

## **“Announce! The Challenge of Gathering”**

*Reading: Isaiah 60:1-9; Matthew 2:1-18*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Today we're going to continue with the series that carried us through Advent, even though we're no longer in the season of Advent. I know that a lot of people are ready to be done with Christmas because of all of the marketing that goes on throughout December, but there are some good reasons why we're looking back to Advent today. Our culture has turned Christmas into a consumeristic monstrosity that just keeps getting bigger and bigger, so that we don't even have time to wash the dishes from Thanksgiving dinner before we start with Christmas; I heard one person comment that Christmas has “started eating other holidays.” But if we look back in Christian history, Christmas has a long history of being celebrated over a period of time. There's the month long season of Advent in preparation for Christmas, but then in some churches there's actually a twelve-day-long celebration of Christmas itself. The song “The Twelve Days of Christmas” — which feels like it takes twelve days to sing all the way through — is actually referring to the twelve days *after* Christmas, ending on January 5, and then on January 6, today, we celebrate Epiphany.

Epiphany has had a few different meanings attached to it through the years, but the basic idea is that Epiphany celebrates the revealing of God in human flesh in Jesus Christ. Some churches celebrate it in connection to the baptism of Jesus; today we're focusing on the nations of the world, represented in the Wise Men, gathering in worship at the feet of the Christ child. So Epiphany is closely linked to Christmas and it comes at the end of the twelve-day season called Christmastide, and since there is an announcement from the angels involved in our story for today, we're having a bit of an encore of our Advent series.

If you remember back a few weeks, we've been looking at the announcements the angels made in preparation for the birth of Jesus, because in an announcement you're giving people a message about something important, something they need to know, something that they need to respond to or prepare for. The announcement today comes near the end of the story, and it's a warning to Jesus' parents that King Herod is trying to kill Jesus. There are a lot of important things that can be pulled out of this whole story, but the essence of what the angels are announcing to Jesus' parents is that this child of theirs is powerful enough to be dangerous. Herod wants to kill Jesus because Jesus is a threat. The central claim of the church is that Jesus is Lord, and there will always be people who are threatened by that claim. Not everyone responds as violently as Herod, but many people are regularly threatened by the authority of Jesus.

I like to think of this story of Herod and the Wise Men as a Disney animated movie. Herod comes across as a classic Disney villain, power-mad and thoroughly evil, maybe with jowls, a scowl, and bags under his eyes. The wise men are on a long quest to find this child, so maybe they're riding some funny camels that provide comic relief and serve as their sidekicks. Maybe one wise man is handsome, one is smart, and one is pudgy. It's just a very classic story with classic characters, partly because we've all heard it a hundred times before, but partly because we're so familiar with the motivations of these characters. Herod is lusting after power and is willing to do terrible things to get it, and the wise men are on a search for something greater, and in the process they outwit Herod and help the hero escape. It's not just a chronicle of an event in the life of Jesus, it's a timeless story that points us to how people react to this revealing of Jesus as the Lord.

That is the fundamental claim of all of the announcements that the angels make about Jesus, and it's the fundamental claim in all of our announcements about Him, too. Jesus is Lord, and He's Lord of all, and His lordship represents a threat to some people because it involves a reversal of power. If He is Lord of all, that means that anyone who is under His lordship is gathered together with everyone else under His lordship, and that's not always comfortable.

The arrival of these wise men from faraway lands represents a significant moment in the history of God's people. There had always been this ancient hope and expectation that as God worked among His people, God's presence would draw all the nations of the world together. God blessed one nation of people so that they could then pass on that blessing to all other nations. So, as we read in Isaiah 60, there were all sorts of hopes about that coming time when God would do such a great work that all peoples would gather around Him. So when these foreign dignitaries arrive to pay their respects and bring gifts to this child Jesus, it is a fulfillment in miniature of the ageless hope of all nations gathering under the Lordship of God.

It points us to the fact that the announcement of the lordship of Jesus Christ is, in fact, all-inclusive. He came to draw all peoples to Himself. He wants all nations, all types of people, all races, all classes, all experiences, all mistakes, all positions in life to accept Him as their Lord, because that's what they were made to do and that's how their life is truly lived. His Lordship implies His desire to gather all nations.

