

Experiencing Christ This Christmas

Rich Nathan

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2006

Matthew 2.1-12

I want to begin by welcoming our guests here this Christmas Eve. I know we have lots of family members from out of town spending the holidays in Central Ohio. Some of you have come with friends. Perhaps some of you have seen one of the yard signs that we have around town. If you are a guest here tonight, on behalf of the Vineyard, I want to say welcome!

This Christmas Eve I'm going to share with you a familiar Christmas story. It is the story of the Magi, those Persian astrologers who followed a star from modern Iran all the way to Bethlehem in Israel. We read these words in Matthew 2.1-2,

SLIDE

Mt 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

Our church for years has put up large billboards in several locations around the city. The billboards simply ask the following question in huge letters: "Looking for God?" If you talk with people about spiritual things, as I regularly do, it is amazing the variety of ways that people have of experiencing God. Because God is the Creator of this world, many people experience something of God by being out in nature. I've talked with hunters who say one of the things that they love about hunting is not just getting a deer. It is being in the woods at the crack of dawn when everything is still. It seems that every breeze communicates something of God's presence.

If you've ever watched a lightening storm over an ocean, the thunder and lightening can fill you with a sense of God's power and majesty. Walking by a flowing stream, or hearing birds sing, looking a field of flowers can fill a person with a sense of God's joy and comfort. The Old Testament King, David, who is the most famous of all of the Israelite kings said this in Psalm 19:1-4,

SLIDE

Ps 19:1 The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. ² Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. ³ They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. ⁴ Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun,

Have you ever experienced God through nature?

Since God is love, many people experience God when they do good and serve other people. Why do you think so many folks enjoy going down to Faith Mission or the Ronald McDonald House, or a food pantry to serve people at Christmas time? It is not only the satisfaction you get knowing that you've helped someone else, God reveals himself as we give ourselves away in acts of service. When you help a stranded motorist, when you shovel the driveway of an elderly neighbor, when you tutor a child in an after school program, you might find yourself experiencing God. Jesus says as much in Matthew 25:34-40,

SLIDE

Mt 25:34 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶ I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

³⁷ "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? ³⁸ When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? ³⁹ When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

⁴⁰ "The King will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

Have you ever felt closer to God because you did some act of kindness for someone else?

Since God is the author of beauty, some people experience God through the arts – through music, dance, film, or painting. Because God is relational, one can often have a sense of God when families come together in love, or friends come together over a meal and enjoy warm conversation with each other.

An ancient Psalm says this in Psalm 133:1 and 3,

SLIDE

Ps 133:1 How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!

Ps 133:3 It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore.

But all of these general experiences of God, whether through nature or through service, or through the arts, or through relationships – all of these general experiences of God, however wonderful they are, are meant to lead us somewhere. It is not the intention of God to leave us with vague spiritual feelings, or even a sense of wonder and awe. God wants us to know him. Nature

and acts of service, the arts and community, these are all sign posts meant to point beyond themselves to a specific God who exists.

So we read in Matthew 2:1-2 these words:

SLIDE

Mt 2:1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

There are lots more questions than answers about who these Magi were. There is nothing in this story that tells us they are kings, as later church tradition made them out to be. We don't know their names. We don't know exactly where they are from. We don't know that there were three of them. And we don't know what they saw in the sky, whether it was a confluence of planets coming together, as some have suggested, or a super Nova that is recorded in ancient Chinese documents to have taken place between 5 BC and 4 BC. There is said to be three Magi because they offered three gifts in Matthew 2:11,

SLIDE

Mt 2:11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But most scholars seem to recognize that these Magi belonged to a priestly cast of Eastern astrologers. And in most ancient histories, Magi are found in either Babylon, which is in modern day Iraq, or Persia, which is modern day Iran. The Magi, this priestly cast, used to be involved in astrology and dream interpretation, as well as predicting the future. It was also widely believed in the ancient world that when a certain star appeared, a world ruler would be born in Israel.

So these astrologers were not satisfied with some vague spirituality, a generic belief in God, a feeling of God in nature, or in family gatherings. These astrologers were not satisfied with season's greetings, or best wishes this holiday season. They wanted to focus their spiritual discoveries on a specific person. They saw the star or some confluence of the planets – and they realized that the world ruler the ancient world had been waiting for had been born. So they asked: "Where is the one whose been born King of the Jews?" In short, these Magi followed the light they had all the way to Christ.

