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Sermon: “The Newborn King” (Matthew 2:1-12)

January 2, 2011

Happy New Year!

Each year many people make New Year’s resolutions—perhaps you are among them. The most popular resolutions involve losing weight, drinking less alcohol, getting out of debt, volunteering more or maybe taking a trip. Some people do a relatively good job with their resolutions; most do not. Maybe you’ve already broken your resolution—after all, it is already January 2nd ☺. I was having lunch with a friend this past week and he was joking about not making resolutions anymore because there are some ways he just isn’t going to change ☺.

This morning I’m not preaching about making any resolutions, because the Gospel is not about anything we resolve to do or stop doing; the Gospel is about the resolution God made before the foundation of the world, a resolution He has always kept: His resolution to love us no matter what. The greatest demonstration of God’s love for us is found in Jesus Christ.

Today’s Gospel passage from Matthew recounts the visit of the wise men to worship the newborn Jesus. During the past few years at the *Lessons and Carols* service here at Christ Church I have read this passage. One year I misread the famous question of the wise men, “Where is the child who has been born?” as “Where is the *star* who has been born?” Immediately after saying “the star who has been born” I realized what I had done, but acted like nothing had happened and kept on reading. The problem was I couldn’t prevent myself from thinking about the two famous *A Star is Born* films (1954 and 1976), so during the rest of the reading I’m trying not to laugh as visions of Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand were dancing in my head. Off to the side I could hear a couple members of the choir trying not to giggle too loudly. Unfortunately seminary did not include a course on phonics ☺.

In today’s passage we read that “wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.” These wise men, or Magi, were a combination of astrologers and scholars, perhaps from Babylon. There had been widespread expectation among them about a great king who was to be born in the West, and they had journeyed many miles to find him. It is quite possible that one of the factors involved was the prophecy of Balaam from the Old Testament book of Numbers in which he prophesied, “a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17). Scholars maintain several theories about the “star” they followed. It may have been a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, or a comet or supernova, or perhaps simply a one-time supernatural sign from God.

But the emphasis of this passage is neither why the wise men made their journey nor how the phenomenon of the moving star can be explained; the emphasis of this passage is *who* the wise men came to see. They came to see Jesus. The wise men wandered about Jerusalem asking,

“Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” and telling people, “We observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” People all over Jerusalem were troubled by this, including King Herod.

King Herod was evil. He was of mixed blood, part Idumean and part Jewish and as such was resented by both. He was the puppet king of the Romans over Judea and Galilee and although famous for his many building projects (including the expansion of the Second Temple), he was equally notorious for his cruelty and paranoia. Out of fear of maintaining his power Herod had killed many rabbis, and had even killed one of his wives and at least two of his own sons.

When King Herod heard about the words of the wise men, he summoned the Jewish religious leaders, the scribes and priests, to ask them where the king was to be born. They told him Bethlehem, citing the prophecy from the Old Testament prophet Micah (Micah 5:2). Then Herod summoned the wise men themselves to learn about the appearance of the star. After that Herod sent the wise men to Bethlehem to find the newborn king and then bring him word so that he too could worship him. Interestingly enough, the scribes and priests apparently did not make any effort to find the newborn king.

Herod had no intention of worshipping Jesus, the newborn king; he wanted to kill him too. We know this because Matthew tells us that after the wise men journeyed back East without telling Herod where the newborn king was, Herod sent men to Bethlehem to slaughter every child two years old and younger.

The wise men went to Bethlehem and arrived at the place where Jesus, the newborn king, was staying with his mother Mary. They had finally found the king of the Jews. The great king who was to be born in the west was right before their eyes. Matthew tells us “they were overwhelmed with joy.” This past week I had the privilege of visiting a Christ Church couple who had just had a baby boy, and I never tire of seeing the joy of a couple holding their newborn child.

