

Unexpected Guests (2:1-12)

In the fall of 2005, a **seismic wave** appeared on the U.S. literary scene. It was a book that would take the world by *storm*. It would change the very way we thought about fiction—and indeed, not only fiction, but our very *selves*. It was a work of literary genius, never seen before and the *likes* of which we have never seen *since*. The name of the book was *Twilight*. It was a young adult vampire-romance novel. Which, believe it or not, was already a genre *prior* to the *Twilight* books coming out.

The book, which later was released as a movie, chronicled a **love triangle** made up of Bella, a human girl; Edward, a vampire; and Jacob, a werewolf. And especially after the movie came out, there arose a substantial *debate* among movie-goers about which human/creature Bella should've ended up with. First, there was **Team Edward**. *Team Edward* believed that a relationship with a *vampire* was the only way to go. Edward was intelligent, understanding, patient, mysterious, and protective. He also sparkled in the sunlight—which is a plus, if you're into that sort of thing.

Team Jacob made their case by insisting that Jacob (who just as a reminder, is a werewolf) would have been a much kinder and more supportive boyfriend than vampire Edward. He encouraged Bella to achieve her own goals—for instance, when she really wanted to learn to ride a motorcycle. There's also the added benefit of her not needing to change her human biology to be with Jacob, because he isn't drawn to her blood like Edward is. These are things you have to think about when you find yourself in a love triangle with a vampire and a werewolf.

But after the movie came out, it was **fascinating to watch** the *debates* taking place in society around which guy she should've ended up with. Articles were written and posted online, arguing their case. People would go to the theater dressed as the team they belonged to. The actors in the movie were asked to *weigh in* on the debate and passionate fans were hanging on their every word: “*should we be #TeamEdward, or #TeamJacob—the world must know!*”

Now, we **could debate all day long** whether *Twilight* was good *literature* or not. I've got no dog in that fight (but if I did, I would bet on “no.”) *But* it's hard to deny that it struck a chord with quite a few people in the early 2000s. Whether it was *good* or not, it evidently *was compelling*. **And I think the phenomenon of *Twilight* shows us something about what *compelling writing* does.** Whether fiction or nonfiction, compelling writing makes you do way more than just read it and go “✓. Read that. Ingested some information. Moving on.” **Compelling writing *envelops* you in a story. It causes you to**

emotionally invest in what you read. And maybe, just *maybe*, it causes you to read it and go “if I was Bella, who would I choose?” ~~Which is the question that keeps me up at night, tbh.~~ That’s what compelling writing does.

And in ways **far more significant and meaningful** than *Twilight*, I think the story we’re about to read does *some* of the same thing. As goes *Twilight*, so goes the bible (in mainly just this one, specific way). **What we find in Matthew 2, verses 1-12, is a historical account of how three different groups respond to the news of Jesus’ birth.** But a number of scholars¹ have actually pointed out that in the way Matthew *tells* the story, he is inviting his readers to emotionally *invest* in what he writes. He gives us a three-fold cast of characters, and then almost invites his audience to consider, “which one am I *most like*?” “How would I have responded, and how *do* I respond to Jesus, *myself*?” And I think we can learn an awful lot about ourselves by asking those questions.

So **let’s dive in** and see what we can learn. If you have a bible, turn with me to **Matthew 2**. If you were here last week, you’ll remember that after a series of events, Joseph and Mary have given birth to a baby, they’ve named him *Jesus* as instructed by an angel, and they are now adjusting to life as a family of three. And *that’s* where we read *this*. Chapter 2, starting in verse 1:

[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.”

Alright. So we’re only two verses in and we’ve **already met two** of our three characters. We’ll talk in detail about *Herod* here in a second, but let’s first ask: **who and what are the “Magi”?** Believe it or not, we actually don’t have a ton of rock solid background on them. But best we can piece together, **the Magi were likely Persian astrologers.** In other words, they studied the stars, quasi-scientifically. I say “quasi-scientifically” because by *today’s* standards, what they did would be seen as little more than *superstition*. **For instance, these Magi believed, for some reason, that the appearance of a new star in the night sky indicated the birth of a new king in the land it appeared over.** So when they see a new star appear over *Judea*, they conclude *Judea* has a new king. So they go looking for him.

