

Four Questions from the Magi

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening. My name is Anthony Parrott. I have gotten to serve as one of the pastors here at the Table Church for almost three years, hard to believe. Happy New Year, Happy 2023, though we're getting close to the period of time where you can't say Happy New Year anymore because it's too far gone. But this is my first time seeing a bunch of you, and I hope you had a wonderful holiday season and Christmas and New Year's. And, you know, I know for a matter of fact that some of you didn't and some of you didn't. Some of you had some rough times over the holidays, and I'm always mindful of that fact every time we get together that we get this kind of smushing together of big feelings where people are having good days and bad days and things are going great in their life and things are falling apart. And I appreciate the fact that we get to sort of be reminded of that every time we come together on a Sunday, either together in person or online or we meet in a community group or an affinity group. We're just reminded that the world and our lives are kind of bigger than ourselves. And I think that's a huge important part of why we do this. So if some of you are here because you made like a New Year's resolution that you're going to like get right with God and go back to church, that's cool. That's cool. And, you know, on the one hand, I hope you stick with it. I think what we do here is worthwhile. And on the other hand, if you don't, like there's no shame in that. Like if this isn't for you, it's okay. It's okay.

My holidays were mixed. We were able to have some family come out here to DC. We had a really good time with our kids and all the classic Christmas stuff. I also lost a grandparent, which I'll talk a little bit later in the sermon. And so we had to make a trip back to Indiana and do a funeral and all of that, which, you know, it's always this mixed bag of like, it's a grandmother. She lived to 91. She was ready to go. You celebrate a life. But it's sad you're saying goodbye. It was my last grandparent. But I'm also seeing siblings. I discovered that my brother can make like a mean margarita. And we all like had a lot of margaritas. So, you know, holidays and death and loss, it's, it's this interesting thing that we all, we're all doing together. Tonight's sermon, we're going to be in the book of Matthew chapter two. The words will not be on the screen behind me. And so if you have a Bible in, on your phone, or if you happen to bring a physical one, it'll be in Matthew chapter two. And we're wrapping up sort of the last of our Advent and Christmas sermon series today. And maybe some of you are like, come on, it's January 8th. Are we not done with Christmassy stuff? But today is the first Sunday of Epiphany. And Epiphany is a longstanding feast and celebration on the church calendar that half of the world of the Eastern Orthodox Greek Russian Orthodox Church recognizes the baptism of Jesus. And then the other half of the world, influenced by Roman Catholicism and

Protestantism, all of that. They recognize the coming of the Magi. And that's what we're going to talk about tonight, the coming of the Magi. And then once we're done with this series, Tanetta and the preaching team have been working on our next series coming, I believe, next week. And if it has a title, I don't know it yet. But basically the idea is moving from this to that. What are the movements in our spiritual lives, our lives with God, as we've moved from toxic forms of faith to life-giving forms of faith? So you have that to look forward to. So for the sermon, I want to give, I want to read through the text, Matthew chapter 2, verses 1 and forward. I'll give a little bit of commentary and some notes as we go through it. And then I've got sort of a New Year's-y sort of sermon for you, which is very much not my style, but I'll talk about that in a second too. So here is Matthew chapter 2, starting in verse 1. And I'm going to interrupt our reading a bunch of times, so bear with me.

It says this. It says, After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod. We'll pause right there. So King Herod, his name is Herod Antipater. And Herod was a puppet king of Rome, who was overseeing the Palestinian and Galilean territory where a bunch of the Judeans, Israelites lived in the first century. Now, don't be confused. Rome was very much in charge. The empire was very much present anywhere you went, in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Galilee, all around. But Rome was smart, and they knew that if they could install these kind of puppet rulers, it would sort of keep the masses tame for a while. At least that was their thought. So Herod was part Edomite, which was a sort of cousin off branch of the ancient Israelites, and part Arabian.

