

A Green Christmas
Matthew 2:1-12, Psalm 19:1-6

Well brothers and sisters - since it is December 1st today, we can say that the countdown to Christmas has officially begun.

And of course, this means we have to get our Christmas trees set-up, put out the rest of the Christmas decorations, hang the Christmas lights, schedule in all the Christmas parties and music recitals, make sure that the fridge and freezer are stocked with Christmas goodies and food for Christmas dinner, and... in the midst of all of this... make sure that we get our Christmas shopping done on time.

And that's just for starters, I'm sure that all of us have additional tasks that we need to complete in order to prepare for Christmas.

And I'm also fairly certain that most of us approach our Christmas to-do list with mixed feelings. We wouldn't want to celebrate Christmas without a tree or decorations or gifts... but wouldn't it be nice if we didn't have to be the ones

responsible for putting it all together?! It's a lot of extra work to add in to our already busy schedules.

And... if celebrating the birth of Jesus is important you because we are celebrating the birth of our Lord and Savior – then it's also easy for us to start to feel like all these additional Christmas preparations are starting to become the main focus and detract from what or who is truly important – Jesus Christ.

Certainly, that's what we've seen happen in our society over the past number of years. The trimmings and trappings of the "holiday season" have become the main focus while the real reason for the season has been overshadowed by advertising and marketing and commercialism and taking some time off.

In so many ways we see how our society has taken the good created things that contribute to a season of celebration and has turned them into god things and idolizes them by worshiping them instead of worshiping Jesus Christ.

So how do we respond to this? Well maybe we just grudgingly put up with and endure all the extra baggage of the holidays until the real celebration on Christmas Eve arrives when we finally get to focus on the scriptures and worshipping together at church in explicit celebration of the birth of Christ.

Or maybe we struggle with feeling like we enjoy the trappings of the season a bit too much – we know we should be more focused on the real reason for the season – but you just can't resist the lights and decorations at the shopping mall, the steamed eggnog lattes at Starbucks, and binge watching all the Hallmark Holiday Christmas movies. It's all so enjoyable - but you always feel a bit guilty because you know its not focused on the birth of Jesus at all.

And let's not even get started on the dilemma that we feel about how to talk with our kids about Santa Claus and whether he is real or not – do you know what I'm talking about?

But brothers and sisters – if the birth of Jesus Christ and celebrating it is supposed to be an opportunity for us to come to know God in a deeper and more profound way – then let me suggest that there is a real danger in becoming cynical and begrudging and about all the trapping and trimmings of the season and trying to reject them - in spite of the fact that our society gets quite idolatrous about them.

The danger is that by labelling them as “unchristian” and rejecting them... or feeling guilty for enjoying them because they are “unchristian” –then brothers and sisters we risk missing out or rejecting a means by which God intends to reveal Himself to us and bring us into a deeper and more profound relationship.

But the good news brothers and sisters is that by focusing on the actual birth of Jesus Christ and the events surrounding that – God makes us aware of the ways in which He reveals Himself to us and His purposes for doing this and the goal of this Christmas series is to help us and encourage us respond in

faith to the various ways in which God reveals himself to us at Christmas time.

We might summarize it like this – at Christmas time nothing else matters but the birth of Christ, but because of the birth of Christ everything else matters – and it is the visit of the magi in Mathew 2 which puts this in proper perspective for us.

Now – I know that starting our Christmas series with the story of the Wisemen seems to be a bit out of order – but it actually makes for a very smooth transition into the Christmas Season coming out from last month’s Breakfast Theatre series on Daniel.

Firstly because the Wisemen from the East – or Magi as they are technically referred to in Matthew 2 – are the same Babylonian wisemen and astrologers and court magicians (magi) that we met in the story of Daniel.

These were the men who were learned in the arts of interpreting dreams and visions, reading omens and

determining what the gods might do, and of course reading the stars because it was believed that what happened on earth was a reflection of what happened in the heavens.

And secondly because this story is a perfect example of how something that was considered to be idolatrous by God’s People – divining and astrology - was used by God to reveal himself and what He was doing in the birth of Jesus Christ - and thus it is very applicable to our dilemma of how we deal with all the Christmas preparations that get idolized during the Christmas season.

