

The Magi: A Reminder that Jesus Came for All Nations

SCOTT HOEZEE

We often assume that we can tell a lot about a person by the company they keep; with what kinds of folks do certain people like to surround themselves; and we fret what can happen if we hang out with the wrong crowd. Bad company corrupts good character, we sometimes say. One bad apple can spoil the whole barrel. One of the earliest things we read in the Bible about Jesus had to do with the company he kept already when he was just a baby. Jesus had not been on this earth for long when he somehow attracted the visit of some very quirky people called the Magi. Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore this story. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are introducing with this program a five-part series for Advent and Christmas. Advent traditionally has four Sundays and then Christmas. So, the five-part series corresponds to that. Advent means *arrival*, and in the tradition of the Church, Darrell, we spend four Sundays getting ready for the arrival of Jesus, which is what happens at Christmas.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I remember when I was leading children in worship lessons for the children, and how we always told them that we are preparing...we are expecting Jesus' arrival, and we are excited, so we are getting ready to unpack these four stories to prepare our hearts for Jesus to come, and we are looking forward to that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we are going to look at some of the main characters that surround the run-up to the birth of Jesus, but we are going to start today...and some people might be surprised by this...we are going to start with the Magi. They often are thought of as at the end of the story, but their journey probably began sooner than a lot of the other people, because there was a long trip to get to Bethlehem.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, let's dig right into scripture here, starting at Matthew Chapter 2 with this story: After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and 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." ³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When 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 of 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.' ⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is the story. We have a little intrigue here going on with King Herod. We will loop back to that later, but we will set it aside for the moment. I think what we want to do first in this program, Darrell, is sort of establish who these Magi were. Sometimes we have called them wisemen...not quite sure where that tradition began, because the Greek word is *magoi*, and its most literal translation is magi.

DARRELL DELANEY

What I found is that there are a lot of different things that we put together what we call a nativity scene, and what I call it is a casserole because you put all these different ingredients together to come up with everybody at the manger scene together...the magi, the animals, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph. It is not accurate to put them all there at once. So, I am glad that we are taking this time to take each piece apart, especially with the Magi here, so we can see where it really comes from.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the Magi...yes, right, right; they were never all there at once; and the Magi arrived later...much later. Again, they took a long journey. They may have headed that direction even before some of the events we will look at in future episodes in this series, but it took a while. They were quasi magicians—the Magi; and actually, they practiced, near as we can tell, sort of a pseudoscience that today we would call astrology; not *astronomy*...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, which is the scientific study of planets and stars, but *astrology*, as in the sense of trying to predict the future by the movement of the stars. These are the people who today would write horoscopes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, I think it is really interesting because they are not like “God’s people”.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

They came from somewhere else, far from the east. We don’t exactly know where.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, it is interesting that Matthew, who was a Jewish writer writing to a Jewish audience, would put these Magi in as one of his main characters finding the Messiah. That is really interesting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In fact, about a century before Jesus was born, a Jewish rabbi wrote: He who learns from magi is worthy of death. So, the Bible actually in the Old Testament condemns magi...

DARRELL DELANEY

In Leviticus...

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, these are not positive people. Matthew wrote for a Jewish reading audience, who knew their stuff; and so, Matthew knew his readers would be offended by the Magi; and we are going to talk more about that. For now, we often think there were three...the three wisemen. We don't really know. The Bible doesn't say how many; we just know they gave three gifts, so we assume each gave one gift, but that is kind of thin. The notion that there were three kings. In the Eighth Century, there was a teacher who came up with names. We have no idea where he got them: Melchior, Gaspar, and Baltazar. He gave these names to the Magi, but that is all kind of fantasy. Really, the only evidence we have to go on is what we read in Matthew 2, and that is just that there were some magi, we don't know how many; but again, these guys would have been regarded as kind of quacks and charlatans; then and now.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, if you think more of a caravan, I think that would be closer to the actual idea of how many magi; but it really doesn't matter how many magi. I think Matthew is trying to actually illustrate a point that has to do with the fact that these people who do not know God found out that the Messiah was being born in this city, and they made their way here, even before some of these events have happened; and it is really interesting to see that he uses that in his book as a main point.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and we don't know either exactly how they figure this out. One thing we do know: Matthew is not saying: Hey, guess what? Astrology works. No; he is not endorsing their science. Somehow, though, they got this right. They saw something that we assume God revealed to them that said: Hey, something cosmic has happened in Bethlehem of Judea. So, we are told they follow the star. You cannot really follow a star. You know, when I was a kid, I would say to my dad when we were coming home from my grandpa and grandma's house, I am in the backseat, it is dark: Dad, the moon is following us...you know; and Dad would say: No, it's not. It is just that it is so high you can see it from everywhere. You really cannot follow a star. I think it was God obviously guiding them...

