

The Magi Pt 2

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, December 29, 2024
PASSAGES	Matthew 2; Isaiah 60; Isaiah 9; Daniel 2
MESSAGE	Begins at 0:54:30 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The second half of the Magi story is a battle between light and darkness, and the sides are absurdly mismatched. Herod has an empire, soldiers, religious scholars and permission to lie; God has one poor family and a few dreams. God routs him completely — which is worth remembering while you are waiting for a rescue big enough to notice.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Gold and frankincense arriving from the east is Isaiah 60 landing in a house in Bethlehem — and behind it, the older promise to Abraham that the nations would be blessed through his seed.
- ◆ The Magi were stargazers in the Babylonian and Persian tradition, plausibly heirs to Daniel's legacy. God spoke to them through the night sky and through dreams, which is not how we usually assume he is allowed to work.
- ◆ Joseph's obedience is the small hinge the whole rescue turns on. He was given a dream — the flimsiest evidence a person can act on — and he got up and went.
- ◆ Matthew keeps stopping to say *this fulfills what was spoken*. The Jesus narrative is not a new and unheard-of event; it was promised ahead of time.
- ◆ Jesus re-enacts Israel's own story — called out of Egypt, baptized in the Jordan, tested in the wilderness, the true suffering servant, the Passover lamb himself.
- ◆ Herod's jealousy turns murderous against the most vulnerable people available. The light-versus-dark battle in this text is not a figure of speech.

- ◆ God is a humble God who often moves in ways small enough to miss if you are not paying attention. Watching for his fingerprints turns being bent out of shape into gratitude.
- ◆ There is no repayment plan with God. He will always be more generous than you, and letting him be the better one is how you come to know him as he actually is.

► 0:54:30

This was the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's, which at Hope means travel, thin volunteer rosters, and toddler classes but nothing above them. Matt welcomed the room to children's ministry — "you've all been deputized" — announced that the poinsettias were free to a good home after the service, and promised to be on his best behavior, a promise he later broke with a third Lord of the Rings reference.

A word about repayment

► 0:56:46

He started somewhere else entirely. There is a very human Christmas feeling, he said, of wanting to come out at least even on gifts — the quiet discomfort of receiving generously from someone you forgot to buy for. That instinct does not transfer to God. "There is never any time in the future where we'll pay off our low-interest or zero-interest loan to him," Matt said. "There's no license plate making in heaven." The gifts keep coming, because in his presence is fullness of joy. One of our biggest struggles with God is simply letting him be better than us — and when you do, you get to know him as he really is.

1. Treasures from the east, promised centuries earlier

► 0:58:26

"And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."

MATTHEW 2:11-12 ↗

Matt read that against Isaiah's vision of the nations streaming toward Israel's light:

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.”

ISAIAH 60:1–3 ↗

Read on and the correspondence gets uncomfortably specific — sons coming from afar, daughters carried on the hip, camels from Midian and Ephah, and travelers from Sheba bringing *gold and frankincense* (Isaiah 60:4–6). Two of the three gifts, named by the prophet. And behind Isaiah stands something older still: the promise to Abraham that in his offspring all the nations of the earth would be blessed — made before Israel was a nation, and being kept here by foreigners kneeling on a dirt floor.

► 1:02:01

Who were they? Not three, and probably not kings. “There’s no way of knowing how many they were,” Matt said — the number three comes from the gifts, and the crowns come from the scaffolding we build around the Bible rather than the Bible itself. The Greek is *magoi*, the same word the Septuagint uses in [Daniel 2:2](#) for the enchanters Nebuchadnezzar summoned about his dream — a word that can mean stargazer or astrologer, which fits men watching the night sky. Matt’s reconstruction: Daniel served as a prophet in Babylon and Persia, and told those courts about a [stone cut by no human hand](#) that would supplant every kingdom on earth. Wise men in the east kept that memory alive. When the star rose, they knew whose it was — and assumed, wrongly, that Jerusalem would already be celebrating.

Instead a dream sent them home by another road. These pagan astrologers heard from God accurately, through the sky and through their sleep. It breaks the mold of how we assume God is permitted to speak, and he seems untroubled by the mold.

2. Joseph, and four dreams he could easily have shrugged off

► 1:04:43

“Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”

MATTHEW 2:13–15 ↗

Herod does what threatened rulers do; a new king is a problem for his line. And God's countermeasure is a dream. Matt pressed on how small that is: not fire, not a sign in the sky, not an angel standing in the room while you are awake. "When you wake up in the morning and you remember a dream, you think, well, it could have been supper." Joseph heard, listened, obeyed — by night, on a donkey, to a foreign country, with an open-ended instruction to stay until further notice. It required faith precisely because the evidence was so thin.