Now we see in this story three very different reactions to the birth of Christ. First of all, we have the reaction of King Herod, who was threatened by the birth of Christ.

SLIDE

The Experience of Being Threatened by Christ.

Here is what we read in Matthew 2.3-4,

SLIDE

Mt 2:3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

When Jesus was born, the nation of Israel was under Roman rule. Herod the Great enforced Roman rule at the local level. And Herod the Great had declared himself to be the King of the Jews. He was known for his paranoia regarding the protection of his throne. He killed two of his brother-in-laws. He killed his wife. And he killed two of his sons. There was a saying at the time of Jesus' birth that it was better to be one of Herod's dogs than to be one of Herod's sons. Five days before his death, he ordered the arrest of many citizens and decreed that they be executed on the day of his death in order to guarantee a proper atmosphere of mourning in the country when he died.

The political climate at the time of Jesus' birth resembled that of Russia during the 1930's under Stalin. Citizens couldn't gather in public meetings. There were spies everywhere. People were constantly reporting rumors of political insurrection and rebellion to King Herod. And so what do you think King Herod experienced when he heard from the Magi this statement: "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and we've come to worship him."

You know, its not just the ancient King Herod 2000 years ago that experienced Christ as a threat to his plans and security. Today many people experience Christ as a threat to their wellbeing and their happiness.

Let me tell you about a couple named Lee and Leslie. Lee and Leslie had a storybook romance. They met in high school when they were 15 and instantly fell in love. In fact, when Leslie met Lee she went home that evening and told her mother, "Today I met my future husband." Leslie's mom smiled as moms do when teenage daughters say things like that and said, "Yes, dear, I'm sure that's the case."

Lee said if there was such a thing as love at first sight, he experienced it. Lee and Leslie dated through high school. When Lee went to college, Leslie followed him to the same school. They continued to date and they married when Lee was 20 years old and Leslie was 19. Lee studied journalism and eventually went to work at the Chicago Tribune. He won a bunch of journalism awards. One day he had three of his articles on the front page of the Tribune under his own byline.

They had a son and a daughter. They made a bunch of money, although not nearly as much money as they spent. Lee had a bit of a drinking problem. He also had a little bit of an anger problem. But over all, he would have said that they had an excellent marriage.

And then one day, Lee's worst nightmare was realized. Someone came between he and Leslie threatening to shipwreck their idyllic marriage and land them in divorce court. It wasn't an affair. It wasn't the resurfacing of an old flame. Instead, the one who came between Lee and Leslie and who nearly capsized their marriage was none other than Jesus Christ.

You say, "How could that be?" How could Christ, who so many credit for contributing to the strength of their marriage and the strength of their families be a contributing cause to Lee and Leslie almost splitting up?

You see, when Lee and Leslie got married, God wasn't even on their radar screen. Lee described himself as an atheist. Leslie wasn't sure she believed, but if she believed in God, God was only an abstract idea to her that she had never really taken any time to explore. Neither Lee nor Leslie were church-goers.

But then Leslie met a woman in their apartment complex who was a Christian. This woman was one of the nicest, kindest women that Leslie ever met. Leslie admired the way she was raising her children. Leslie discovered a peace and serenity in this woman's life that Leslie knew she didn't have. Occasionally, this Christian woman would refer to Jesus in a very natural, non-preachy way. It was obvious that she had experienced Jesus as a living, real, and wonderful person. She certainly wasn't pushing religion down Leslie's throat. But Leslie became intrigued and at a certain point in their relationship, this Christian woman invited Leslie to go to church with her.

Leslie began getting up on Sunday mornings going to church with the kids. And after several months Leslie decided to ask Jesus to be her forgiver and the ruler of her life.

So she came home and told Lee what she had done. For Lee it was the worst possible news that he ever heard. Lee was afraid that his wife would become some sexually repressed prude; that she would walk around judging him about his drinking; that she would spend all of her free time serving the poor in some soup kitchen; that she would reject their upwardly mobile lifestyle.