He wasn't really a Jew at all. And so Rome sort of made a miscalculation in that they installed this guy Herod, that the Israelites, the Jews, hated. They hated the guy. And Herod, as he got older and older throughout his life, he became more and more paranoid about his role over Palestine and Galilee. And there are lots of stories outside of the Bible about just how sort of deranged Herod got in his latter years. And you're going to see some of that in our story tonight. So that's King Herod. So during the rule of King Herod, Magi come from the east to Jerusalem. So Paul's again, who are the Magi? So the Magi used to be, before the time of Jesus, a specific cast or sect of servants of the king who were astrologers. They would interpret dreams. They would do magic, which is where we get the word magic, in order to kind of do things on behalf of Persian rulers, Babylonian and Assyrian.

[6:10] Then that word, Magi, sort of got spread around. And so lots of cultures used it in the time of Jesus. And so Magi could have come from anywhere, but they were still mostly associated with the mysterious east from the perspective of like a Roman or a Greek or even a Jewish person.

So these Magi come from the east. And there is other records, other stories of Magi coming to the east for significant royal births. There's a story in AD 66 where they visit the Emperor Nero in Rome.

So during the rule of King Herod, after Jesus is born, Magi come from the east to Jerusalem. And they ask, where is the newborn King of the Jews? Now, King of the Jews, a very important phrase.

It's used only twice in the Gospel of Matthew. It's used here by the Magi, and it's going to be used again at the death of Jesus by Pilate. And it's going to be the sign that's above Jesus's head during his crucifixion. It's the thing that he's accused of being. It's the thing that is going to get him executed, that Jesus thinks that he's the king of the Jews. Rome really doesn't like people claiming themselves to be king. But the Gospel of Matthew, the author of Matthew, he's making a point that it seems to be the outsiders who are the ones who understand who Jesus truly is. So the Magi ask, where is this newborn King of the Jews? We've seen his star in the east, and we've come to honor him.

Now, Magi, they're astrologers. They use the sky, the stars, the planets to make predictions. And interestingly, the author of Matthew doesn't make any commentary about this, good or bad. Now, when King Herod hears this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. Herod is paranoid.

[8 : 07] He's afraid somebody's going to topple him as a ruler. And he would build these massive fortresses to protect himself. He would execute various members of his family in order to protect himself from being usurped. And then Jerusalem is troubled with him, not because they want Herod to stay their king, but basically, whenever Herod's upset, trouble is a brewing. Herod's going to do something rash or wild, or he's going to bring the wrath of Rome upon them. So Jerusalem is troubled. Herod is troubled. And Herod gathers all the chief priests, all the legal experts, all the religious professionals in Jerusalem where the temple is, and asks them, where is the Christ, the Messiah, to be born? And the religious experts say, in Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote. And this comes out of the book of Micah, you Bethlehem land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers, because from you will come one who will shepherd my people Israel. And I think it's worth noting here too that in Micah's prophecy about the Messiah and Bethlehem, the primary metaphor that Micah uses is that of a shepherd, not a ruler, not a despot, not somebody who's going to go on rampages because they're afraid that they're going to lose their throne, but rather a shepherd, one who cares, one who is nurturing. Then Herod secretly called for the Magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. And it's about, we know this from the next story that we won't get to tonight. That's about two years ago, because King Herod eventually is going to order the execution of all the children two years and younger. And so the Magi must have seen the star in the sky show up about two years ago. So Herod sends them to Bethlehem and says, go and search carefully for the child. When you found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him. Herod lies. When they heard the king, they went and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. Now, if you're hoping for some sort of like scientific explanation of this or some sort of like, it was this comet or this constellation, you're not going to get that tonight. You can go looking on Google or TikTok. You're not going to get that from me. We're going to accept the story as it's been handed down to us. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.

The Greek actually sort of stumbles over to itself. They were exceedingly joyful and glad. They entered the house and they saw the child with Mary, his mother. Now, I shared a little bit about this on Instagram. My last church in Iowa, Good News Church in Iowa, was sick of me talking about nativity sets and the three wise men. Because every nativity scene you've ever seen that has three wise men there with a manger and the shepherds is wrong. Is wrong. And so what we had to do at my last church, we'd have these big nativity sets that were like, I don't know, child's eyes high. And I would force the decorators to move the magi to a different room to show that they had just started their journey when Jesus was born. And they were two years away from showing up. So the scene is that the magi show up and Jesus is probably one and a half to two years old. They are no longer, you know, stuck in a cave or a manger scene. They've managed to secure housing, probably with family, in Bethlehem.