¹ Keener, Carson, Green, and Platt all mention this in their commentaries on Matthew.

Now, there probably **wasn't anything particularly religious** about the Magi. They likely weren't God-fearing or God-worshipping people. In fact, on a few occasions, the Old Testament *opposes* any type of divination or fortune-telling, which *includes* astrology.² In the book of Daniel, astrologers are depicted as complete *pagans*.³ So these Magi in our story likely aren't operating out of any deep understanding of *God* or the *Scriptures*; they just see a new star in the sky, and think that means that a new king has been born.⁴ So they do what they did *anytime* a king was born in a nearby land: they show up as a delegation, bearing gifts for that king.

But **since they don't know exactly where** this king has been born in Judea, they go to the most likely place to find a king: the king's *palace* in Jerusalem. And it's *there* that they run into Herod and ask him, "where is the king?" Which causes a bit of a problem. Keep reading with me in the passage, picking it back up in v. 3:

[3] When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

So **here's why this question** ("where is the king of the Jews?") **would've disturbed** King Herod. At the time, "king of the Jews" was *his* title. *Herod* was the king over the Jewish people. **So the Magi showing up and asking where they can find the one "born king of the Jews" would be a little like foreign dignitaries showing up in the U.S., meeting our president, and responding with "yeah, but where's the real president?"** It's just a very inflammatory thing to say, whether or not the Magi *intended* it that way.

And really, it's **even worse than that**. Because **while Herod was indeed the king, he was a fairly illegitimate king**. And because of that, he was quite *paranoid* about his power. He was constantly looking over his shoulder, even occasionally having members of his own *family* killed because he suspected they were trying to take over his throne. Not a great dude. So you can *imagine*, **when these astrologers show up out of the blue asking Herod about a new king, with his title, who isn't him, his paranoia kicks into high gear**.

So in response, he hatches a plan, v. 4:

[4] When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah [a word meaning long-awaited king—where that king...] was to be born.

² See Deuteronomy 4:19 & 18:9-13, Isaiah 47:13, and Jeremiah 8:1-2.

³ See Daniel 2:2,10 as pointed out by Craig Keener in his commentary on Matthew.

⁴ This was likely due in large part to a nova that once coincidentally appeared over Julius Caesar's funeral in 44 BC.

So *notice* that **Herod himself has no idea** where the Old Testament says the Messiah will be born. He was actually pretty clueless when it came to the history and beliefs of the Jewish people he ruled over. So he's gotta call in the *experts*—the chief priests and teachers of the law—to tell him how it all works. Here's where *they* say the king can be found—v. 5:

[5] “In **Bethlehem** in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet (i.e. Micah)⁵ 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**.”

The chief priests enlighten Herod on where he might find this king, based on Old Testament prophecy: in the city of *Bethlehem*. Now, here's **what's odd to me about their response to Herod**. And not *just* me: quite a few people smarter than me have pointed it out too.⁶ These chief priests and teachers of the law were men *steeped* in the Old Testament Scriptures. Including its repeated *claims* that a Messiah would one day arrive on the scene.

And yet, when they catch wind that this Messiah at least *may have* appeared about five miles away from them, they seem completely *uninterested* in finding out more. They don't ask any more questions, they don't take a road trip to Bethlehem to check things out...they just answer Herod's question, very matter-of-factly, and go about their lives. Does that **seem weird** to anybody else? *Like, if you're in their situation, doesn't your curiosity at least get the better of you? Even if you think the Magi are off their rockers about all of this, don't you at least look into it? It seems so bizarre to have no interest in confirming or denying the arrival of the one that the Scriptures speak so much about.* Remember *that* for later (because I think that tells us a lot about the spiritual state of the chief priests). But for *now*, continue with me in the story. Here's **Herod's response**, v. 7:

[7] Then **Herod** called the **Magi** secretly and found out from them the **exact time** the star had appeared. [8] He **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**.”

