

“Absolute Cinema”
Matthew 2:1–12; 4 January 26
Rev. Michael Hood

Happy New Year everyone! It is good to be back in action after the holidays. Tonight’s the night the youth start back, which I’m excited for, but a couple of weeks without hearing words like *skibidi* and *6-7* over-and-over again was nice. The season has weeks of homey traditions like making sausage balls with grandparents and enjoying peppermint-flavored everything!

One thing I love about this time of year is the movies. Sara’s family watches a lot of Christmas movies. My choice last year was a marathon of Scooby Doo winter specials, which made me realize I hadn’t heard the word *jinkies* in a long time. But it is not just about Christmas movies. All the summer blockbusters start advertising and releasing trailers, and I love the hype around them. Speaking of...

Did y’all see the trailer for the new *Odyssey* movie? Yeah, if you didn’t know, they’ve made a movie based on *The Odyssey*, and it has all the ingredients to be a cinematic triumph. It is being filmed on special film and it has a superstar line up of actors. I don’t want to hop on a bandwagon indubitably, seeing only 90 seconds of the movie on YouTube, but I’m not far behind it.

The best part about it for me is the brain behind it. This is a film by the great Sir Christopher Nolan. If that means nothing to you; think *Oppenheimer*, *Interstellar*, *Dunkirk*, *The Dark Knight* trilogy, *Inception*. He did all of them.

The first time I watched *Interstellar*, I couldn’t decide if I had lost 6 hours of my life, or if I had watched a cinematic marvel. But the more I let it simmer, and thought about the movie, and even watched it again, I was blown away by it.

When I watched *Dunkirk*, I had no idea what was going on, until a single moment that brought everything together and unlocked a part of my brain I didn’t know was working.

I still think about the plot and the ending to *Inception*. There have not been many works of art that have taken me on the emotional roller coaster that the *Dark Knight* did. I’m just a big fan of his work.

What Christopher Nolan does so well, it messes with your perception of time and reality. For some reason, we often think of time as a singular line with a beginning and an end, and we develop our understanding of our lives and history based that single line. We especially understand movies that way. So, what he does is he takes the flat timeline and turns it into macaroni; he bends it, adds tangents to it, twists it, and reshapes it ways that create this disorienting, yet thought provoking, art that makes you question reality. It is peak storytelling.

So, I'm going to make my pitch, directly to the countless people watching on the internet. Sir Christopher Nolan, if you are watching this, first, may the peace of Christ be with you! Thanks for worshiping with us today! There's a QR code on the bulletin or you can go to our website and fill out the visitor information — we'd love to get to know you . . . AND, if you're looking for a new project, might I suggest, that you consider the Gospel of Matthew, please.

Now obviously I love the Bible, and I love being a Christian, but I am keenly aware that there is a massive divide between what we modern-day Christians have shaped the words of the Bible into, and what the Bible actually says, and how it was meant to be read.

If you hate the way TicToc, Snapchat, and Facebook have ruined the way people communicate with each other, you should also be upset with how the majority of Christians handle the Bible. We so often take this library of literature, and pull out a snapshot of sentences, then dissect it for all its worth, and make sweeping assumptions about its meaning with no context of the whole story. There is great merit and fruit in close study, but when it is disconnected from the context of the entire story, we lose a lot of richness.

So, here's my second pitch. Next time you sleep in and attend Bedside Baptist, crack open the Gospels and read them like you would read any other book. See what you discover. Look, I was a churchgoing person for years before I ever sat down and read one of the Gospels from start to finish. I found out really quickly that I didn't actually know anything about what Jesus said or did, until I *read* the Gospels.

You could even start with the first one, the Gospel of Matthew. It's not a bad idea, but I want you to know; it's hard. It reminds me of a Christopher Nolan film. It's

very long, there is so much dialogue, there are a lot of references to other books in the Bible, a lot of the words are pretty, but —like what do they mean? It's hard to tell. When you read Matthew, you know it is supposed to be good and important but it is not easy to understand.

Matthew is like chili—you have to let it simmer, you have to investigate it, and yes even pick it apart, but you need a greater scope of time and reality and the whole story of the Biblical people alongside you. If you do that, this disorienting, subversive, and challenging story begins to emerge. Matthew as an author does this remarkable thing where he brings in voices and character identities from the past into a present narrative about future Hope. He messes with time and reality.

Our Gospel lesson today is a perfect example. It is part of the opening sequence of Matthew's story that foreshadows so much and sets the stage for what Matthew is all about. Because I love you all and I don't want to lose you, I'm going to give you the big picture to start with.

