything." It is the same with us. If you recall Jesus once said, *"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing"* (John 15:5). That's why we must be in the Master's hands, so we will be able to

produce the fruit that He needs and that He requires. As Paul said, *"...it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me"* (Galatians 2:20).

The wise men, the Magi, went to great lengths to seek out Jesus. In the privacy of your own hearts where only you and God Himself can reflect on these few questions are you continually seeking Jesus? Do you invite Him into your heart, grow through His Word, and through prayer, repentance, and fellowship? We do not want to be people who mistake salvation for virtuous outward practices but rather experience Him filling our whole being. Let Him be the Lord of every part of who you are, what you do, and think, and feel, and dream. Do you continually worship Him with your whole self in sincere commitment, not just on Saturday night or Sunday morning? What about the rest of the time? Do you make time for daily devotion? Do you abide with Him and stay in communication with Him? Remember, Itzhak relentlessly practiced when not on stage. He comes prepared. Do you bring Jesus the gift of yourself in all aspects of your life submitting to His Lordship, not merely confessing with your lips and tongue? In the depth of your heart and soul are you truly living out discipleship to the One Whom we proclaim is the Lord of our lives? I appeal to you and encourage you to turn to the Holy Spirit to inspire you and uplift you, to be encouraged by God's promises to be a part of building God's Kingdom.

At times it may seem like this mission is in decline. There are times, especially in the West where there is great affluence and convenience, we observe a false sense of self-sufficiency. It may seem that the Church is in decline. That is not true. We might observe it in some mainline denominations but in the larger scheme of things around the world, the Kingdom of Christ is growing in places where a Westerner may not expect.

The attitude of Christians toward our mission should be like something George Washington reportedly said concerning the famous crossing of the Delaware in the middle of a snowstorm to surprise the British: A subordinate said to him, "General. It can't be done!" to which Washington reportedly responded, "I know it, but we're going to accomplish it anyway!" They did!

God promises that He will complete what He started, and praise be, He includes us in what He is doing! If there's anyone within the sound of my voice who wants to join us in this great mission at an even greater level than you already are, let us know; there is a place for you! We need laborers in the vineyard. All need to be involved in their unique way. "The harvest is truly plentiful, but the laborers are few" (Matthew 9:37). Look what God says about what He is doing. When the angel came to Mary in Luke 1:33, he announced "And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." There's no decline here.

In Daniel during the exile, the Babylonian king had a vision of a statue and could not determine what it meant. Daniel explained that it represented great kingdoms such as Greece and Rome, Babylon and Persia, and he told the king about those kingdoms saying,

And in the days of these kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44).

Malachi 1:11 says:

"...from the rising of the sun, even to its going down,
My name *shall* be great among the Gentiles;
In every place incense *shall be* offered to My name,

And a pure offering;
For My name shall be great among the nations,"
Says the LORD of hosts.

I want to leave this thought with you. What started with a handful of stargazers from the East will culminate with a great victory as described by the Apostle John in Revelation 7:9-10. First John sees the 12 tribes of Israel and all the Chosen People that will be saved. Then he turns,

After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰ and crying out with a loud voice, saying, "Salvation *belongs* to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

To make this happen is what the Church is all about. We are a part of the most essential and truly glorious cause in human history. We are a part of God's work in reconciling the world to Himself through Jesus Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit. No other endeavor has greater consequence than this. The building up of Christ's Kingdom will last through all of eternity! May God be praised! ■



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