So Herod is obviously **concealing his true motives** here. **He doesn't actually want to worship this new king; he wants to eliminate him.** But he needs the Magi's help. So

⁵ Specifically, Micah 5:2,4

⁶ See Matthew commentaries by Keener, Carson, Platt, and Wilkins.

he sends them to *find* this new king, and wants them to report back to him with a precise location. Verse 9...

[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** (“the child” there being Jesus, who would’ve been 1-2 years old at this point). [10] When they **saw** the star, they were **overjoyed**.

Now, there in v. 10, **the language Matthew uses** is *really* peculiar. Most literally in the Greek, it says the Magi “rejoiced with *exceedingly great joy*.” Do you hear how *redundant* that sentence sounds? It’s got a couple more words in it than it needs, right? **It would be like me saying** “I went to the grocery store to buy groceries with money.” You just don’t need that many words to say that. **Or like saying** “~~I met an obnoxious Alabama fan and didn’t like him.~~” You could’ve just said “I met an Alabama fan.” Similarly, Matthew *could’ve* just said “they greatly rejoiced.” But he doubles up both ideas: *they rejoiced, with exceedingly great joy*. **Matthew is going over-the-top with his language to make sure we are properly visualizing the response of the Magi to meeting king Jesus.** They’re *ecstatic*. They’re throwing a party. They’re *celebrating*. They’re so *excited* about finding this king that they can barely contain themselves. Which leads to the next verse, v. 11...

[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.

They’re **so ecstatic** about meeting the one born king of Israel that they **fall to their knees**, bow down, and worship him. Then they open the gifts they brought with them to give to the king. Now, **interesting little tidbit**: if you know the story, how *many* Magi were there when they met Jesus? Any guesses? *Most of us* would probably say “*three*.” But does it say anywhere in the story that there were *three* of them? *Nope*. In fact, earlier, it says that the arrival of the Magi in Jerusalem caused the whole *city* to be *disturbed* by their arrival. So I’d be willing to bet it was a good bit more than three—maybe dozens or even like a hundred of them. What the *story* says is that they **brought three gifts**.

And it’s **hard to be sure** about the *significance* of each gift. But we *do* know these were common gifts offered to *royalty* in their day and age. So the Magi here are *recognizing* that the one they’ve found is *indeed* a king: namely, the *new* king of the Jewish people. And the gifts they give him *reflect* that. So then, after worshiping Jesus, giving their gifts, and visiting with his family, we read this—v. 12:

[12] And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

So, much like *Joseph's dream* in last week's passage, **God uses a dream to interrupt someone's normal course of action.** This time, he tells the Magi *not* to return to King Herod, so they *don't*. They worship the king, and they go home a different way, avoiding Jerusalem and Herod on their way back.

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So there's our story for this week. Now, as I said earlier, this is a story about how three groups of people respond to the *arrival* of Jesus. Here are our *characters*, if you didn't already piece it together. We have **King Herod, the chief priests (and teachers of the law), and the Magi.** These three groups demonstrate, I think, three different **postures towards Jesus.** And specifically, towards the *kingship* of Jesus: his authority, his presence, his power. And as I mentioned in the beginning, I think **Matthew includes these three characters in part because he wants us to consider if our posture towards Jesus resembles any of theirs.** So I thought it might be good for us to spend some time on each one of them, and see if the Holy Spirit has anything he wants to speak to us through it. Make sense? Okay, first, let's take a look at...