DARRELL DELANEY

Sure.

SCOTT HOEZEE

To Jesus for strategic reasons.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I think it is the strategic reasons that we probably want to get into to try to help us understand why did Matthew put these people in this story at this time, and what was he trying to say about the Messiah? We will talk about that in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Darrell, let's go right back to Matthew 2. We read the first eight verses in the first part of the program. Now at verse 9: After they (the Magi) had heard the king (Herod), 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. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of

gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, Scott, this also points to the fact that I talked about a casserole earlier...how we throw all these things together, but this actually starts to unravel it and tell us the truth because it says: they came to a house and not a manger...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; this is some while later, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, it says that he lived in a house and it is a child and not a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, it took them quite a while to get there, and some scholars say it took maybe up to two years for them to get to Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; they may have come from as far away as Baghdad in modern-day Iraq. The courts of Persia, a lot of magi were associated with the royal courts of the far east. So, it would have indeed taken them a while; but we were saying, Darrell, at the end of the previous part of the program, these guys really don't belong here. Now, we forget about that. We think they do belong there. We like it; you know, we kind of think they are like royalty. They present royal gifts to the King of Kings, and how appropriate is that! In our Sunday school Christmas programs, you know, the kids get to play the Magi. You know, we put them in bathrobes that are bright yellow, bright red...you know...bright blue...royal colors. So, we don't bat an eye seeing the Magi next to Jesus, but Matthew's original readers would have. The preacher Debbie Blue preached a sermon on this a while back, and she mentioned that...and this really happened...that she had seen a manger scene in somebody's front yard with an inflatable Superman on the roof of the manger; and she said: You know, Superman doesn't really belong in the nativity scene. No, it doesn't, but the Jewish readers from Matthew would have said the same thing about the Magi.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is actually a twist to have them involved in this. It is the spectacle of it all. It is a hooking moment, where you want to read more and find out why that is happening; what is going on there? I think that Matthew put them in, not just to draw them in, but to show a bigger theological point, which we will probably get to later on in this episode.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, exactly; Matthew's readers wouldn't have liked the Magi because one of the terrible things that happened around this time was when Herod, in an effort to find Jesus, we are told, indeed, God tipped the Magi off: No, don't go back to Herod. He does not want to worship the child. He lied to you. Go home by another way. So, they bypass him, but Herod gets so mad that he thinks: Well, if I don't know the specific 2-year-old I need to kill, I will kill all the 2-year-olds; and so, this slaughter of the innocents, as it is known, was a terrible thing. Jews would have blamed the Magi for that; but even that wasn't the main scandal of having these astrologers there. These are people who just didn't belong. They weren't Israelites...they weren't Jews...they weren't God's covenant people. What are they doing? If Jesus is God's long-promised Messiah, what are these guys doing there?

DARRELL DELANEY

It is really powerful because if you think about this, Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience, and he always traced...I mean, actually, in the beginning of the book he traces the genealogy back to Abram, and this is the reason why, I believe, he is bringing them in because he wants to remind them of the promise God made to Abram.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You will be a blessing to all nations, God said in Genesis 12 already. The very beginning of Israel, with Abram; even before he was named Abraham, that promise was made; and so, right; you mentioned the genealogy. We have done a program on that before...or a series on that before, actually, on *Groundwork*, and we said at the time that Matthew goes out of his way in that family tree of Jesus in Matthew 1 to include four women...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Women weren't usually in genealogies, and all of them were foreigners. Four foreign women, and we said in that series: Ah, see: Ding, ding, ding; Matthew is telling his audience Jesus is here for more than Israel, and the Magi are the same message. These are not buttoned-down Jewish people...people of the covenant...but they are worshipping Jesus as the Messiah, and they are right. So, Matthew was saying: Jesus is here for everybody.