A few weeks ago there was much in the news commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the death of John Lennon. John released his final album, *Double Fantasy*, in the fall of 1980, just a few weeks before he was killed. One of the tracks on this album is entitled *Beautiful Boy*, a moving lullaby he wrote for his five-year old son, Sean. At one point in this song he sings:

Before you cross the street
Take my hand
Life is what happens to you
While you're busy making other plans

Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful
Beautiful boy
Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful
Beautiful boy

When the wise men saw Jesus, the newborn king, the beautiful baby boy in the arms of Mary, they were overcome with joy—and out of that joy, what did they do? They worshipped Jesus.

For this newborn baby, Jesus Christ, was indeed the king of the Jews. Just as Balaam had prophesied many centuries before, a king had indeed arisen out of Israel, and just as Micah had prophesied centuries earlier, this king had indeed been born in Bethlehem.

In the Old Testament we see that Bethlehem was where Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel, was buried, that Bethlehem was where Ruth was rescued by her kinsman- redeemer, Boaz, and that Bethlehem was where King David was born. And it was through the lineage of Jacob, Ruth and David that the newborn king came, born in Bethlehem, just as God had promised. Bethlehem in Hebrew means "house of bread," and it was in Bethlehem that Jesus Christ, who later identified himself as the Bread of Life (John 6:35) was born.

And we see in today's passage that Jesus did not become the king of the Jews *later* in his life; he was *born* king of the Jews. In contrast to King Herod, whose reign was rooted in fear and marked by aggression and cruelty, Jesus' reign would be rooted in love and marked by compassion and grace.

As the wise men worshipped the newborn king they presented their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There is a deeper significance in these gifts, for gold was a typical gift for a king, frankincense was used by priests in worship, and myrrh was used to embalm the dead. Even at his birth it was clear that Jesus, the king of the Jews, the Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14) was destined to die for the world.

And about thirty-three years later that is exactly what happened. Jesus, the newborn king, died on the cross for the sins of the world, with a sign affixed above him that read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matthew 27:37). The newborn king in the arms of Mary grew up to be the King of Love on the cross.

T. S. Eliot, the great twentieth century poet and playwright, was born in St. Louis, Missouri and later moved to England where he eventually became an English citizen in 1927. That same year he converted from Unitarianism to Christianity and was baptized and confirmed in the Anglican Church. In 1927 he also wrote *The Journey of the Magi*, a poem Eliot wrote in the first person from the perspective of one of the wise men. In the final stanza Eliot describes his own conversion to Christianity through the eyes of the wise man:

Were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

In Eliot's poem the wise man recounts catching a glimpse of the truth that this newborn king would die one day for the world, including him—and this changed his life. From now on there would be a longing in his life, from now on he would be “no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,” from now on he would long to be fully in the presence of the King, Jesus Christ.

As Christians we believe that Jesus, the King of Love, after dying on the cross, was raised on the third day and ascended into heaven, and that he will return someday. In *The Return of the King*, the third volume of J. R. R. Tolkien's classic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, Gandalf the wizard tells his friends how they will be able to identify the returning king: “The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known.” It's the same with Jesus, the King of Love.

Jesus died for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:2), for the healing of every hurt in your life and mine. The hands of the newborn baby that Mary held, with tiny fingers and tinier fingernails, were the same hands that were later nailed to the cross. Jesus died for the sins of all of us—for the wise men who journeyed to Bethlehem to see Jesus and the scribes and priests who did not, for T. S. Eliot and J. R. R. Tolkien, for John and Sean Lennon, and yes, for King Herod too. Jesus, the newborn king, the beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, beautiful boy, eventually gave his life for all of us. The newborn king born in Bethlehem, “the house of bread” is indeed the Bread of Life. His hands, which even now bear the scars of His love for us, are indeed the hands of a healer, and we can be encouraged today that one day the King of Love will return to complete his great healing work, that with those same hands He will dry every tear from our eyes.

In the meantime we can respond to the unbounded love of Jesus in the same way the wise men did, by worshipping Him—and we need not give him gold, frankincense, or myrrh, we can give him thanks and praise instead.

So in this New Year, regardless of any resolutions you have made or already broken, be encouraged. The Gospel is not about anything you have resolved to do or not do. The Gospel is about the truth that God has resolved to love you no matter what. Jesus, the newborn king, the King of Love, is proof that God kept His resolution of love for us, that He loves us now and always will.

Amen.