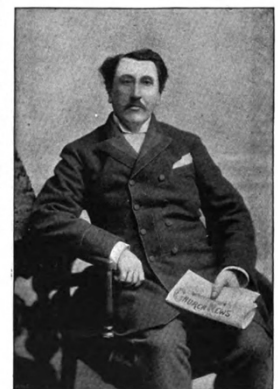


We’ve been in an Advent series connecting well-known Christmas hymns with the biblical passages that tell the story of Jesus’ birth. Tonight we’re looking at the hymn “*What Child Is This?*”—which we just sang—and the passage from Matthew 2 that we just heard read. Let me begin with a bit of background on the hymn. It’s not nearly as controversial as “*O Holy Night*,” which we looked at last week, but it may be even more relatable.

“*What Child Is This?*” was written in 1865 by **William Chatterton Dix**. Unlike many hymn writers or contemporary worship artists, Dix was not a professional musician, poet, theologian, or pastor. He was a businessman—an insurance manager in Bristol, England. In other words, anyone here tonight could write lyrics that are sung around the world 160 years later. He wrote around 40 hymns, primarily for his own personal devotion, though he later published them for others to use.



MR. W. CHATTERTON DIX.
(Author of “Come unto Me, ye weary.”)
From a Photo. by Lardon Hall, C1/Don.

This particular hymn was written during a season when Dix was wrestling deeply with purpose and direction in life while suffering from severe illness and depression. “**What Child Is This?**” is not a rhetorical question. It’s the honest question of a man trying to understand who Jesus really is and what it means to follow him. If you’re here tonight with genuine questions about Jesus—honestly seeking to know who he is and what it means to follow him—this hymn is for you, as is the passage from Matthew.

The tune, *Greensleeves*, is much older. It’s a traditional English folk song that dates back to around 1580 and is attributed to a man named Richard Jones. **The original title was “*A Newe Northern Dittye of ye Ladye Greene Slevs.*”** Yes, that spelling is correct—and I’m thankful English has evolved since then.

“*Greensleeves*” is mentioned three times in Shakespeare’s play *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, written about 17 years later. At one point a character

exclaims, “Let the sky rain potatoes! Let it thunder to the tune of Greensleeves!” I don’t usually think of music from the 1500s as thundering, but there you go.

In any case, the tune fits the words well. It’s a bit mysterious—questioning, reflective, searching. The minor key isn’t triumphal or exuberant. “*What Child Is This?*” is certainly not “*Joy to the World.*” It invites us into holy mystery and thoughtful reflection. And that sense of mystery and seeking is exactly what we see in Matthew 2.

The Magi come from the East asking their own question: “**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**” (Mt. 1:2). They are seekers, guided by questions. Despite the song “*We Three Kings,*” the Magi were not kings. And Scripture never tells us how many there were. They brought three kinds of gifts—gold, Frankenstein...excuse me...frankincense, and myrrh—so, three gifts, but there could have been two Magi or ten. We simply don’t know.

They were most likely astrologers or scholars. “From the East” was common Jewish language for Babylon or Persia—roughly modern-day Iraq or Iran. It raises an important question: Why would people from so far away associate an unusual star with a Jewish king? Israel wasn’t exactly a global superpower at the time. In fact, it was under Roman occupation. So why travel hundreds of miles to honor a newborn Jewish king?

While we can’t be absolutely certain: **There’s a very strong historical connection going back several hundred years earlier, when Israel was conquered by Babylon and many Jews were taken into exile and scattered throughout the Babylonian Empire.**

Babylon was later conquered by Persia, a transition that occurred during the lifetime of the prophet Daniel. Daniel served under both empires and was known for his bold faith and public witness. The Old Testament book that bears his name records much of what he taught: that the God of heaven would establish a kingdom that would never be destroyed; that a coming

figure like a “Son of Man” would receive dominion, glory, and an everlasting kingdom; that Jerusalem would be restored in connection with this anointed one.

Daniel taught these things while living in Babylon—the heart of the eastern world. It’s not hard to imagine how his message would have resonated with Jewish exiles over generations, and how it might also have caught the attention of Babylonian and Persian scholars—people interested in the heavens, spiritual realities, and divine signs.

So, while the exile was a tragedy for Israel, it may also have been the means by which God planted knowledge of him and seeds of faith in the East—seeds that bore fruit some 550 years later when the Magi came seeking Jesus. The dots connect more easily than we might think.

Then there’s Herod, whose response is the opposite of the Magi. **It’s well documented that Herod was paranoid, fear-driven, and obsessed with power.** He would do anything to protect his position. So when he hears about a newborn “king of the Jews,” he’s deeply disturbed—and his fear spreads. Matthew tells us “all Jerusalem” was disturbed with him, using a bit of hyperbole. He’s referring not to every resident, but to the governing leadership—the seat of power—much the way we might refer to “Olympia” when talking about state government.