► 1:07:02

Then the massacre — every male child in Bethlehem two years old and under, the age bracket itself telling us how long the Magi's journey took. Matthew reaches for Jeremiah rather than explaining it away:

a voice heard in Ramah, Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted, because they are no more. Herod's rage lands on the most vulnerable and innocent people available, and goes unchecked. That is the darkness this story is fighting.

► 1:08:36

A third dream brings the family back after Herod dies; a fourth turns them aside to Galilee when Archelaus proves no safer (Matthew 2:19–23). Four times, the same unimpressive delivery method. Four times, a man gets up and moves his family.

3. Jesus re-walking Israel's road

► 1:09:20

"Out of Egypt I called my son" was first said about the nation (Hosea 11:1), and Matthew hands it to the child. From there the pattern keeps repeating: Israel came out of Egypt toward the land, and so does Jesus; Israel passed through the water, and Jesus is baptized in the Jordan; Israel was tested forty years in the wilderness, and Jesus fasts and is tempted there; Israel was called God's servant, and Jesus is the true and faithful suffering servant. Moses promised a prophet like himself, and here he is. Bread appeared in the wilderness for Israel, and Jesus hands out the same. Israel kept the Passover lamb; Jesus is the lamb. Israel received a covenant through a mediator on a mountain; Jesus teaches the law and its significance on one.

"A true and profound fulfillment of the promises God has been giving," Matt said — "but the packaging looks small." The robust thing arrives in the humility of a child.

► 1:12:59

Even Nazareth carries freight. No single verse says "he shall be called a Nazarene," so Matt offered two possibilities. Nazareth was a humble place to be from, and the prophets said the Messiah would be humble. And Galilee itself was under prophetic expectation:

“In the latter time he has made glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.”

ISAIAH 9:1–2 ↗

The other option is wordplay. [Isaiah 11:1](#) promises a branch — *netzer* — from the stump of Jesse, and Hebrew runs on consonants, which Nazareth shares. “It could be like a dad joke kind of prophecy.”

4. Count the forces on each side

► 1:14:24

Matt laid the ledger out. Herod: his own throne, backed by Rome and its resources. Self-issued permission to deceive. Religious scholars summoned on command. Governmental authority, soldiers, and the will and means to kill children in quantity, with nobody to stop him. On the other side: one small poor family, guided by angels through dreams.

Could God have done it differently? “Could God have gone totally Lord of the Rings epic battle mode?” A fire show, *you shall not pass*. Baby Jesus strangling snakes like Hercules. A golden crib and a public guarantee of safety. Presumably yes. What he did instead was speak to one man in a poor family, in his sleep — and that completely routed an opponent who held every visible advantage.

5. Watch for the fingerprints

► 1:17:37

Which is where he turned it toward the room, on the last Sunday of the year. Many of us are asking for the big rescue: the breakthrough, the giant check, the person who surfaces after years to say they are sorry, Gandalf coming over the ridge at dawn. “It is in God’s track record to overcome great evil with really, really small humble acts that, if you weren’t super paying attention, you might even miss.” A scoffer looks at chaos on this scale and says: that’s it? Dreams, to one poor family? Yes. And he wins through it.

► 1:19:17

Matt was careful about what he was not saying. Not: make a New Year’s resolution about baby steps. What he asked for was attention — “look for the fingerprints of a humble God who might move in small ways.” Have you ever been bent out of shape that the Lord didn’t do enough, fast enough, big enough, loud enough, bright enough? Then notice what he is doing on the scale he actually chose. We are

people who ask for daily bread, dependent day by day. Reframed that way, the same circumstance produces gratitude instead of grievance — and a sharper sense of how powerful he is, given how little of himself he had to spend to win.

He closed by praying for eyes to see what God is in fact doing, for faith while we are outnumbered, and for gratitude.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Psalm 16:11
- Matthew 2:11–12
- Isaiah 60:1–3
- Isaiah 60:4–6
- Genesis 22:18
- Daniel 2:2
- Daniel 2:34–35
- Matthew 2:13–15
- Matthew 2:16–18
- Matthew 2:19–23
- Hosea 11:1
- Isaiah 53:11
- Deuteronomy 18:15
- Isaiah 9:1–2
- Isaiah 11:1
- Matthew 6:11

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt said our instinct to come out even on gifts does not transfer to God. Where do you catch yourself trying to repay him, and what would it change to let him be the more generous one?
2. God spoke to pagan astrologers through the night sky and to Joseph through dreams. What does that stretch in your own assumptions about how God is allowed to get your attention?
3. Joseph acted on a dream — evidence thin enough to dismiss before breakfast. What have you been waiting to have confirmed more solidly before you obey it?
4. Name the rescue you have been asking God for. What would it mean if the answer arrived at the scale of a dream rather than a fire show?
5. Where could you go looking for the fingerprints of a humble God this week, and who will you tell when you find them?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEvg8ZJQRuU&t=3270s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.