And that's the scene that the magi walk in on. Not a manger, no shepherds, not a little tiny baby, but a little, you know, two-year-old Jesus who can walk and stumble around and talk and all that.

So the magi, they come in, they see Mary, they see Jesus, they fall to their knees and they worship. Then they opened their treasure chest and they presented to Jesus very practical gifts for a two-year-old gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Just what every two-year-old wants. Now this is the idea where we get the idea of like three wise men because there were three gifts. There's nothing in the story that says there were three. There were just three gifts. More than likely, what we know about magi is they traveled in caravans. So it's probably a large group. Both male and female would be there. So it's not just wise men. There could be wise people, wise women too. And probably a whole, you know, just menagerie of folks who are looking for the king of the Jews. So they present the gifts. And then verse 12, because they were warned in a dream, again, supernatural direction, they did not return to

Herod. They went back to their own country by another route. Now that's the story. Epiphany is this church holiday that recognizes the coming of the magi. And specifically, Epiphany is about the showing up of light. During, while we were singing, we had a reading from Isaiah chapter 60. And it's the story about the Messiah receiving kings from nations, receiving treasures because light has dawned in the world. And what Epiphany is recognized in the church calendar is that Jesus came not just to the Jews, but to non-Jews as well. Myself, I'm assuming most of us in this room, we are immigrants into someone else's religion. The recognition of Jesus as Messiah, the recognition of there being a Messiah at all, was something that came from the Jews. It came from the Israelites. It came from the Hebrew scriptures. And so what Epiphany celebrates and recognizes that Jesus, the light of the world, coming into the world, was for everyone. And this is not what the sermon is about tonight, but I do think that we owe it to ourselves. We owe it to our Jewish brothers and sisters. We owe it to our own religion, our own faith, to maybe recognize the fact that we are immigrants and strangers into it. That we are invited in by Jews 2,000 years ago who recognized what Jesus was up to. The other thing I'll say is, as I was preparing for this sermon, I kept wrestling with God. Like, I was just, I would sit in prayer and in silence, and I was like, what exactly do you want me to say to my flock as your pastor, my church, to my friends and my family here? Of what is it that we need to hear in 2023? And I just, I never got like a definitive answer. Because I feel like at any given moment, there are so many different things happening in each of our lives that it seemed really hard to reduce this down to just one single point. And so what I've got for you tonight is just sort of a series of things I've noticed. And I'm hoping and praying that the Spirit will take either any one of those, if we're lucky, and maybe it will speak to you tonight. The other thing that happened is I recently read a book called 4,000 Weeks, and it really made an impact to me. I've got this short list of books that I call books that every grown-up should read. And I think 4,000 Weeks is going to end up on that short list. And it's basically an anti-time management and productivity book. I'm a big productivity nerd. I've got like four different to-do apps on my iPad. I like change note-taking apps every week in like this effort to be like 1% more efficient. And this book basically just says like all that is ridiculous. You are mortal.

[16:05] You're going to die. Give up. And it's somehow inspirational at the same time. So I don't know how it managed to do that. But we're all coming into the new year. It's 2023. We've had some holiday breaks. We're probably coming back to email inboxes that are overflowing. We're thinking about what we want this year to be like. And I'm usually not the sort to give New Year's kind of sermons. I'm allergic to self-help-y sort of preaching. Three steps to a better marriage. Five steps to, I don't know, five easy points for becoming a better driver. Like all those sorts of sermons I could give, but I've never enjoyed giving them. And if you've been around for the past few years, I think you know that about me. But as I was reading this week's scripture, as I was meditating on this book, I just, the one bit of direction I felt from God is that whatever I offer, it just needs to be practical and helpful tonight. So maybe the sermon is just for me. If that's the case, thank you for allowing me to inflict it onto you. But maybe it will be helpful for you as well. So the first thing