DARRELL DELANEY

Lest we forget God's original plan for Israel to be a light to the nations, that the salvation may reach the ends of the earth, that was always the original plan...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And Matthew is bringing that point across, not only in his genealogy, but by having these magi come; and when I was in Bible college, I learned a concept called faithful foreigners, where there would be people who had no concept of who God was, had no history with God, but all of a sudden, they are finding their way to be more faithful, even than Israel at some points; and we see the Magi actually leading the way to the Messiah; and we see that salvation is designed, not just for Jews, and Paul picks that up in the New Testament, where it is for everyone in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

What you just said about faithful foreigners just reminded me, in the design of the temple, remember Solomon's temple, there were the Gentile courts...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There was a space set aside for non-Jews to come and pray to Israel's God; and when Jesus later cleanses the temple, it wasn't because he was upset they were buying and selling; the buying and selling was taking place in the Gentile courts, so the foreigners didn't have room to pray...

DARRELL DELANEY

No space.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, Jesus said: My house of prayer shall be a house of prayer for all nations; and Matthew is previewing all of this. The Magi are a preview. So, Jesus somehow...like a magnet...attracted these magi, and in coming years, once he is grown up, he is going to be magnetic to prostitutes, tax collectors, Roman soldiers, lepers, lots of women, lots of people that the religious establishment of the day said were undesirables; Jesus attracted them in droves.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is beautiful that you see our Messiah magnetizing the marginalized....

SCOTT HOEZEE

Oh, nice.

DARRELL DELANEY

Because I am the one who is also on the fringes. I am also the one who is desperately in need of God's salvation; and so, I am included in these people who Jesus would be drawing to himself; and scripture tells us that once he is lifted up, he will draw all people to himself. Not just Jews, not just Gentiles, not just males, not just females, but everyone who names the name of Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; I mean, I remember one of my teachers in seminary, you know, pointing out one time: If you don't have Jewish ancestry; if you didn't grow up or come out of Judaism, you are a Gentile, and you are the magi; you are the non-Israelites that Jesus has attracted; you are in the covenant by adoption, and that is good news. If it is good news for you, it has got to be good news for everybody; and Matthew, of course, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, was a very clever writer, Darrell, and he has in his gospel a couple of what we call *inclusios*, or we could think of them as like bookends. So, Matthew sounds a theme in the first part of the gospel, and then he repeats the theme at the end of the gospel. In this case, in the second chapter, we get the Magi, and then in the second to the last chapter we have the Roman soldier at the cross: Surely this was the Son of God. Again, a foreigner recognizing the Messiah, even ahead of Israel, as a sign that, indeed, that Son of God died for all nations.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful thing to see that the testifying comes from not just people that are in the Jewish culture that have this history, but from people who don't have that history at all...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DARRELL DELANEY

And are still able to do it; but as we wrap up this program in a moment, we are going to bring home to our own situation today kind of a so-what and see how it applies to us. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this first episode of a five-part Advent and Christmas series, in which we are going to be looking at some of the main characters surrounding the birth of Jesus; and we have started with characters that come at the end because their journey probably took them longer. So, we have been looking at the Magi.

DARRELL DELANEY

God has been using people who are not Israel to point to Jesus, who is the Messiah, for not just Israel, but for all nations; and we can see that coming up in the New Testament. We see it in the book of Acts. There is a passage in Chapter 2 that says: ³⁶“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.” ³⁷When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. ³⁹The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