Whenever Leslie would get up for church, Lee resented it. He resented the time she was taking away from him. In anger, he used to say to Leslie, "If you need that kind of crutch, if you can't stand on your own two feet and face life without some make-believe God, and a book of mythology and legend, go ahead. But remember two things: don't give the church even one penny of my money because that is all they are interested in. The church is run by a bunch of con

men. And, second, don't try to get me out of bed to go anywhere with you on Sunday morning because I am too smart for that blankety-blank stuff."

And you know it is not just marriages that have been threatened by one person experiencing Jesus. Friendships are sometimes threatened by a person becoming a follower of Jesus and allowing Jesus to be their forgiver and ruler. Families are threatened when a child decides to take Christianity really seriously and starts going regularly to church or to youth group.

My wife, Marlene's, parents were quite concerned when in high school my wife began to sit in her room and read her Bible. They, in fact, sent her to a local pastor to try to talk Marlene out of her new-found faith in Christ.

It has been widely reported that a major reason why the billionaire Ted Turner divorced his actress wife Jane Fonda was because Jane Fonda became a follower of Christ. Ted Turner's daughter said this, "Religion per se wasn't the basis of the disagreement between my father and Jane. It was another male that came between them, Jesus Christ. My dad interpreted it as taking time away from him." In other words, Jesus was a rival to the exclusive relationship that Jane used to enjoy with Ted.

For some of you, you absolutely can identify with feeling threatened by a friend or relative's Christian faith. Part of the threat may come from having a rival for your friend or relative's affections. Part of the threat may be the result of knowing that your friend or relative admires certain qualities and has certain values that you don't have and that you don't share. Perhaps you feel competitive with the new friends that your relative or friend obviously admires. It is also threatening to us to have people talk with us about things that we know nothing about. Some of you may have spent years getting a professional or academic degree; you went to college; maybe you went to grad school. Some of you have post-graduate degrees. You may be highly trained, highly competent in your particular field. And when you are highly competent, when you feel like you know a great deal about a great number of things, you can feel threatened when a person begins to talk with you about important subjects that you know absolutely nothing about.

I heard one scientist say that despite his advanced degree in physics and his medical degree, he didn't even have an elementary school education when it came to spiritual matters, or an understanding of Christ. And some of you are there. I say this with all affection, but some of you don't even have a grade school understanding of Christian belief or Christian theology. It is not that you've thoroughly explored the person of Jesus and found him somehow deficient. The fact is you've never explored the person of Jesus at all.

What does all of this have to do with you and me? Why would you and I be threatened by the person of Jesus this Christmas?

Friends, again, I speak to you with all affection, but there is a little King Herod that lives inside of every one of our hearts. A little King Herod who reigns over the kingdom of self and who is threatened, deeply threatened, by the claims of Jesus Christ to be the only King. The issue for many of us that keeps us from becoming followers of Jesus is the issue of control. Is that true of you? Would other people close to you say that you have “control” issues? You don’t want anyone else to call the shots. You don’t want anyone else telling us what to do. I have a kingdom of Rich that I reign over and you may have a kingdom of John, or Bill, or Julie, or Mookie, or Tawana, or Julio, or whatever your name is. You reign over your little kingdom and Jesus’ demand that you become one of his followers threatens your reign.

Do you know what becoming a Christian involves? Christ is not just interested in changing you at the surface, offering you a little moral improvement, making you nicer, making you kinder, making you a little more giving. Christ wants to enter the deepest part of your being and transform you. Christ is interested in taking total control of your life. For some of us that is a threatening thought. But you know, everything that God intends for your life is good. In fact, God’s plan for your life is infinitely better than any plan you might have for your own life.

Some people don’t experience a feeling of threat from Christ. Its not that they say, “Look, I don’t want to talk about this. It makes me feel uncomfortable. It really upsets me, or makes me angry, that you are a follower of Jesus and that you claim Jesus as your forgiver and your ruler. Some people experience utter indifference and apathy towards Christ. Matthew 2.4-6,

SLIDE

Mt 2:4 When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

SLIDE

The Experience of Indifference and Apathy Towards Christ

The chief priests and the teachers knew exactly where Messiah was supposed to be born. The Old Testament contains hundreds of prophesies concerning the birth of Messiah.