I noticed about the Magi is that they go on this pilgrimage. They leave their culture. They leave their people. They go into a strange, to them, a strange and different world of Jerusalem and Palestine and Herod and this idea of a Christ, a Messiah, a King of the Jews. And I imagined for them that this was deeply uncomfortable. They're astrologers. They're magicians. They're Magi. And they're going into the Jewish culture, which was very monotheistic. It was very suspicious of astrology and magic and anything like that. And they are making themselves go into an uncomfortable situation and, you know, show up and pay homage to this King of the Jews. And so what 4,000 Weeks, that book I mentioned, does, it offers a series of questions about your life. And this is the first question. Where in your life or your work are you currently pursuing comfort when what's called for is a little bit of discomfort?

Where in your life or your work are you currently pursuing comfort when what's called for is a little discomfort? Now, many of us, we've got plenty of discomfort in our lives already. Thank you very much. And so pursuing discomfort hardly seems like an encouraging word for the night. So often we make choices in terms of alleviating anxiety or chasing happiness. But what if instead we asked, does this choice diminish me and my people? And by my people, I mean my family, the people I'm in solidarity with, the people of my race or my culture, whatever my people means to you. Does this choice diminish me and my people or does it enlarge me and my people? Well, oftentimes we don't know what the right decision is, what's going to reduce anxiety or increase happiness. But I feel that often, at least

I know deep down what is going to enlarge me, grow me as a person, and what's going to shrink me down. Often, the things that enlarge me, transform me, are deeply uncomfortable. And yet I'm better off because I choose to do so. The magi could have seen the star and could have said, that's cool, write it down in the, you know, annals of our history, and left it at that. But they left their culture and they got to see Jesus Christ himself. Like I mentioned, my grandma recently died, just a couple weeks ago. We had the funeral and the burial last week. And we were in where I grew up in Indiana about a month ago for Thanksgiving. And our trips to Indiana, my parents are there, my wife Emily's parents are there, we've got college friends there. They're always very, very packed.

And we had not planned on seeing my grandmother. The other thing, which I'll just sort of confess before you all, is like, I'm deeply uncomfortable around like really old folks. Which I know, I know, you can chuckle. But like, nursing homes have always just kind of made me uncomfortable, which is where my grandma lived. And so it just was not high up on my priority list to go see grandma during Thanksgiving.

[20 : 39] But I knew that she was sick, she had pneumonia, she was on the upswing. But it was really encouraged that we go see her. And so I went and saw her. And didn't know that would be the last time. But it was a really good time. We had a good talk, I got to hug her, I got to say goodbye. It was a thing that made me uncomfortable, but enlarged me as a person and made me appreciate the time that I had with my grandmother. So where in your life or your work are you currently pursuing comfort? And what's called for is a little discomfort. In short, choose uncomfortable enlargement over comfortable diminishment wherever you can. Thing number two I noticed about this story is the reversal of expectations. King Herod, Jerusalem, the religious professionals, they respond in fear to the arrival of the Messiah. And it's the astrology following non-Jewish pagan magi who get it. In other words, the people who made it in the world, Rome's puppet King Herod, the Jerusalem city dwellers, the city elite, even the religious leaders who King Herod consults, they miss it. And it's the folks who would have been pushed aside by most of Matthew's readers. They're the ones who are elevated in the story.

They're the ones who get it and get to experience Jesus. So question number two from 4,000 weeks is this. In what ways have you yet to accept the fact that you are who you are, not the person you think you ought to be? So many New Year resolutions are about that little bit of guilt or shame within us that try to tell us you're not the person you ought to be. And quite often it may feel like an internal voice, but probably it's been years of external voices pushing or pressuring on you to change something about yourself that I believe God probably created in you as good. There's these stories about magi who another confession. Okay, I'm uncomfortable in nursing homes. You know that about me. Also, I automatically judge somebody who's into astrology. I'm sorry. I know there's some astrology folks in here. I'm sorry.