So, that *all* makes it very, very, very clear that it is for all people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, *all*...for all those who far off...and here in his Pentecost sermon, Peter kind of proclaimed more than he knew, because if we fast-forward about eight chapters in the book of Acts, Peter is going to be confronted with non-Jews...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Cornelius and his Roman household; these Italians that God is sending his Spirit on; and Peter is shocked that all of a sudden...ooh, the Holy Spirit is coming to not just Israel but to Italians and to non-Jews—Gentiles. So, he said it...he predicted it, right here; but even he wasn't quite ready for the full reality of it. All who are far off; what a beautiful promise.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a wonderful thing, and it is really important for us to remember that the gospel need not be just in our own personal comfort zone or in our own personal circle, but we need to actually think about what God might see when he looks at people wherever they are in their lives, whether their socioeconomic status is up or down, whether they are in the margins of society, God is actually coming to save, with his grace, all people, and that is very important to make sure that that is clear.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Magi...we do associate them with the nativity, and like you said earlier, our nativity scenes are sort of like a casserole. It is like everybody in the pool...shepherds, angels, magi, everybody there at once, which never happened in the narrative, of course; but the Magi are also associated with what comes right after Christmas, which is Epiphany. An epiphany is a revelation; and indeed, this was a revelation for Matthew's readers that these magi...these foreigners...these astrologers...are within the reach of God's grace, too. So, I think, you know, it kind of forces the question on us: Who are the magi today? Who are the people who when we see God bringing them into the church, we sort of say: Ooh, well, now, you know, they are pretty different from us. Do they really belong here? Who are today's magi? Who is God working in that we didn't expect?

DARRELL DELANEY

I think the people who we, I guess ashamedly, look down our nose at, and who we think we are better than. It just might be those people. If we are really honest about it, then nobody belongs. It is because of grace that any one of us can be welcomed into the family of God; and if we remember that in humility, then we will be able to open our doors, our hearts, and our lives to people.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It can happen anywhere. The preacher Nadia Bolz-Weber is a very interesting preacher. She is sort of a leather-wearing, tattoo-borne, motorcycle person who has a church that attracted a lot of other motorcycle

types, you know; lots of tattoos, lots of leather, lots of long beards. Well, she is such a good preacher that eventually other people started to come to the church...people who dressed the way a lot of us associate going to church. They are wearing coats and ties and dresses. The motorcycle guys go: We don't want those kinds of people in our church. So, usually when the motorcycle crowd would come into a church, us buttoned-down types would say: Ooh, boy; I'm surprised they are here. It was the opposite there when the buttoned-down people came and the motorcycle people said: Oh, man; they are not like us. But that is God, right? That is the Holy Spirit always working among surprising people, and it is up to us to show the welcome of grace; because, as you said, Darrell, that is how we got in.

DARRELL DELANEY

And honestly, if we think about our lives, if we are really, really honest, we will know that we are all a motley crew of people who come from a variety of different places, and because of God's grace we are able to be united as a miracle under one body. It is really challenging for us to think about when we think about where people come from, but it is not too challenging for our God who actually uses Matthew and this story to show with the Magi that it is possible.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When I have preached on this before, Darrell, I have said: You know, for about four weeks a year we have our creches...our nativity scenes in our front yards, or in the front yard of the church. Some churches have a living nativity scene around Christmas, you know; and we are fine with it. Shepherds and angels and magi all mixed together; and then Christmas is done and we pack up the manger scene and put it back in the attic; and then the rest of the year, we have to remember that that is what we really want all the time. We want the manger scene to be true of the Church all the time. A whole bunch of different people under one roof...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And if it doesn't bother us in the manger scene for a few weeks a year at Christmas, it shouldn't bother us in the real Church the rest of the year...the other forty-eight weeks of the year...either.

DARRELL DELANEY

Exactly; and I think that the point Matthew is making with the Advent and preparing us in this passage...you mentioned he bookends these things...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Also, it is really important for us to remember that in the book of Revelation there is another advent; and we look forward to not just the one that is coming this season, but the one that comes at the end of all things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, in Revelation 21, from the latter part of the chapter, John of Patmos is saying in verse 22: I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. (Now, this part is important): ²⁴The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. ²⁵On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. ²⁶The glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it. ²⁷Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.

So, there is the ultimate vision, Darrell, at the end of the Bible. All nations...all the kings...bringing the splendor of their cultures in...everybody. We are never going to shut the gate, John says. The gate is always open so that all people may come in.

DARRELL DELANEY

And for those of us who live between the two advents, it is our role to not only live as disciples who love and follow Jesus, but to make sure that everyone knows that, hey, it is not just for me or for the people who I know. It is for you, it is for everyone who is far off; for us to know who the Messiah is, and we get to see the Magi bringing the first picture of that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And for that, we can say thanks be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue preparing our hearts for Christmas by studying the stories of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John the Baptist.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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