So turn with me to the story of the Magi in your bible in Matthew 2 and lets take a closer look at this passage of scripture.

Now the first thing we notice is that the Magi have travelled to Jerusalem and are making inquiries about where to find the King of the Jews who has recently been born.

It's somewhat ironic and comical because no one else knows what they are talking about, it seems that the news about Christ the savior having been born which the shepherds received from the angels never made its way to Jerusalem, or if it did - it was dismissed as the drunken delusions of crazy shepherds.

But the Magi are rather insistent that this has happened because they have seen a particular star that has announced his birth – so they are convinced that it has happened.

Now even though it sounded crazy to the Jews and also to us that the stars can give us information about what is going on and who is being born – lets remember two things that we learn in scripture.

The first is that scripture tells us in Psalm 19:1-3 *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no*

words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

So – its not completely unreasonable to say that we can't learn something about who God is and what He is doing from the creation which HE made. Scripture does say that it communicates about God to us.

Secondly the birth of the King of the Jews (the Israelites who were of the tribe of Judah) was prophesied many many years earlier by none other than the pagan prophet Balaam - we read about that in Numbers 24:17 which says *“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob a scepter will rise out of Israel.”* This is a prophesy about a future King of the Jews.

So for these reasons its not that crazy for these Magi to say that they have come to seek the King of the Jews because they have seen His star.

The creation has revealed something about what God is doing and something of the nature of this King who is born to these Magi and they know it is of great importance – divine importance - and they are seeking as best they know how in order to respond properly – in worship.

In theological terms we say that when people pay attention what the creation reveals to us about God – that is common grace - and the Magi seeking to find the King of the Jews is an example of how idolaters can experience God’s common grace from the revelation that occurs in creation.

This what Paul references in Romans 1:20 that *“since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.”*

But brothers and sisters the common grace in the general revelation of creation is insufficient – the Magi know that the King of the Jews has been born – but they do not know where

he is. The star is only able to lead them to Jerusalem – where they must ask for more information. They need the grace of God’s specific revelation in scripture.

Now there is lots of interesting political drama and power games going on as King Herod reacts to the news that the King of the Jews has been born – but that is material for another sermon – what’s important for us this morning is that it serves as a catalyst to bring the chief priests and teachers of the law together to open scripture and specifically identify that the King of the Jews – or the Messiah – was to be born in Bethlehem, this is what had been prophesied in Micah 5:2

And what we see here is the interaction or co-operation between creation revelation and scriptural revelation – and after this - when the Magi go to Bethlehem, it is the the star that is able to identify Jesus’ exact location in the town.

So when creational revelation is illuminated by scriptural revelation it becomes sufficient to help the Magi see Jesus – as the Psalmist says in Ps 119: 105 *“Your word is a lamp for my*

feet, a light on my path.” and brothers and sisters all this is possible because it is all God’s Word at work.

The Word of God by which creation was made is operative creational revelation, the Word of God which speaks specifically through the prophets is in the scriptural/ special revelation and this leads the Magi to encounter the Word of God incarnate in the flesh – the baby Jesus.

Now as we said before – at Christmas time nothing matters but the birth of Jesus Christ, but because of Christ’s birth everything else matters.

And the most succinct way I can think to explain this to you - and capture the essence of what it means to have a Green Christmas – is John 3:16, but the correctly translated version of John 3:16 which says *“for God so loved the cosmos, that he sent His only Son”*

At Christmas – in the birth of Jesus Christ the Word of God became a human being not just for the sake of humans – but

for the sake of the entire cosmos, the beautiful arrangement that God created.

Brothers and sisters God loves His creation – not just the people in it – but He loves the oceans, the forests, the rivers, the mountains and the animals and birds and fish and insects and reptiles...

But, brothers and sisters creation is not just a synonym for nature. Creation is also a distinction between God – who is uncreated – and everything else that exists, and everything else that exists is actually a part of that beautiful arrangement, the cosmos.

So creation includes sports, law, government, art, music, science, construction, computers, even social media – everything that isn’t God is creation - and it exists because of Him and He loves it and it belongs to Him.