King Herod

If I were to use one *word* to sum up King *Herod's* posture towards Jesus, it would be **hostility.** Upon finding out from the Magi that there is a new king, Herod immediately goes into self-preservation mode. He starts figuring out how he might *locate* this new king and eliminate the *threat* that he poses. And in *next* week's passage, we find out that he's going to go to some pretty extreme measures to do that.⁷

So think about Herod's situation with me for just a moment. As king, he had likely grown *accustomed* to a certain way of life. A certain *status* level in society. A certain *income* level. Certain comforts, conveniences that came *with* his way of life. A certain ability to do things his way, call his own shots, and to reject anything that *interfered* with him doing that. That's what *kings* get to do: in essence, whatever they *want* to do. *But* if there is a *new* king on the scene...well then all of *that* could *vanish* for Herod. It could all be taken away in an instant. Herod could *lose* his way of life. He could *lose* his comforts, his conveniences. He could *lose* his right to do things his way. And that is a possibility that he is unwilling to entertain.

⁷ See Matthew 2:16

But here's what I would point out to ya. When you think critically about it, **Herod's mindset isn't far from** how some of us prefer to approach life. Are we not told, pretty regularly, that we can **be whoever we want to be**, and *do* whatever we want to *do*? And then, are we not told that **if anyone interferes** with what we want to do, that we should **"shake the haters off"** and do it *anyway*? Are we not told that if **anyone makes us feel uncomfortable** or puts undue expectations on us, that we should **"eliminate those toxic people** from our life"? Are we not taught to believe that **any external source of authority** over our life is inherently suspect? You see, **I think you and I are often trained to operate as kings of our own making. And, hear me: if that's how you choose to go about life, Jesus' status as king will always feel like a threat to you.**

Have there **ever been moments** where the Holy Spirit presses on you about something. So where he encourages you to *move* in a certain direction, or to *do* something or *not* do something, and you just respond with a "no"? *No, I'm not gonna do that. No, I'm not gonna go there. No, I'm not gonna deny myself that experience, that comfort, that relationship, that happiness.* Is there anywhere where your knee-jerk response to God is just "no?" Where you respond by thinking, *God would never ask me to do that. God would never ask me to say no to that. God would never ask me to miss out on that.*

I often **hear people say things** like "well I could never believe in a God who would ask me to _____." Whatever that thing is. Or "I could never worship a God who _____." I understand where those statements are coming from. There are things about God that are difficult to comprehend, difficult to understand. But at the same time, I hope we hear what we're implying when we say things like that. What we're saying, essentially is *my intellect, my moral reasoning, is correct. And for me to worship God, trust God—he must agree with me.* "I'll worship Jesus as king, as long as he gets on board with *my* kingship first." See that, at its core, is *hostility* to Jesus. **Turns out, there at least a little of Herod's posture in each of us. There's a piece of us that naturally resists any rival claims to the throne of our life.**

And if the **life of Herod is any indication**, that hostility can take you to some dark places. **When your own autonomy is worshiped above all else, you will do most anything to eliminate threats to that way of life.** That's the hostile posture of Herod at work. Let's look at the *second* posture found in the passage, which is that of...

The chief priests (and the teachers of the law)

Here's the word I would use to describe their posture: **indifference**. They're just *indifferent* to Jesus. They're the ones that should be *most interested* in the arrival of the Messiah. They've spent their lives and careers *studying* about it. And yet they seem to

have very little interest in Jesus' arrival at all. There is no *curiosity*, no *draw* to go and check things out. Just *disinterest*. So notice: **the chief priests and teachers of the law had a knowledge of the Scriptures, but they lacked any substantial interest in the one the Scriptures pointed them to.** Jesus actually sums up the posture of the chief priests later in his life, when he **says this** to a very similar group of people:

*You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. (But) These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*⁸

That was the problem with the chief priests: *indifference. Disinterest.* And this, too, is a danger for us today. To me, **a significant risk for followers of Jesus**—especially here in the Bible Belt—is **to know just enough about Jesus in order to grow disinterested in him.** And worse, to not think of disinterest in him as a *problem* worth addressing.