I’d like to add a personal note here. I was raised in a conservative Jewish family. The first time I ever stepped foot in a church was at age 18. I had never been in a church of any kind – Catholic, Protestant, Lutheran, Baptist ... I had never been

in any kind of church for any reason – not a wedding, not a funeral, not Christmas, not Easter. I had never set foot in a church until I was 18 years old.

But as somebody coming from a Jewish background, I found the story of Jesus to be incredibly compelling. When I began reading in the Old Testament – books accepted by Jewish people, I began reading dozens of prophecies about what Messiah would be like. The Old Testament teaches that Messiah would be born of a virgin. There were prophecies that Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. That Messiah would be rejected by people. That he would be crucified. That his death through crucifixion would be a substitutionary one. That God would have his Messiah pay for the sins of the world. But that Messiah would not stay dead; he would rise from the dead.

All of this can be found in the Old Testament. And the Chief Priests and the teachers of the Law knew the prophecies about Messiah. And they knew exactly where Messiah was to be born. But here's the tragedy in all of it. Even though they had this knowledge, they utterly indifferent and apathetic. We don't read that the priests or the teachers joined the magi in their search for Christ. The knowledge that they had just sort of slid off of them like water off of a duck's back.

Friends, I say this with all affection, but there is a warning in this for you and me. You know in the United States, we are surrounded by the message about Jesus Christ. Particularly at Christmas, in every shopping mall and at every gas station, whenever you turn on your car radio, you're going to hear Christmas Carols. And I don't just mean the jingle bells kind of songs. You can't go to any shopping mall anywhere in America without hearing some choir singing "Silent Night, Holy Night, Shepherds quake, at the sight, glory stream from heaven afar, heavenly hosts, sing hallelujah, Christ the Savior is born."

We're surrounded by the message of that verse from *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, how silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts, the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

But you know, even though you may be surrounded by the message like the teachers and the Priests back then, you may be a person tonight who has responded with indifference or a barely suppressed yawn.

You know, *The New Yorker Magazine* this past week did an article titled "Why Publishers Love The Bible." You may not know this, but the Bible is the best-selling book of the year every year. It is virtually impossible to calculate how many Bibles are sold in the US. But a very conservative estimate would put the number of Bibles sold in the US last year at 25 million. That is more than twice the number of the recent Harry Potter book that was sold. And that doesn't take into account the millions and millions of Bibles that are given away for free all

over America. Research has demonstrated that 91% of Americans have at least one Bible in their house. The average American has at least 4 Bibles in their home.

Modern marketing has been applied to the sales of Bibles so that there are niche markets for almost every kind of Bible conceivable. There is a surfer's Bible; they are talking about coming out with a skater's Bible with stories of skaters and spiritual tips if you are a skater. There is something called Revolve, which is a Bible for teenage girls. The 2007 edition features cover lines like "guys speak their minds" and "Do U rush to crush?" Inside, the gospels are surrounded by quizzes, photos of beaming teenagers, and sidebars offering Bible-themed beauty secrets. Let me read to you from one of the sidebars next to a gospel passage:

SLIDE

Have you ever had a white stain appear underneath the arms of your favorite dark blouse? Don't freak out. You can quickly give deodorant spots the boot. Just grab a spare toothbrush, dampen with a little water and liquid soap, and gently scrub until the stain fades away. As you wash away the stain, praise God for cleansing us from all the wrong things we have done (1 John 1:9).

Friend, this Christmas Eve, you may be a person who was raised in a church. You may have been raised Roman Catholic or Methodist or Presbyterian or Baptist or in some other church. But as you sit here this Christmas Eve, you would have to admit before God that you have never personally surrendered your life to Christ, or experienced Christ as a living real, wonderful person who could change your life for the better. Like the priests and the teachers of the Law – surrounded by information about Christ but not responding to it.

Someone once said to me, "You know, going to the church that I went to growing up gave me just enough dead virus to inoculate me for years from catching the real thing." I wonder if some of you might have been injected with just enough irrelevant, boring, dead religion to inoculate you from experiencing the real Jesus Christ this Christmas.

