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Matthew 2:1-12

## THE MIRACULOUS AND THE MUNDANE

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Word of the Lord.

People love a good controversy. We are drawn to them like flies to paper, like mice to cheese, or like Magi to Bethlehem. Don't think the Wise Men just happened to stumble into Herod's court to ask him where the king had been born. My theory is they did this in full hearing of Herod's scribes and priests just to get a good rumor going. "Did you hear that Herod is afraid of a baby?" Those rascally Magi and their silly geography questions.

A controversy **WAS** born that day in Bethlehem but it wasn't started by our beloved Magi.

The *christological* controversy was a great feud between church leaders who could not agree on the question of who exactly was born on Christmas day. Who was Christ? Was he human? Was he God? Theologians took turns coming up with theories and explanations trying to decide what the gospels really say.

In 325, Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, led the charge to settle these questions and more at the Council of Nicaea, and eventually the Nicene Creed was created and adopted by nearly all Christian churches. In fact, it remains the only creed that is given the title "ecumenical" on account of its acceptance by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and major Protestant Churches. Give the Nicene marketing team a raise!

But the Nicene Creed was and is not perfect. One thing it doesn't score well on according to Aaron Twitchell's proprietary Creed-rating system, is its handling of the very issue it was meant to address: the person of Jesus. It doesn't have much to say about Jesus the baby or Jesus the man. Since Athanasius and others were so focused on defending the deity of Christ, they kind of left a lot out about his humanity.

Here is what the creed says: “I believe in on Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;”

I think in some ways, the Church never recovered. Over millennia, Christians have focused heavily on what it means to say that Christ was fully divine, but perhaps not enough on why his humanity is so important to God’s plan for salvation.

We ignore it to the point that even our Christmas carols seem to want little to do with Jesus as a human baby boy.

“Away in a manger” expects us to believe that the baby Jesus didn’t even cry, something that former president of Fuller Seminary Richard Muow calls a “heresy”. Muow drives the point home by saying, “There was no Superman under his swaddling clothes”. The song, “Do you hear what I hear?” is not much better when the little boy says to the king, “A child, a child, shivers in the cold, let us bring him silver and gold.” What’s wrong with blankets and a casserole?

Now, I get it. Who wants to sing about dirty diapers, temper tantrums, and teething? “Silent Night is a much better song than “Sleepless Night” But still, Richard Muow’s concern is valid that these songs reinforce our resistance to the human nature of the Messiah.

Why is this? Why are we like Herod, terrified of the idea that salvation had come through a messy, painful birth? What is it about this article of our faith that is so challenging?

Matthew’s gospel illustrates the fact that early writers wrestled with this question, just like we do. The tension between humanity and divinity is lifted up in our passage for today through the use of contrast: worship and fear, wise and foolish, the miraculous and the mundane.

For example, Herod, a terrible and powerful man, was “frightened” when he heard that the Messiah had been born, yet he wants to know where so that he can go and worship him. Herod isn’t sure who or what this Messiah is. Human or divine?

Or how about the fact that the Magi, who get to enjoy the title, “Wise Men” didn’t know the answer to a very basic geography question despite having traveled by star to a distant land, and instead had to be educated by “chief priests and scribes”, who are 100% vilified throughout the gospels?

As far as the miraculous is concerned, miracles can be found throughout the birth narrative: the star that rose, its stopping above the manger, the fact that these Magi came at all being from a far away land and probably of a whole different religion, their witnessing of the baby, and the warning in a shared dream to return home on a different route.

These miracles help all of us to prepare for the holiness of Christmas. The anticipation of the coming Messiah, the fact that the prophecy of Micah was fulfilled in the small town of Bethlehem, and the splendid light from the star that guides us to the manger. We sing lovely hymns and carols as a way to express our own worshiping of the newborn Savior and King. The miraculous is almost synonymous with Christmas and Epiphany, and rightly so. We love miracles. We have the best miracles. They are tremendous.

And the reason we love miracles is because we don’t have to be afraid of the them. The angels tell us as much all throughout the Bible. The phrase, “Do not fear” is the most commonly occurring sentence in all of scripture. And for good reason. We need not fear the baby, right? After all, he is the Son of God, a God who loves us and who now is with us, Immanuel. We need not be afraid. We are not afraid of the miraculous.

What we fear is the mundane, lowly, and fragile phenomenon that we call humanity. We fear that in the story we would be like Herod, afraid that the

Messiah had been born of a woman, instead of like the Magi, courageous and obedient.

Indeed, our fear of Christ's humanity began far back in history and has persisted through the centuries. Perhaps this is so because Christ as the invisible God is easy to ignore in our own lives because, after all, how could we possibly live up to the life of the Son of God? And so why even try? Certainly we can be excused from such a demand.

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote an essay about this while at Crozer Theological Seminary. He wrote: "To say that the Christ, whose example of living we are bid to follow, is [only] divine... is... harmful and detrimental. It causes us to say, 'Oh, well, he had a better chance for that kind of life than we can possibly have.'" End quote. That, brothers and sisters, is called a cop-out, and it is so much easier to do when we pretend that Jesus was "just" God.

But if we have to contend with Christ the Person, Christ the Human Being who we could see and touch... that isn't so easy to ignore.

When Jesus commands us and teaches us and demonstrates God's love for us, he does so not as an angel or an all-powerful deity but as a frail human being, just like us.

When Jesus chooses not to condemn, not to hate, and then commands us to do the same, we don't hear that command from a burning bush or a gentle breeze. Instead, we hear it from a human being just like us. And that is challenging.

When Jesus loves the tax collector, the adulterer, the Pharisee, the poor, and the sick, and then commands us to do the same, we don't receive that command from an invisible spirit. Instead, we hear it from a man whose life looked much like ours in many ways: he felt pain, anxiety, the sting of

rejection, and the daily demands of living under a violent, despotic rule, and yet he commands us to love our neighbors.

We don't want Jesus to be a human being who *chose* love because we live in contempt of our fellow human beings. We hate the stranger, the immigrant, the widow, and the orphan which means that we would have hated Jesus too.

We don't want Jesus to be a person because Jesus the person was a brown refugee born out of wedlock who grew up to say things about power and politics that nobody wanted to hear.

And some of us don't want Jesus to be a man because Jesus the man chose not to oppress women, exclude them, or treat them according to the patriarchal system he was born into. Rather, he sought to upend such a system which cost him everything, and some of us would rather avoid paying that cost. Jesus the man taught these things, not Jesus a disembodied God who wouldn't know the cost of fighting such patriarchy. Jesus the man knew the cost, and paid it. Are we willing to do the same?

Thankfully, Epiphany is about light. The Magi followed the light of the star. Our passage from Isaiah began with, "Arise, your light has come". Indeed, the Savior of the world has been born into the world, so let us go and see where this great light has come.

The light that came into the world gives us hope that our humanity is nothing to fear. God in God's wisdom elected to save the world by becoming a part of it, showing us that if God has redeemed it then we can also participate in its redemption.

The light of Christ gives us hope that we can trust in the obedience of Jesus of Nazareth to serve as an example for how we ought to live our own lives.

And we **should** trust in his light. We should trust that the life and ministry of Jesus was meant to be a light for us to see our fellow human being the way God sees them.

Indeed, the light of Christ was not only meant to miraculously reveal the face of God. It was also meant to reveal the faces of our neighbor, the faces of all people, so that we might choose to love them just as Christ chose to do.

May the Spirit be with us in our efforts to love others as Christ has loved us.

Amen.