

# Sermon: Jesus: The Early Years

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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**Introduction:** From [Matthew 1:18-2:18](#) almost two years pass. In just a little over a week, the church worldwide will celebrate what is called Epiphany. The word epiphany comes from a Greek word that means “a revealing or showing.” It is about the appearance of Deity. For us that is Jesus, who the Apostle John calls the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. The idea of epiphany implies a search. It is a search that everyone should make. “Luke, in his gospel has the poor searching, in the form of the shepherds. Matthew, in his gospel, has the learned and the rich searching, in the form of the Magi. So the message is that there is room for everybody in this search, from no degrees to Ph.Ds, from shepherds to executives.” (Baush, *Telling Stories: Compelling Stories*, p.60) Everybody needs to find Jesus!

More and more, people are looking for a relationship with God in the spectacular, the miraculous, the great and grand expressions of worship. That is why the mega-church is so popular. That is why events that draw thousands are like spiritual pilgrimages for some. God has also come to be known, though, to work through humble, quiet service, personal worship, and study.

God’s will has been discovered in the past, and will be seen in the future, in prophecies, at different places, and through various kinds of people.

## I. God Shows Himself in Prophecy.

Matthew has a real tendency to interpret the Old Testament Scriptures so as to reveal the Messiah.

For Matthew, Jesus’ name had been foretold hundreds of years ago by the prophet Isaiah. (7:14) His name was to be certainly Jesus, but also Immanuel ([Matthew 1:22-23](#)).

Another prophet by the name of Micah had predicted Jesus’ birthplace was to be Bethlehem (5:2). Matthew tells about this in our text ([Matthew 2:6](#)).

And finally there was the slaughter of the innocents talked about in [Matthew 2:18](#) where babies were killed in order to exterminate the so-called Messiah. You can still hear Jeremiah crying as he wrote:

**Jeremiah 31:15 (NIV)** <sup>15</sup>This is what the LORD says: “A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.”

Growing up I heard that this slaughter involved thousands of babies, but in reality the number was more like 20-30 babies who were murdered by Herod. This was still no insignificant number, and especially so, if one of the babies was yours.

Prophecy is a major part of Matthew’s gospel. Matthew’s audience is primarily Jewish and so he uses 62 direct quotes and about 260 allusions or parallel passages from the Old Testament in his gospel. This is all in an effort to demonstrate how Jesus is God’s promised Savior and Messiah.

In many cases, prophecy may be fulfilled more than once and speak to more than one generation. This in fact is true of many of the Messianic prophecies. But this is no fairy tale passed down from generation to generation. It is no “once-upon-a-time story.” These are stories that were true, are true, and will always be true.

Today there’s a lot of end-of-time talk, but you shouldn’t be worried if you are a Christian. There have always been a lot of predictions made about all kinds of biblical events, especially the second coming. My counsel to you would be: don’t pay any attention to all these false prophets because the Scripture says that not even the Son knows when His second coming will be. Anyone who pretends to know more than Jesus Christ is both arrogant and led by a different spirit than the Holy One whom we have as a deposit of things to come.

## **II. God Shows Himself in Different Places.**

God has used many places to demonstrate His power and reveal Himself. On an ark, on a holy mountain named Sinai, in unholy cities like Sodom and Gomorrah, tabernacles and majestic temples, or caves and crèches. Sometimes He is seen in us.

When we first see Jesus and His family in a more settled surrounding, they are still in Bethlehem and now in a house (**Matthew 2:11**). I know it doesn’t seem the same as what we many times see in nativity displays, but that *is* what the Bible says.

Today there are certain places where we can sense God’s presence like Jacob at Bethel. Listen to what he thought (he had used a stone as his pillow):

**Genesis 28:16 - 17 (NIV)** <sup>16</sup>When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” <sup>17</sup>He was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.”

Can you remember those places where you felt God’s presence? I think back to church camp, or in church service when I first gave my own money that I had earned, my home church where I was baptized, a worship time at a church in Peoria, Illinois, Sayre PA UMC, Waverly, NY UMC when I was called back into the ministry, Mimbres Camp in New Mexico when I preached during Jr. High week and 14 of the 28 campers came forward to be baptized, Deming Episcopal Church where only 12 people showed up on any given Sunday morning, and probably still that’s the case, but I could sense a reverence for God when I walked into their newly refurbished sanctuary.

Have you ever had moments like that?

There have been a couple of other times for me. When Jack Smith was in the middle of another round of chemotherapy, got up in service with his family, and sang, “I Believe in God,” and when Bob Cramer got up in service and announced he had terminal cancer, but in the meantime wanted to minister to our needs. There have been some Christmas-eve services and other special times when I could sense God beside me. There have been a lot of different individuals, and I could name them, too: male and female, young and old, well-educated and high-school dropouts, rich and poor that have forever changed me for the better.