I think of some of you who are children and teenagers and young adults who have been raised in Christian families. Some of you have been raised in this church – in the Vineyard Church. Yet this Christmas Eve – even though you have been surrounded by so much information about Christ – the truth is you have never surrendered your life to Christ personally.

It's not enough that your mother or your father or your grandparents were true Christians. You need to personally respond to the message. The Magi, who were a thousand miles away, went looking for Christ in Bethlehem. Teachers of the Law and the Chief Priests, who were just an hour's walk away from Bethlehem, didn't go looking for Him.

There ought to be just a little bit of embarrassment for some of you to have a Jewish guy like me – who was not raised in church, who never set foot in a church until he was 18 – having to tell *you*, who were raised in church – about Jesus.

We have in our church former Muslims, we have former Hindus, we have former Buddhists, we have former Atheists. Why should they race ahead of you - who were raised in church – to have a personal relationship with Christ? I want to invite you to join them. If you've never surrendered your life to Christ – to join them in responding to the Jesus that you've heard about your whole life.

Finally, we read this in chapter 2:9-12,

SLIDE

Mt 2:9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

We find in the lives of the Magi the experience of pursuing and finding Christ at Christmas.

SLIDE

The Experience of Pursuing and Finding Christ

Those who are near the religious leaders will not honor Jesus. But the Gentiles, the Magi, who are far away living in Persia, decide to bow before Christ and give him gifts.

All of the gifts given were very costly. It says they presented him with gifts of gold, incense, or in some translations, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold signifies all their earthly possessions, their bank accounts, their investments, their properties. All of it was yielded to Jesus Christ for his service. Frankincense was a gift that people gave to the gods. In Babylonian temples, the Magi used to burn frankincense on silver altars as they offered their prayers to the gods. And myrrh was an expensive spice that was used for embalming by the ancient Egyptians. Perhaps the gift of myrrh pointed prophetically to the future death of Jesus on a cross as a sacrifice for your sins and for my sins.

You know, many people are kept from experiencing Jesus as Christmas because they are afraid of what they are going to have to give up. The Magi, when they came to Christ, gave Christ expensive things. And a lot of people say, "I'm not

interested in becoming a follower of Jesus because of all that I will have to give up.” If you have a Bible, I would like you to circle a word that is found in v. 10. It is the word, overjoyed.

SLIDE

Mt 2:10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

No one whoever meets Jesus ever feels cheated or ripped off. You know, after Jesus grew up there was a moment when he stood on the steps of the Jewish Temple and shouted out to the crowds, “I am not a thief. A thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy. I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.”

One way to think about what happens when Jesus comes into your life and you experience him in a real way is that it is like coming into your house and recognizing that someone has been there. You look around and you find that there is nothing missing except that the person who came into your house has straightened up a little bit. They’ve thrown out the garbage. They fixed one of the leaky drain pipes that was causing a stinky smell in your house. They spackled and painted some of the cracks in your living room. They cleaned your oven that hasn’t been cleaned in years.

And not only do they fix up some of the mess in the house, but the person who has secretly been there leaves behind certain gifts. On your fireplace mantel is a beautiful antique clock. There is a wonderful painting left on the wall in your living room. It is exactly the style that you like. You open up your jewelry box and there is a beautiful ring made just in your size. And on the kitchen table there is a note with a wad of cash attached that says, “Just a small token of how much I love you. Merry Christmas! Love, Jesus.”

There is an old saying that you can never out-give the Lord. I have been a follower of Jesus for 33 years. During that time, I have met tens of thousands of other followers of Jesus. I have never met anyone who has experienced Jesus as their forgiver or ruler who said, “This bargain turned out badly for me.” We always win in the exchange. Like the Magi, we give Jesus certain things. We give him our anxious hearts, and he gives us his peace. We give him our sins, and he gives us his forgiveness. We give him our depression, and he exchanges it for his joy. We trade in our out-of-control lives and he gives us abundant life. We give him our confusion and our uncertainty about the future, and he gives us a compass whereby we can do life well.

The Magi gave to Jesus various gifts. But nobody can out-give Jesus. He gave them the fulfillment of their life-long pursuit, the secret of the meaning of life, and the opportunity following death to live eternally with God. Will you open your hearts today to experience the real Jesus this Christmas? Let’s pray.