



December 11, 2011
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The Creep that Stole Christmas: Culture

Matthew 2: 1-18

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is not a very pretty church and it's a little odd. For instance, most churches have an impressive set of doors. This one has a tiny, low entrance that allows only one stooped-over person at a time. And because the walls are thick, it is easy to stand up too soon. I know. The first time I went in, I left some of my scalp on the lintel. It is called the Door of Humility because everyone who enters this church must bow down. That's appropriate this morning because the visitors who journeyed to find the King of the Jews, when they found him, did exactly that. *[READ]*

What is our Advent series called? "The Creep that Stole Christmas." Not the Grinch. We are looking at things in our lives that creep in and steal the joy, the meaning, the beauty of Christmas. First week was Disappointment. The heartbreaks of life can steal Christmas, can't they? Last week, Indifference. When this becomes a kiddie holiday, when it is no longer wonder-full to us... that steals Christmas.

This morning's creep is Culture. Do you feel like our culture is creeping in on OUR holy-day? Our Christmas story this morning is about an amazing cultural invasion. We just sang a song about it. "We Three Kings." We love that carol... and the title is all wrong. First, we don't know if there were three of them. The Bible doesn't say. Because there were three gifts given, it is assumed there were three. But we don't know. Also, they weren't kings. The Bible calls them "magi," a word that means "wise men." Our son Cooper used to call them the "Three Wise Guys." But they were definitely not kings.

So, three words in the title—"We Three Kings"—and two of them are wrong. They got "We" right. And there's one more myth: that the magi appeared at the manger. The text actually tells us they came to a "house." Apparently, after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph leased a little condo in Bethlehem with a nice view of the Shepherd's Fields. They lived there for at least two years and that's where the magi visited.

There are a lot of things we don't know about the Three Wise Guys, but what we do know makes them the most unlikely of visitors to this Jewish family. First of all, they were Gentiles, probably from Persia—modern-day Iran. Remember last week how I told you that shepherds were almost at the bottom of the Jewish social order? Only one group was lower. Who? Lepers. But at least they were Jews! Gentiles weren't even on the social ladder; they were despised. If you were an observant Jew, you didn't hang out with Gentiles, you wanted nothing to do with Gentiles, because they were considered a spiritual pollutant.

But these guys weren't just Gentiles... they were idolatrous Gentiles. Today, "astronomers" are scientists who study the heavens; they are the ones who write textbooks about the universe. "Astrologers" are those who believe that the stars and planets guide our lives; they are the ones who write horoscopes. Definitely two different professions, right? But

2000 years ago, they were the same profession. The ones who studied the stars and planets were the same ones who believed they controlled destiny.

Because of their education, they were called "magi"... wise men. But another translation of magi is "sorcerer." Because they believed the stars controlled destiny and made predictions about what would happen, they were considered sorcerers. Think of the word "magi"; what English word do we derive from it? Magician! Exactly!

How much of a role do you think astrology and magic played in God's plan for Israel? Not much. Isaiah had some mocking words to say on the subject:

Keep on, then, with your magic spells and with your many sorceries, which you have labored at since childhood...All the counsel you have received has only worn you out! Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month, let them save you from what is coming upon you. (Isaiah 47:12)

The Egyptians who once held Israel captive believed in astrology. God sent Moses to set them free from that idolatry. Now, centuries later, God sends his Son to set his people free again, and the only visitors that Matthew records are Gentile sorcerers.

I find this fascinating, don't you? Pagans magicians who believe that stars and planets are divine, paying respect to the God-child who created those stars and the planets. This was a huge culture clash. Maybe you never considered this possibility, but Joseph and Mary had every right to say to the magi, "Get out of here! We know who you are. We know what you believe. We want nothing to do with you; nothing to do with your gifts. Go away!"

So do you ever feel like we are in a similar cultural clash today? Our culture has a love-hate relationship with Christmas. On the one hand, it loves Christmas shopping. Do you know why they call the Friday after Thanksgiving "Black Friday?" Because up until then, the average store is running in the red. It is those 35 Christmas shopping days that bump our retail economy into the black every year. Our culture loves the commercialization of Christmas. It wants us to spend lots of money we don't have. It needs us to charge, charge, charge it at Christmas time.

The big stores can be pretty blatant about it. Target boasts, "Santa has elves; you have Target." And Sax Fifth Avenue really lays on the guilt. The old saying goes, "It's the thought that counts." The Sax slogan? "It's not about the thought."

But as I said, it's a love-hate thing with Christmas. Our culture needs us to celebrate Christmas... but would prefer that we pretend it wasn't Christmas. Store clerks don't dare wish their shoppers, "Merry Christmas." Instead? "Happy Holidays. And those evergreens that we murder by the millions... they aren't Christmas trees. They are "Holiday Trees." Or, as one frustrated group of students named it, "the Holiday Bush." Christmas paranoia extends right into our schools. Don't dare call it a Christmas concert. Don't dare call it "Christmas vacation" even though Christmas is a nationally recognized holiday.

Christmas, Hanukkah, Ramadan, Kwanzaa ... if you are trying to be politically correct, it can be pretty confusing. I heard one suggestion. Roll all of them up into a single holiday and call it... Chrismakwanhandan. "Merry Chrismakwanhandan!" Rolls right off the tongue, doesn't it?

Most of us who celebrate the birth of Jesus realize He probably wasn't born on December 25. But if we want to set aside that day to remember the birth of our Savior and gather our family together in a time of worship and joy... we find cultural forces of commercialization and secularization squeezing us from two sides. Creeping in and trying to steal the joy and beauty and meaning of something that is sacred to us.