I just thought I have found the whole thing ridiculous. And yet, it's also been said that the Enneagram, which is something I ideally adore, is basically astrology for Christians. So everybody has their thing, okay? I, astrology is not my thing, and I'm trying to get over that judgmental part of me. But a big part of that is that here I've got this story in Matthew chapter 2, and the gospel or Matthew says those folks that Anthony, you historically have made fun of, they are the ones who get to go and see Jesus in the arms of Mary, the mother of God.

They're the ones who give the gifts. And Matthew seems utterly unconcerned about whether or not they got saved. Seems utterly unconcerned about their pagan rituals and ways. Rather, just lets them go on their way. And there's definitely a stream of Christianity somewhere out there that says, hey, that's great about the magi, but you know they're burning in hell, right? I'm like, really?

Is that the gracious God that we believe in? And so we've got these external pressures on us that say, hey, January 1st, 2023, it's a new year, it's a new you. So lose that weight, take up that habit, give up that habit. Now, don't take any of this as an excuse to, like, keep being a jackass when you know you shouldn't be. It's not to say that growth or change or transformation isn't possible. I'm not the same person that I was 15 years ago, thank God. But it's not because I became less me. I think, I think, I am more me than I've ever been, more human than I've ever been, because I've learned how to become more loving and kind and generous and understanding and empathetic. And I've learned to heal from the systems and the scars and the wounds that tricked me into believing that that was the best version of myself. Becoming a more productive, inexhaustible, one percent better tool in capitalism's hands, I guess that's personal growth. But it also feels a lot like becoming less human. Change through shame and guilt and condemnation will always, I think, lead to deformation. Yes, change, but a sort of mutation that leads to death. And as far as I've ever seen, it's grace and mercy and love that are the only things that are capable of bringing about growth and shedding the systems and deformations that make me less me and you less you, less human, less of the Imago Dei that God created us to be.

[25 : 53] And of course, this isn't solely about me and my personal growth. We are an interconnected network of souls who are meant to care for one another. As one writer put it, the place that God calls you is to the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet. But it can be surprisingly radical for many of us to simply ask, what do I enjoy? What is my deep gladness? And then be okay with the answer. Because so many of us have for years been told that what you enjoy in your deep gladness is probably the thing that will lead you to sin and shame. And I wonder if stories like Matthew might invite us to maybe believe where our deep gladness and our deep joy is might be just the way God made us. You can't know where God is calling you if you don't know what your deep gladness is.

Your deep gladness without the voices internal or external of condemnation and judgment. So what would you do differently with your time today if you know that your standards, the standards that have been applied to you have been unreachable all along and maybe never meant to be reached in the first place? Third thing I notice is that the Magi, they go on this journey and they follow a flipping star, not even knowing where it's going to lead. They end up in the wrong town, you might notice. They don't end up in Bethlehem. They first end up in Jerusalem.

They end up talking to the deranged king, Herod, who ends up going to kill, trying to kill who they want to worship. These Magi, they may be devoted, but they're not professionals. They're not experts.

So here's the question. In what areas of your life are you still holding back until you feel like you know what you're doing? In what areas of your life are you still holding back until you know what you're doing? Here is the deep, deep truth that nobody wants you to know, but you need to figure out. Every institution, every walk of life, every profession, everyone is just winging it all the time.

All the time. We run from crisis to crisis trying to figure out because whatever we learned in school did not apply to whatever situation we're facing today. And we all feel this deep sense of imposter syndrome, at least some of the time. If you don't, do you have narcissism? Congratulations.

[28 : 38] Congratulations. We all feel this deep sense of imposter syndrome, at least some of the time. And then it leads us to stop doing what God is calling us to do, where our deep gladness and the world's deep needs meet. And we stop doing it because, oh, I'm not ready yet. I'll, someday I'll know what I'm doing, but I'm not, I'm, until then I'll hold back. 18-year-old me would be super impressed with 35-year-old me today, other than my radical demonic theology that says that God loves everyone.

But that aside, 18-year-old me would be very impressed by 35-year-old me. I have, what I've said here before, my dream job. I am the lead pastor of a church of folks that I think are on the right path. We, all the things that Richard said earlier, all the things that we believe, all the things that we're up to. I get to set my schedule. I get to worship with folks that I enjoy worshipping with.

