

“Recognizing Jesus” based on Matthew 2:1-12 and Isaiah 60:1-6

Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on January 5, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church

On February 5, 2006, Quarterback Ben Roethlisberger won the Super Bowl, leading his Pittsburgh Steelers to defeat the Seattle Seahawks, 21-10. Later that year in June, while riding his motorcycle through a green light at an intersection, Martha Fleischman, who also had a green light, turned left in front of him. She hit the 24-year-old football star who went flying off his motorcycle without a helmet, crashing. He nearly died.

The 62-year-old Fleischman told police that she looked, but she did not see him coming. How did Martha Fleischman not see Big Ben on his motorcycle? If this happened today, online conspiracy theorists might have an elaborate theory, perhaps claiming she was a Seahawks fan getting payback for the Super Bowl. Nonetheless, no charges were filed, and she was taken at her word.

She simply wasn't looking for a motorcycle when she made her turn. If he had been driving a car, she probably would have seen him – not because a car is bigger, but because she would expect to see a car in that situation. After all, she had 40 plus years of driving experience, with no accidents and only one ticket ever.

In their book, “Invisible Gorillas,” research scientists Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons use this accident as an example of what they call “inattention blindness.” Essentially, unlike physical blindness, all of us are prone to inattention blindness. When we are looking at things, our brains use our past experiences, to focus our attention on what we can reasonably expect to see. This often makes us unable to see the unexpected.

The researchers have used several now famous tests to prove how common this is. In one famous example, they filmed students in black shirts and white shirts, passing a basketball to their teammates as they moved around each other. They then asked people to watch the video, telling them to count the number of passes made by the white-shirted team. Afterward, most of those who watched the video, correctly counted the number of passes by the team. However, only about half noticed the gorilla.

Yep, that's right, in the middle of the video a woman dressed in a gorilla costume comes out for about nine seconds, stands in the middle, looks right at the camera and beats her chest. Participants who did not see the gorilla then accused the researchers of lying. When they showed the video again, they claimed it was a different video. They couldn't believe that they had not seen the gorilla.

You may think that you would have seen the gorilla, or you might imagine that there is some factor that explains who saw the gorilla and who didn't. The researchers felt the same way and controlled for many factors. They even had someone put sensors on kids eyes and noticed kids looked directly at the gorilla for as long as two seconds and did not see the gorilla.

They even suspected the black gorilla costume and black shirts affected the results. So, they did the experiment again with black and white letters and a red cross. Again, half of the people who watched the video did not see the cross, even though it was the only color image, and the only non-letter. Chabris and Simons wrote of this phenomenon, “Your moment-to-moment expectations determine what you see, not what you're looking at.”

In our reading today, the Magi followed a star in the sky for hundreds of miles, Yet Herod and his court had not noticed the star themselves before the Magi came to ask about it. I've sometimes wondered how there wasn't a traffic jam on the way to see Jesus. “Hey, what's under this star?” you might ask people to wonder, given that the implication is that this bright star was over the house.

But for most people, it seems they had inattentive blindness, perhaps aware of the star, but not of it having any significance. In our Advent Devotional, Jim McConnell called on us to see the Magi as priests for us, or mediators between the divine and human worlds because they saw the star. Jim wrote, “they were able to interpret the sign of the star and know that God was up to something new. They recognized the importance of this star they had seen in the sky and acted on their spiritual instincts”

He points out that the Magi who were not Jewish recognized Jesus as a king. They saw his humble birthplace and still they worshiped him. They even brought him gifts, expensive gifts at that. But how would Magi in the east know to look for the sign of a great king in Judea?

To answer that question, I want to take you on a brief excursion. You see the Magi were a hereditary class of priests, much like the Levites in Israel. They oversaw the sacrificial system in a series of major ancient empires in the Middle East. According to Herodotus, they were Medes in their ethnic history. The Medes ruled an empire in what is now Northern Iran.

Yet, the Magi also served in the royal court of the neighboring Babylonian Empire, which at the time of the Median Empire’s decline was ruled by King Nebuchadnezzar. If that name sounds familiar, you may know it from the book of Daniel, where we learn that Nebuchadnezzar put Daniel over the Magi. Often this is translated as “wise men,” rather than rendered as Magi.

This makes it seem as though Daniel led a school of philosophy, like he was a college administrator. But perhaps it shows Nebuchadnezzar trusted Daniel, by putting him in charge of a foreign priestly class, because in this time kings and priests were often rivals because each of them were claiming divine favor for their own self-interests. In fact, in the Persian (Achaemenid) Empire that overtook the Medes and later the Babylonians, Herodotus tells us the Magi tried to overthrow the king and install an imposter king. Darius, who overthrew the alleged imposter, even instituted an annual holiday where for one day you were allowed to beat up the Magi, keeping them in their place.

Nonetheless, given Daniel’s role as a prophet who speaks the word of God, we can safely assume that if he were in this position, he would talk with the Magi he oversaw. If so, perhaps they would have been aware of Daniel’s visions and timeline. Daniel’s prophecy points to a coming king, and a divine Son of Man figure. He predicts a period of 490 years before this king would come, a date that roughly coincided with the time of Jesus’s birth.