That’s why Psalm 24:1 says *“the earth is the Lord’s, the world and all who live in it”*

Now – I know that its easy to be a bit skeptical about God sending Jesus into this world to save social media – though we all know it needs salvation big time.

Now Someone might say *“well if the Word came to save the creation why not enter into the creation as an animal or as a philosophical ideal or a plant, why did the Word become human if God wants to save more than just people?”*

Brothers and sisters the Word became flesh – one of us – because Humanity was created to rule over creation and continue God’s creating work with it – and so the best way to save Creation is to save those who are the stewards of creation – that’s why at Christmas everything else matters.

Now I’m not just making this stuff about a Green Christmas up – Christians before us knew this very well – in fact maybe better than we did. Think about that classic Christmas carol – Joy to the World. Have you ever really thought about the words you are singing in that song?

Especially vs. 2 and on where we sing *“While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains (creation) repeat the sounding joy”* and vs. 3 is even more explicit *“No more let sins and sorrows grow, Nor thorns infest the ground; He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found,”*

For God so loved the cosmos that He sent His only son.

Now – what happens as a result of a Green Christmas?

Well once the Magi find Jesus and they bow before Him in worship and they offer Him gifts – it seems that creation revelation finds its rightful place in the service of God’s plan.

The Magi had intended to go back to King Herod and tell him they had found the King of the Jews – but they were not aware that Herod intended to murder Jesus.

Fortunately, the Magi do not fall into Herod’s trap because they are warned in dream not to go back to him.

Please note brothers and sisters – it does not say “God” warned them in a dream, or an “angel” warned them in a dream – it was a dream that warned them. In fact there are no divine indicators at all in this entire story – its all on a creational level, to make the point that God reveals Himself through His creation. (that’s the core of Green Spirituality)

And what this means is that when we encounter the Word made flesh and we worship Jesus instead of the creation – creation revelation is used for the purposes of God’s plan instead of us idolizing it.

So let’s bring this all together and apply it to how we deal with all the Christmas preparations that we must face over the next 23 days.

Firstly – each and every one of those preparations is part of God’s creation and He loves it and sent His Son for it. I know that is challenging to think of and believe.

In part because we see how these things can be idolized, in part because maybe God loves it – but we don’t particularly like it, and in part because we don’t realize that the reason for God’s special revelation is to redeem and restore His creation revelation – so we discard it and ignore parts of the creation. (e.g. If its not in the Bible I don’t need to know about it.)

But what if we took the time to observe and look and listen for what these Christmas preparations might be revealing to us as part of God’s creation? What are all the decorations and displays communicating to us? What are all the sales and shopping and gifts communicating to us? What are all the parties and gatherings and food and goodies communicating to us?

At the very least brothers and sisters it says that something very important is going on – and we ought to make sure that we do not end up like the Chief Priests and Teachers of the Law who – even though they had all the specific revelation of scripture – were not the ones seeking to find and worship Jesus.

At the very least brothers and sisters what these Christmas preparations ought to do is bring us to Jerusalem – to the people of God – the Church where scriptural revelation can illumine creational revelation.

Now I hope you have begun to pick up how this happens - after four seasons of the Talk Show – where we deliberately create an opportunity in our Sunday worship to shine Creation, Fall, Redemption, and New Creation – and that is the scriptures – on various parts of God’s creation so that we see how creation revelation leads us worship to Jesus Christ as we interact with it – instead of idolizing it.

And when we have knelt before the incarnate Word in Jesus Christ and given our lives, our very bodies to Him in worship (Romans 12:1) Then how might these Christmas preparations be used for God’s purposes and plans big and small to work out God’s Kingdom in our lives, in our church and in this community here on the West side of Calgary?

At the very least brothers and sisters we will be celebrating a Green Christmas by participating in Christ’s work of redeeming and reforming these Christmas preparations and you will experience and deeper and fuller relationship with God as the God who sent His only Son because He loves His Creation – and He wants it to lead us to know Him and worship Him as THE Creator.

So - may all your Christmases be Green brothers and sisters.
Amen.