I've heard some people call this **gospel inoculation**. You know what *inoculation* means? It's actually the idea behind vaccines. Generally, the way a vaccine works is that it introduces just enough of a disease or virus into your system that your system learns how to fight it. It's a *great* idea when it comes to vaccines. It's not good at *all* when it comes to your relationship with Jesus. I think some people know just enough about Jesus to become inoculated to knowing more. **They know just enough to think there's nothing else they need to know.** Just enough to where their system actually "resists" any further knowledge *of* or relationship *with* God.

I've got friends who work regularly with **Muslim populations**. And they tell me that one thing Muslims have a really hard time with is how Christians can be so *nominal* and *indifferent* towards their faith. They find it so baffling how Christians can believe some of the revolutionary things the Bible teaches and yet remain so *detached* from it, and *unchanged* by it. // So can I ask you: do you find yourself regularly *indifferent* towards Jesus? Do you know just enough about God to be completely okay never knowing *more* of him? Do you think you have been *inoculated* to the gospel? Are you, like the chief priests, *disinterested* in the one the Scriptures say so much about?

Do you feel no draw, no longing in you towards God? Do you feel no pull in your heart towards interacting with God, conversing with God, *hearing* from God? Listen, we *all* go through seasons where we are less *excited* about following Jesus than others—that's part of the Christian experience. But my question for you is this: do those seasons *bother* you when they happen? When you're *in* those seasons, do you *want* them to be over? Or

⁸ John 5:39-40

have they become completely *normal* for you—nothing to be troubled about at all? Followers of Jesus may go through seasons of indifference towards God—but they never grow *comfortable* with those seasons.

Because **here's what I'll tell you:** often, *indifference* like *that* towards Jesus can be just a stopover on the way to *hostility* towards him. *This generation of chief priests was indifferent towards Jesus. But the generation after them would seek to kill Jesus,⁹ just like Herod.* If you settle into *disinterest* towards the things of God, it's only a matter of time before you become *hostile towards* him. That's the danger in a posture of indifference.

But then we have the **final posture towards Jesus** in the story, which is that of...

The Magi

How much we can *learn* in this passage from the Magi. Here's how I would describe the posture of the Magi: **adoration**. Remember the language Matthew used to describe them once they encountered Jesus? "*They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.*" They traveled far and wide to come and find him, and then when they *arrived*, they fell flat on their face and *worshiped* him as king. They brought gifts: signs of homage and recognition and honor towards him. The Magi *adored* Jesus, and recognized him as king.

Now, here's **what's fascinating about that response** to Jesus. The Magi likely *weren't* doing any of this because they thought this child was *God*. They likely didn't *believe* that, or even have a framework for believing that. Remember, they're *pagans*: they believe that there are *many* gods. At most, this was them acknowledging that they believed Jesus was *one* of those gods. So this isn't a *conversion* story. The Magi aren't becoming the very first *Christians* at this moment. They're not coming to know Jesus as the one true God of the universe.

But **at the same time, Matthew portrays them** as being *much nearer* to discovering who Jesus is than King Herod was. They have a more keen *awareness* of Jesus' identity than the *chief priests* do. They're a lot closer to "getting it" than either of the other two characters in the story. **Matthew suggests in this story that the king and the bible experts would've been better off if they had taken the posture of pagan astrologers.**

⁹ See Matthew 26:59

Because **the Magi's response** (as incomplete as it is) **means** they have come to **one very important conclusion about Jesus**. You know what it is? That *he* is greater than *them*. That this young child *is* who the star told them he was. *He* is the new king of Israel, and therefore that he is more *significant* than any of them. More *mighty* than they are. More *important* than they are. And it is that belief alone that prompts their worship, and gifts, and “exceedingly great joy” at having encountered this king. **The Magi respond with adoration for the child before them.**

So can I ask you a question: **would you describe your posture** towards Jesus as one of *adoration*? When you reflect on who Jesus is, do you experience “exceedingly great joy?” Do you respond with some amount of awe, wonder, reverence at who he is and what he's capable of? Do you *marvel* at the *mystery* of the one greater than, more *significant* than, you? I sometimes wonder if we have *lost* that sense of awe and adoration when it comes to our relationship with God. Sometimes, when I hear people talk about God, they tend to talk about him just like he's a set of *ideas*. A tidy collection of *beliefs*.