If the Magi passed this down, as was customary of religious leaders with prophecies, the Magi at the time of Jesus’s birth would have been on high alert, just as the Judean leaders were also looking for a Messiah to come at this time. The Magi recognized the star and, in the house below it, they recognized Jesus. Having heard about his coming from Daniel, the Magi recognized this child not just as a king, but also as a priest, or mediator between God and humanity, and as a prophet who could speak for God.

To the King, they offered gold, because the King oversaw the economy of any Kingdom, and the wealth of the nations under his control. To the Priest, they offered frankincense, the fragrance associated with sacrifice, to carry the pleasing scent from the human world up to the divine. And to the Prophet, they offered myrrh, a burial spice, because prophets often suffered the worst fates. The world rejects the word of God that they preach.

Beloved, the Magi were looking for the manifestation of this great King. This is the same King who in Daniel’s prophecy ascends as one like a Son of Man, entering into the throne of God, signifying that he is one with Israel’s God. The Magi were considered “impious” and odd by the Greeks, because like the Jews, they sacrificed animals, and appeared to have worshiped only one God.

Unlike Herod, who saw the baby and star as threats to his power as a client king under Rome the Magi chased after the star in the hope that this baby king would rule the world with humility, as a mediator between God and humanity, speaking for God. I believe that Daniel did oversee the Magi, and that because of this they had reason to pay attention to the star and see it for what it was as a sign that God was coming to make all things new.

Beloved, how often do we miss the star? How often do we fail to recognize Jesus? The truth is that inattentive blindness seems to account for how God's action in this world, so often goes unnoticed, ignored, or even denied by us and by others. What's more, we may even feel resistant to looking for God in our world, since many make claims of God's action in things like winning a sporting event, or their financial prosperity no matter who it exploits, or the suffering of an enemy, or the image burned into their pancake one morning. This often looks like Barry Gibbs of the Bee Gees rather than Jesus.

I believe we can be like the Magi. We can see God at work around us by looking for God in the world around us. But make no mistake, I'm not talking about God in the football match, the billionaire, the dead terrorist, or the blessed pancake. No, I'm talking about seeing God revealed as scripture reveals the one true God of Israel time and time again. This is the image of a loving, faithful, just, and merciful God who arrives, coming to us, to the people, as a minister, as a servant, to be with us in our most difficult moments. This running theme of Scripture is of a God who loves and comes down, meeting the people where they are at, in the most dire of situations.

We see this in the incarnation we celebrate in these 12 days of Christmas. The Son of God in Jesus is the recognition that God – the creator from whom all things exist – needs nothing. God is complete in the eternal community of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And yet, the Son, who is the firstborn over all creation, who exists outside time and space, entered into the creation which he had himself spoken into being. He did so, not to exploit, but to live within our limits, doing so for our sake, not his, even to the point of death, death on a Roman cross after he was betrayed by his people. Now, he is the firstborn of the dead, resurrected on the third day, to reign as our king.

Beloved, by his life, death, resurrection, and ascension, the Holy Spirit is present right here in and among us. When we participate in the humility and self-giving love of Jesus, then we reveal the love of God at work in this world. When we have eyes to see where humility and self-giving love overcome the worldly drive for honor and selfish accumulation, then we have eyes to see God at work in and through others in the world around us.

Beloved, the Epiphany is about seeing Jesus for who he is, what he did, and how he is still with us. We are the body of Christ in this world, united to him in his humanity, and brought close to God the Father by through Jesus's divinity. This is the grace and truth of the good news of Jesus Christ. Our light has come, as the prophet Isaiah wrote, and like the Magi, we must be shaped by God's word, to rise – now and on the last day – in Christ.

How we view the world matters. We must be blinded by inattentive blindness. We must lift up our eyes and see God at work all around us. We must be attentive to the real presence of God in our midst. It is inattentive blindness that causes so many to miss our God, and relegate God to some abstract ideology, or a distant force that's not too concerned with our lives. We mistakenly think that we have all the answers.

The story of the Magi shows us the grand narrative of God's story in all its connections. Over generations, ancient Magi held the prophecy of Daniel close to their hearts, and the Magi in our reading – whether it was three or three hundred of them – recognized that they were called to play

a part in God's narrative. Indeed, as Jim said in the devotional, they are mediators for us. They bring us closer to God in their ability to see Jesus and recognize who he truly is.

Wherever we see self-giving love, humility, justice, and mercy, look for Jesus because he is there. In each case, also, we are given the opportunity like the Magi to step into the narrative of God's story and be ministers for our God. We can share in the work of the God who ministers to us. Remember what the author's of the Invisible Gorilla said: "Your moment-to-moment expectations determine what you see, not what you're looking at."

Don't miss the gorilla. The world has all kinds of distractions. Each of them tells us that we must curate our identity to show off our greatness to the world around us. This creates a lot of pressure. Our young people probably feel it the most, having grown up only in a world with social media and a world influenced by post-modern philosophy.

There's a lot of pressure trying to live up to the expectations of others in this world. But God's expectations are different because God loves you. Rather than being the perfect you, God wants you to love others in their imperfection. God wants you to be like Jesus – humble, desiring justice, showing mercy. Arise! You light, your God, has come. Expect to see Jesus all around you and you will see him. Then be Jesus through your love so that others will see him in you. Amen.