And that's a difficult thing. Sometimes we wonder whether *all* nations deserve to be gathered. Maybe it's significant that these wise men come to Jesus by using astrology, reading the stars, which was forbidden to God's people and is a thoroughly debunked practice by modern science. And yet there they are, on Herod's doorstep, looking for the Messiah. It would be kind of like someone showing up in church today saying that God had guided them here through Tarot cards or a horoscope: we don't like the methods and in fact we would speak against them, and yet God was able to use their desire for truth through untrue means to guide them to the truth. As a pastor I hear all kinds of goofy theological ideas from people, and it's a process of discernment to decide when to correct someone and when to bite my tongue and hope for future growth. These guys came to God through questionable means, and that's true for a lot of people today as well: their journey is not as clean as we'd like, and yet they are called to gather before Jesus.

In fact, sometimes what we see is that those who have the furthest to come in order to get to Jesus are the ones who are most eager to see Him. That's not always the case, but it often is. People who are living furthest from Jesus, who have to make the longest journey, in a lot of cases are the ones who know what it's like in the faraway lands and want to be close to Him. And at the same time, then, sometimes it's the people who are already closest to Him who have the hardest time finding Him. We don't know how far those wise men had to travel to get to Jesus, but it's implied that it took them a while. Herod, on the other hand, wasn't very far at all, and he found Jesus' lordship so threatening that He resorted to mass murder. He loved the idea of the nations gathering in worship; any tyrant would. What Herod couldn't stomach, though, was the idea of the nations gathering in worship of someone else. If this child Jesus is Lord, Herod is not, and that's something Herod would not tolerate.

Not many of us today would qualify as Herods. If you're the sort to fly into a murderous rage like a Disney villain when someone challenges your authority, you probably wouldn't be spending much time in church. But even if we're not Herods, there were a lot of other people during Jesus' life who were very close to Him who were very uncomfortable with His authority. Some of them were very religious people who had it all together and thought they were very devoted to God, but then when God was standing right in front of them they couldn't see Him because of the messy people He was gathering around Himself. There were people who wanted to do good things but they wanted to do them their own way and in their own power, so when Jesus showed them a different way and insisted that He be their Lord, they couldn't handle it. There were some people who had worked hard their entire lives to be close to God, but then they had entitlement issues and got upset when Jesus seemed to be letting crooks and layabouts into His kingdom at far too low a price.

Gathering all nations under one Lord is a challenge. Does He have the authority? Do they really deserve to be here? Gatherings are tough to do. Just think of how hard it is to get everyone together for Christmas dinner. Even if you haven't moved far from home, I'd bet you have family or friends who have, so even making the arrangements for everyone to get together can be difficult. And then there's the gathering itself. There's a reason that so many Christmas movies use a family gathering as the setting for hilarity. Maybe you've got an uncle who can't keep his politics off the table, or you've got a cousin whose boyfriend Grandma disapproves of. Or there's the simple passing of time and the change it brings, as you lose some family members and gain new ones, and it gets hard to know where your place is at the table. Even at the best of times, gatherings are challenging.

And yet we continue that ancient hope of all peoples gathering together under our Lord Jesus. He is Lord, and He is Lord of you and me, and He is Lord over all. It can be awkward sometimes, because as we reach out to people who don't already know Him or aren't yet mature in Christ, sometimes they don't act like good church people. Maybe they talk about following a star to get here, and we're not so sure God does things like that. Maybe they don't know the Christian lingo, or they sit in someone's favorite seat, or their family isn't perfect and clean-cut like mine, or there's some bad blood between them and me and I'm not sure I can worship with them. Gathering with others in the name of Jesus Christ means that we have to be big enough to put up with other people and their problems. And if we have a problem with other peoples' problems, the authority of Jesus is a threat to us, because He will remind us that He is Lord and He will gather all whom He will gather.

And at the same time, it means that I have to deal with my own stuff, too. Because like Herod, we can get to the point where our biggest concern becomes not gathering with others in the name of Christ, but worrying about preserving my place in the gathering. The community of the gathered becomes less about the beauty of people being transformed by the presence of Jesus and more about how the community serves me. And if that's the view we take, then the authority of Jesus will be a threat to us, because He will remind us that He is Lord and we are not.

We are beginning a new year. It's a time for us to evaluate ourselves and evaluate where we'd like to be a year from now. My hope is that your desire is to be a deeper person at the end of the year. I hope you want to radiate the beauty of a life that is grateful to God for the grace He has shown you. I hope you want to be fearless in your faithfulness to Jesus Christ this year. That all begins with the simple yet challenging claim that Jesus is Lord, that He has authority over you and me and all nations, and I will lay my life at His feet in service to Him. It's that powerful commitment to love as He

loved, and to call out in love to gather those who are faraway before Him. Begin this year by making that commitment.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 2.5 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.5/)