And **don't get me wrong**—*ideas* and *beliefs* about God matter. They're *important*. But I do hope we remember: **God is not a collection of ideas or a set of beliefs; he is a person to be known and ultimately, worshiped.** I think of the famous Christmas song: “oh come let us *adore* him.” Come let us *adore* him. Not “come let us *think about* him.” Not “come let us agree with some things that he says.” Not “come let us use him as ammunition for winning arguments.” It says come let us *adore* him. *Worship* him. Stand in *awe* and *wonder* before him. Gaze at his *beauty* and his *mercy* and his *compassion* towards us. **Following Jesus starts with adoring Jesus.** Seeing him as *greater* than us, and responding to that accordingly.

Here's **why I think that matters**, practically speaking. **If we don't see Jesus as greater than us, there won't be much reason for adjusting anything in our life around him.** If he's not *greater* than us, he might be convenient for referencing when we need a little help, a little advice—but he won't be worth orienting our entire lives around. He won't be worth inconveniencing ourselves *for*. He won't be worth interrupting our regularly scheduled plans for. But **if he is greater than us—if he is more powerful, more significant, more mighty than we are—then he's worth everything. He's worth it all.** And that's what creates *adoration*.

When I think of **what it means to “adore” something**, right now, I think of my three year old, **Norah**. Christmas is obviously right around the corner now, and I feel like this is the first year that she's really *understood* the things that happen at Christmas. So the other day, she looked at the presents under our tree and said “who *those* for?” When I told her

that some of them were for her and her brother, she said “really?” And I said yes. And then she said “for us to *open*?” Also yes. And she said “on *Christmas*?” Still yes. “And play with them?” *Yep*. “And get to *keep* them?” *Yep*. “For my whole *life*?” Maybe, but yes. Her voice just kept getting higher and higher pitched. She was so excited that she was almost hyperventilating over the joys of Christmas. Think “Buddy the Elf” but as a three-year old girl.

And **after I had that interaction** with her, I remember thinking to myself, “I don’t think I get that excited about *anything*.” That’s adulthood for you, right? Just more and more cynicism about everything. But here’s the thing: **adoration like that is actually a natural human response. We have to learn to be cynical.** The instinctive human response when we encounter something *worthy* of adoration is to *adore* it. To respond with *awe and wonder and excitement, and unbridled joy* towards it.

And so **I wonder if the Magi** responded *that* way, because in their own small way, they *recognized* that the one they encountered was *worthy* of that response. **And I wonder, if we** took just a little more time to gaze at the beauty and the glory and the worth of Jesus this Christmas, if we wouldn’t have a similar response. I wonder if we took the time to slow down and remember the God who became human, if we wouldn’t respond with *awe*, too. If we took the time to recognize that child as a demonstration of the unbelievable, immeasurable love of God, if we wouldn’t respond with *wonder* at the type of love that truly is. I wonder if we actually took a long, hard look at Jesus, if we wouldn’t respond with *adoration, even more* than the Magi did.

So we’re going to **head to the tables** as a church family and take communion together. If you’re new, that’s just one specific way that we pause to remember and reflect on who Jesus is. To stand *amazed* at the idea that this child, laying in a manger, would one day give up his flesh and blood for our sake, to save us from our sins. So if you’re a follower of Jesus, we invite you anytime during the next few songs to head to the tables and do just that. And my prayer is that all of us grow in *adoration* for King Jesus through it.

Let’s pray together.