The star itself remains a mystery. Many theories have been proposed, but for the God who spoke the universe into existence, nothing about this is impossible. The star leads the Magi to Jerusalem, but there they need more specific guidance. **The Jewish religious leaders point them to Micah 5:2, directing them to Bethlehem.**

And there they find Jesus and present their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold we know. The other two are resins—essentially oils. You could say these guys were the first dealers of “Essential oils.” Blame them for the craze. Then, having been warned in a dream, they go against Herod’s request to report back once they’ve found this king, and they return home by a different route.

When I reflect on this story—and on the long history that likely brought the Magi to Jesus—I find myself asking two questions. First: **How did I come to faith in Jesus?** Who influenced me? My parents certainly did, so for me family history is huge. But also Sunday school teachers. Pastors from my childhood church. Friends and relatives. But if I go further back in my family history, I honestly don't know where it all began. Somewhere generations ago, someone said, "I'm following Jesus," and that decision echoes all the way down to me standing here tonight.

Who brought you to this place? Who passed the faith on to you? How far back can you trace it? Maybe you're not really at a place of faith in Jesus, but you're asking honest questions like "What child is this?" and you're here on your own or because a neighbor invited you a few days ago. Whoever has influenced you, their legacy is being lived out here tonight as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

The second question is this: **What kind of spiritual legacy am I creating right now?** For some, that's for your children or grandchildren. But you don't need to be a parent or grandparent to be building a legacy: Friends at school, co-workers, or neighbors on your street are the kinds of relationships we all have. We don't control whether our influence lasts hundreds of years like Daniel's may have—but we *do* shape lives in our own lifetime.

You don't need to be a theology expert to leave a legacy of faith. William Chatterton Dix is a powerful reminder of that. In the midst of illness and depression, he poured over Scripture seeking comfort and meaning. He found not only healing, but inspiration. That didn't then lead him into ministry or missions; he went back to his insurance office—but with a renewed sense of purpose, using his gift for poetry to worship God how he was able. And he left a huge legacy of faith. We can do the same.

Christmas—including the Magi, but also Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and others—reminds us of this, though it’s not easy to create a legacy built around Jesus. So much in life competes. Even the Christmas season has become about so many things that have nothing to do with Jesus and can get in the way of a Jesus-centered legacy. I came across a meme recently that expresses Jesus’ own concern about the legacy of Christmas: **Jesus kinda bummed that he was born on December 25 and now his birthday will be overshadowed by Christmas every year.**



By the way, we know Jesus was not actually born on December 25. That comes from early church tradition connecting his crucifixion to March 25. There was a belief then that a perfect life was one that ended on the same date as when it was conceived, so they pegged his conception to March 25 as well. Nine months later lands on December 25. But it’s not the date that matters. It’s the person, and our response to him.

So how do we make sure the legacy of Christmas—and the legacy of faith we pass on—is centered on Jesus? Being here tonight is a good start. Well done. And really, that legacy all starts with our answer to the question of this hymn we sang earlier: “What Child is this?” How do you answer that question? The twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth often put it this way: **“Tell me what you think of Jesus Christ, and I will tell you what you think of God” (Karl Barth).** So how do you answer that question? Do you say he is Lord of lords and King of kings—Emmanuel, God with us—worthy of our worship and devotion, our time, energy, and resources? The Magi certainly thought so. They traveled great distances and, as verse 11 tells us, they bowed down and worshiped him.

The disciples later thought so – and not primarily because of his birth, but because of his teachings, his death, and his resurrection. In fact, without the crucifixion—which we sang of a few minutes ago in “What Child is This”—and without the resurrection, there’s almost zero chance that Christianity exists and we’d be celebrating Jesus’ birth. The New Testament is filled with people who believed this to be true. And we are here tonight because people before us—generation after generation, all the way back to the disciples, and

in a sense, even back to the Magi—believed that Jesus is God come to us and that this is good news. That is the legacy we have inherited, and now, by God’s grace, the legacy we are called to build and pass on.

So, “What Child is this?” How do you answer that question? Your answer shapes your identity at the core, as we talked about last Sunday, and it shapes your spiritual legacy. Someone left a legacy that brought you here tonight. Let’s build and leave a legacy like Daniel, like the Magi, like William Chatterton Dix—a legacy that leads people to Jesus. Who knows? Maybe centuries from now, someone will trace their faith back to you, all because you, like the Magi, bowed before Jesus. Let’s Pray...Amen.