### **III. God Works through Different People.**

**Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)** <sup>1</sup>After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup>and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” <sup>3</sup>When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup>When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup>“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup> ““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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.”” <sup>7</sup>Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so

that I too may go and worship him.”<sup>9</sup>After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.<sup>10</sup>When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.<sup>11</sup>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 and of incense and of myrrh.<sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

In our story there are generally three types of people represented. Their attitudes are varied in how they relate to the news of Jesus’ birth.

HEROD wanted to know about Jesus because he felt threatened by what Jesus might become and demand from his followers. Allegiance to Herod was usually forced. This is quite a contrast from Jesus who does not try to make people love Him. He knows to violate a person’ free will will not produce love or loyalty. One similarity between Jesus and Herod and even us is that we all want to be accepted. The methods used though are poles apart.

Herod, “in 40 BC had received the title of king; and he was to reign until 4 BC ... He was called Herod the Great ... He was a great builder; he was indeed the builder of the Temple in Jerusalem. He could be generous. In times of difficulty he remitted the taxes to make things easier for the people; and in the famine of 25 BC, he actually melted down his own gold plate to buy corn for the starving people.

But Herod had one terrible flaw in his character. He was almost insanely suspicious ... If he suspected anyone as a rival to his power, that person was promptly eliminated. He murdered his wife Marianne and her mother Alexandra, and three of his sons. Augustus, the Roman emperor, had said, bitterly, that it was safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son. As Herod’s death approached he had people rounded up to be executed exactly at the time when he died so there would be mourning in Jerusalem.” - Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol. 1, p. 19ff.)

God works through evil, pagan people to see His will carried out. God is not limited.

There were also the religious leaders (v.4 chief priests and teachers of the Law) who believed they knew everything including how God would produce a Messiah for His People. No one was going to tell them anything new about God.

**They felt they would know the Messiah when He came. After all, they were the keepers/interpreters of the Truth. It was pride that kept them from seeing or investigating the truth. It is usually terribly difficult for people in authority to admit mistakes especially in foundational areas. They liked their positions of importance. Their reward, Matthew says, was to be seen of men. (Mt. 6)**

**There would be others from this group of people who would want to take Jesus' life later on. There will always be those who cannot stand to hear the truth and will go to any lengths to silence it.**

**Jesus would later say: "unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees you will never inherit the Kingdom of God.**

**It is possible, seemingly, to be so close to God that you miss Him. Even religious leaders cannot prevent God's plans from being carried out.**

**And then there were the magi.**

**The magi were not three kings or even wise men for that matter. We really do not know how many magi there were because the Bible does not say. More than likely they were priests under the Persian empire following a real celestial occurrence that they had first heard about from their Jewish neighbors. God then directed them to follow the sign in the heavens above. Some see in this event a motif for the Gentiles coming to Jesus. It is at least interesting to see who did recognize the Messiah – unclean shepherds and Gentiles.**

**The magi wanted to know everything they could about Jesus so they could worship him. They represent the true spirit of not just Christmas, but Christianity. Their purpose was to give gifts, not get gifts. It is those who seek Jesus with pure motives, people who come to give, and who come to worship who will be blessed.**

**What gifts do you bring to the King of kings?**

**Sometimes God's plan may include the most unlikely people – even outsiders. God has worked through various people. I hope God works through you. He will if you'll let him.**

**Conclusion:** Today, if we are not careful, we can also miss an opportunity to know Jesus. Jesus resided with his parents in Bethlehem for almost two years. Apparently the shepherds and a few Eastern magi were the only ones who really understood who Jesus bar Joseph was. They could see with God's help beyond the obvious.

**Where does one look for Jesus these days? If he is true to form you may find Him in odd, out-of-the-way places - like feeding troughs, back water towns like Bethlehem ([Micah 5:2](#)), or maybe even a trailer park in Gainesville, Georgia (*Cotton Patch Gospel*).**

**Sometimes we walk right by where Jesus is – without recognizing Him. Someday, there will be people inquiring of Jesus:**

**[Matthew 25:37-39 \(NIV\)](#) <sup>37</sup> ...‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? <sup>38</sup>When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? <sup>39</sup>When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’**

**Jesus is usually found not so much in the spectacular, but in the common life. We don’t expect to encounter Jesus, King of kings in a diminished position, but that is where we can find Him many times, being a servant. There is quite a contrast between the offering at the Temple (2 turtle doves and 2 pigeons, Luke 2) for Jesus’ dedication and what the Magi brought as gifts for Him almost two years later.**

**The magi recognized who Jesus was. Do we?**