Matthew is *very* Jewish. He quotes the Old Testament all the time. So, his target audience seems to be people who have some familiarity with the Old Testament. It seems that Matthew sees the Old Testament presenting us with an opportunity for a future hope. Matthew places the Church as that future hope, with Jesus as the catalyst and center of that hope. Jesus comes to fulfill what the Old Testament sets us up for and propel us into the future. Jesus is the New Moses, and the Church is the newest, expanded iteration of the people of God.

Matthew works really hard to sneak in these ideas to the story of Jesus. In some ways it is clear. He says often, “and this happened to fulfill what the prophets said.” But there is something off about the story, something slightly askew in the timeline, and that's where it gets good.

Look at the text in the bulletin with me for a second. Here's some context to help you out. First, Magi are professional astrologers for the Persian empire. Their jobs were to gaze upon the stars and in nature and discern what the gods were trying to communicate. They're not Jewish, not Christian, or anything like that. Also, there were probably more than three. Persian caravans travelled along the Silk Road maybe dozens of people at a time including wealthy patrons and politicians.

In the Christmas card imagination, next to Santa, and—I don't know—Joe the Gnome on a candy cane, we see three kingly dressed guys on camels. It was actually more like a couple of dozen coming to trade and do business in Jerusalem.

They would have drawn attention and commotion . . . think Cybertruck with Christmas lights. But notice that they are the only ones who see something unique in the stary night. It is not a big shiny star that everyone can see. Because they are familiar with the night sky, they notice something peculiar and ask the king of the Jews, Herod. Like the kings before and after him, from Nebuchadnezzar to the Roman emperors, Herod has a reputation of being power-hungry, violent and quite suspicious. So, when the Magi go asking Herod about “the new king,” he has questions.

Herod consults his experts in the Bible; they say that this could be legit, and present to him Micah chapter 5. But you see there is a problem. Jerusalem is the center of power and there is already a Jewish king on the throne. In the books of the prophets, including Micah, Jerusalem is almost always the center of this “future hope.” If you're looking for what God is doing, it should be in Jerusalem, not Bethlehem.

So, he sends the Magi to investigate. Notice that the only people who can actually find Jesus are the foreigners, who are not Jewish at all. They will never be mentioned again in the Bible, and in fact, Matthew is so Jewish that it is weird that he would include astrologers from another religion at all.

It's weird. Then when they get there, they give the boy three gifts. Now, imagine you've created a perfect registry for your kid's birthday party and three strangers show up. First they give you gold. That's a good start. Essential Oils, didn't need that but I'll take it. Then, a gummy, earthy skin balm. Weird but, okay I guess.

Gold is offered to kings; Frankincense is the incense that the priests in the temple use, and Myrrh is used at funerals and is obtained by wounding the tree it comes from. That's some really good foreshadowing.

Think about what's going on here?

If you're looking for the King, he's not in Jerusalem

If you're looking for the High Priest, he's not in the temple.

If you're looking Everlasting Life; it's not where you think it is.

The places where God's glory should be shining, they might look pretty and glorious, but he's not there.

I think this is Matthew's story for us. God really is doing something new: fulfilling the dreams of the past, in a peculiarly present way. Giving hope for the future. But the moment you look where this should be, you can't see it. It is hidden. It is somewhere else. It turns out God is moving in disorienting ways, in the least expected places, like through a poor child who is in hiding in a backwater town that only a travelling outsider can recognize and find.

I think we are all searching for God and we all have ideas of where God *should* be, but God is more hidden than we know. The moment we look where God should be, He isn't there. It takes something, or someone else to open our eyes to what God is doing. This theme persists throughout Matthew. Later, in what is one of Easter texts, a unique scene appears in Matthew culminating in the words; "I know you are looking for Jesus, He is not here." That's what Matthew is saying.

How many times have one of us been hurt by the church claiming to know grace and truth?

How many times have we hurt someone we love claiming to know the right way?

Are you looking for God? Have you found him? You might be looking in the wrong place.

Listen, I'm not here to tell you where God *is*. But what this story tells me is that if I want to see where God is moving, I'm going to need to be more open. I'm going to need to be more vulnerable to the others in my life, and the new things in my life, and to be less threatened by them. If I want to see God in motion, I will need to be more open to surprise, open to change, and open to the ones that society ignores; the small, the poor, the backwater, unassuming. I need to stop being the scared, threatened Herod in my own story, I need to get over myself and realize that God is doing something new with or without me, and I need to be available to listen to new voices, follow the dreams in the air, and be willing to travel by another road if I want to get on board. I don't know about you, but that's scary, and hard, and disorienting. But I'm open to it.