So how do we respond to this creep? Well my thoughts might surprise you. I think we need to claim the middle ground. On the one hand, we must take a principled stand against the excesses of secular Christmas. There's nothing wrong with gift-giving but there is a lot that is plain unchristian about digging ourselves into an annual debt-hole or about creating spoiled, ungrateful kids who never have enough. It wouldn't hurt if every Chapel Hill family said, "Enough! This year we will buy one less luxury and give that money away to someone who is cold or hungry or lonely." And we've made a good start on that this year? Hundreds of you signed up to ring for the Salvation Army. I hear that we are setting giving records this year. Awesome!

We can also fight the creep of secularization by our own example of remembering what this season is really about. I talked with one woman whose family decided to sing carols as they rang their bell. They were nervous, but then amazed at the warm response as they offered their simple witness to the birth of Christ. And when the clerk says, "Happy Holidays," respond with a warm, "Merry Christmas!" In fact, beat them to the punch! And when guests visit you—even those who do not go to church—would it kill you, or them, to say, "Part of our Christmas tradition is going to church. Will you join us?" Or maybe you read the Christmas story at the dinner table. Or make sure that the Christmas cards you send actually mention Jesus on them.

There are ways that we can resist the creep of a culture that wants to commercialize and secularize this holiday. But we ought to be careful that we don't become Christmas fascists who are so angry at our culture that we lose any chance of speaking into it. Last week I was at the Y and someone I know greeted me with "Happy Holidays." I'm not sure what got into me. Maybe I was still jet-lagged...or maybe I was just being a jerk. But my response wasn't exactly winsome. I replied, and I quote, "It's 'Merry Christmas!' None of that 'Happy Holidays' crap!" I'll bet that won him over, don't you think? No, more likely he was saying, "That Mark Toone is a jerk and if that's what Christmas is all about, I don't want a thing to do with it." Nice job, don't you think? I felt so crummy about it that I've been trying to track him down to apologize. No joy.

That is certainly one way to deal with the culture creep, isn't it? Become angry and militant and defensive. Hunker down, assume the worst, become a Christmas martyr. It's not hard to understand how we can get that way. When we feel like what is most precious to us is under attack—and particularly at a time like now when newspaper articles and letters to the editor are attacking us and misrepresenting us—it is easy to become defensive; to fight back. To go into lockdown mode.

The problem is, if you live in a bunker, everything out there looks like a target. And we forget what is at the core of Christmas: God loves pagans! God loves sorcerers. God loves unbelievers. God loves sinners. That's why Jesus came. To save those. To save us, for we were all there, once... and to some extent, we still are! And if we allow ourselves to hate our culture and hunker down in defense mode, who exactly will be left for us to share the good news with?

Here's the amazing thing about the magi. As far as the Jews were concerned, they represented what was worst about pagan culture. But—and this is really a mind bender—it was their idolatry that set them on the journey to find the Messiah. Right? They saw a star in the heavens. They believed that stars directed the course of human affairs. So, at great expense, they followed that star to Jerusalem. Take note of that. God used idolatrous culture to stir a spiritual hunger in these sincere pagans.

I want to be careful with this. I am not saying that Astrology or any other pagan practices are true. I am not saying that all religions end up at the same place. What I am saying is, because God loves fallen humanity—and because God is, in fact, God and sovereign and the boss of everything—in His grace and love, He can use anything, even non-Christian practices, to stir people's hearts, create in them a longing and draw them to Himself. But notice this; their pagan practices only took them so far. It took them to Jerusalem. It didn't take them to Bethlehem. In the end, what got the magi those last six miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem? Scripture! God's Word! Natural revelation—the wonder of God's creation—got them started on the journey. But it was scriptural revelation that brought them home.

And when they finally discovered the baby, do you know what those pagan, idolatrous, magicians did? This. [*Pastor laying prostrate, on the ground*] They worshipped him. The word means, literally, that they put their faces in the dirt. This was the practice of Persians when they were in the presence of someone greater than them. So, as it turns out, God used something else from their pagan background: they had learned how to bow before a potentate. Now, God called these pagans out of a culture that taught them how to read the stars and how to worship, and presented them to the God-child who created the stars and who deserved their worship.

Mary and Joseph must have been amazed by these visitors. And if they had said, "Go away, we are not permitted to associate with people like you," we might understand. Instead, they welcomed them in and, in astonishment, watched them bow before their baby. And then, the Bible tells us, they returned home by a different way.

If we allow the creep of culture to compromise our spiritual principles, we won't have any Good News to share with an unbelieving world. It is spiritual principle that has led us to our present situation as a church. But if we allow it to embitter us, we won't want to share the Good News with an unbelieving world, because we will hate them. Somehow we need to find the middle ground.

Where are you today? Have you sold out to our culture? Do you hate our culture? We cannot be held captive to our culture on either extreme. Maybe now that you have worshipped Jesus today, you will go home by a different way.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **READ** the passage out loud.
- **REFLECT & APPLY INDIVIDUALLY:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your

Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. Describe who the magi REALLY were and why their arrival in Bethlehem might seem surprising and even inappropriate? Why does Matthew include this story?
2. Pastor Mark talked about two extreme responses to the culture creep at Christmas: being seduced by it or hating it. Which extreme do you tend towards? What is the danger of that position?
3. In what way should we love our culture and why? How does this affect our ability to share the Good News of Jesus?