I get to preach. I have my dream job. And yet, every time I write one of these sermons, or I put out a blog post, or I go to Instagram to share something, there is this voice in the back of my mind that says, you don't know what you're doing. Stop it. And I think we all feel this way, at least from time to time.

But if we all feel this way, that means we can all stop feeling this way. We can all give up that hold back until I got it figured out. Because I think it stops us from doing the things that God is calling us to do in this world. I think it stops us from being the sort of, even Christ followers. Well, I could be a praying or meditating sort of person, but I don't know what I'm doing yet, so I'm going to set that aside.

I could be an activist for change, but I don't know what I'm doing yet, so I'm going to set that aside. I could be, now that's not to say like, you know, never stop learning, never stop growing, but also stop cutting yourself off because you believe something about yourself that's just not true.

[30 : 37] In the same way, the Magi who show up at the wrong king in the wrong city two years late, they got to see Jesus. So maybe we just need to take our first steps like they did.

Okay, fourth, last thing. The Magi to me are fascinating because they show up in a big splash, second chapter of the first gospel of the New Testament. They come into the story, they bow down at Jesus and Mary's feet, and then we never hear from them again. There's lots of church tradition, again, that mistitles them as kings and gives them names and makes all like stories around what happened to the gifts. Some say that the gifts were used to finance their escape. Joseph and Mary and Jesus' escape to Egypt. Some say that the gifts were used for the tomb and for the burial of Jesus.

There's lots of stories, but in the Bible that we have, they show up in the story, they make a splash, and then we never hear from them again. Which, as a, you know, somebody who likes to read fiction from time to time, drives me nuts. It's like, I want to know the end of the story. What happened to the Magi? What are their names? Did they go back and tell other people about Jesus? Did they ever hear about his ministry and that the fact that he was a healer and that he would feed thousands? Did they find out about his crucifixion? Do they think that's just or unjust? Do they know about the resurrection?

I don't know the answers to the, to these questions. I don't know the end of the story. They show up. They never show up again. And yet, here we are, 2,027 years later, still talking about them. They had an impact. Maybe not the impact that they planned on. Maybe Jesus wasn't the king that they imagined Jesus would be. We don't know, but they did have an impact. So here's the fourth and final question for tonight. How would you spend your days and your time differently if you didn't care so much about seeing your actions reach fruition? How would you care, spend your days differently if you didn't care so much about seeing the effects of what you do? Basically, it means, how would you spend your time if we had a little bit less anxiety about our impact in the world? As the proverb puts it, plant trees that you will not sit under the shade of. What would it look like for us who, to find the place where our deep gladness and the world's deep needs meet, to start working on that, and then be so utterly unconcerned about, like, will I, will I have a legacy? Will, will I be able to complete my work? Because I think that concern, that anxiety, is what gets us over-anxious, gets us overthinking, and then in the end, not actually taking action. Could we dedicate our life, our lives to projects that almost certainly we won't be completed within our lifetimes? What actions of generosity, of care for our neighbor or our planet, what ambitious schemes of investment into the distant future, might it be meaningful to undertake today if you could come to terms with never seeing the results? The Magi, they embarked on their journey, not fully knowing how it would end, and then they don't know their legacy. They don't know how their story would be written in the Gospel of Matthew.

They wouldn't know about Epiphany and the fact that preachers like me would be talking about them 2,000 years later. They just took a first step. And so my hope, my prayer for myself, and for all of you, is that we might also take some first steps, or second or third steps this year. As we pursue a life with God, of knowing Jesus, as we pursue justice and dismantling systems of death and revealing the kingdom and the commonwealth of God, may we trust that God is in the work, already up to something good, and we are merely joining God in it. May we believe that what we have to offer is worthwhile, that any voices that have ever told you otherwise were wrong. And may we have the audacity of hope and grit and courage to say, you know what? This world is dark and sometimes feels hopeless, and I'm not content with that. And I want to do what I can together, individually, to make this world a more just and beautiful place.