



There's no one like Him

Jesus is not a myth or legend. Jesus is not an ethereal religious figure. Jesus walked the earth at a specific time and place. There's never been another like Him. As we follow the life of Jesus of Nazareth through the Gospel of Matthew, we find our faith in Jesus rooted in the life of Jesus. Meet Jesus. Knowing this man will change your life.

JESUS • Matthew 2:1–13 • Tim McConnell • March 1, 2020

Where were you born and raised? I was born in Germany, raised in Tennessee, then raised some more here in Colorado Springs. That all says something about me. It matters where you were born and raised. Abigail was born and raised in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. If you were born and raised right here, they have a special bumper sticker for you that says “Native”—but they don’t issue many of those! Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Today we start a little adventure studying the life of Jesus. The actual history of a man called Jesus who lived in Israel two thousand years ago. In 2015, the Barna Research Group surveyed the UK about Christian beliefs for a report called “Talking Jesus.” The results were stunning. Here’s just one slide. Not to get deep into it, but three thousand were asked “Was Jesus a real person who actually lived?” about 60% said yes. 17% said they didn’t know. 23% said he was a myth or legend. That’s a problem, and it gets worse the younger the people. So, listen, let’s take a little time just to say this Jesus was a man, a real person who lived in history. Jesus was a man in history. Meet this man, and it will change your life. But first meet the man.

We live in an interesting time. Confidence in knowledge and truth are pretty low, particularly when it comes to religious and ethical questions, but even in fields like history. History? Whose history? Don’t different people tell different stories? Sure. But something actually happened, and what actually happened is still important. People want to avoid conflict, so they say, “That’s your truth. Now let me speak my truth.” Truth gets modified by a personal possessive pronoun, it becomes an individual perspective, not a community exercise. My truth. Your truth. We are willing to dismiss our own version of events for the sake of the feelings of the person before us, but what happened still matters. After a wreck, the police officer doesn’t say, “Oh well, that’s your truth and that’s your truth. Thanks for speaking your truth.” You have to get to what actually happened. You don’t want your doctor giving you his truth or her truth. You want the truth. When it comes to the things that matter most, we leave personal possessive pronouns behind and commit to finding not my truth, not your truth, but the truth. I’m going to ask you over the next few weeks to commit to just

that. Let’s try to leave my truth, your truth behind and say what we can confidently say about this person who lived and shaped the world in ways very few, if any, ever have. Jesus of Nazareth. He was born in Bethlehem. I had the pleasure of visiting the site just a few months ago.

Now, the dates are uncertain. He was not born on December 25, 0000. When the Gregorian Calendar was invented the monks did the best they could, but they were off by a few years. Herod died between 4 and 1 BC. Dates in ancient history are hard to track. There was no common calendar, so events were located by overlapping other known events, like rulers in power and lunar or celestial events. Still, those ranges are like Venn Diagrams, and sometimes the overlap is large. But that’s no reason to lose confidence in the reality of an event. It even happens today. For example, we know that First Pres was established the same month Colorado Springs filed its papers in 1872, so we were confused when the city announced its sesquicentennial for July 2021. I was digging into records and books trying to figure this out. Then Mayor Suthers said they are celebrating when the first stake was driven into the ground to mark out the city in July 1871. When did Colorado Springs start? If we can get confused about 150 years ago, we should forgive a few years off for a birth two thousand years ago. But there’s no “my truth; your truth” here. Nobody doubts Jesus was born. Nobody doubts where.

The tax-collector Matthew tells it like this: “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.” (Matthew 2:1) Usually when we read this, we are so hopped up on sentimental Christmas magic we hardly catch the reality of it. Jesus was born when Herod the Great was the King of Judea, a puppet king to an imperial regime. Herod’s family always knew how to stay in power. When Rome took over, they adjusted. Herod’s father worked for Pompey. When Julius Caesar took over, they adjusted. When Julius Caesar was done, they adjusted. Herod cooperated with the Romans to tax and oppress the Jewish people. Jesus was born at the end of Herod’s life, when he was sick, desperate and paranoid. He executed his favorite wife and a few of his own sons

on rumors. He was quick to murder opponents and had plans in place for hundreds of officials to be slaughtered upon his death. "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." (Matthew 2:3) Herod was disturbed by a threat to his reign; Jerusalem was disturbed thinking about how he might react. That's Herod.

What about these Magi? Probably Persians from Babylon, these were astronomers and seers. Herod wanted to know what they knew. Hearing from them, he called his own experts together. "When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born." (Matthew 2:4) Chief priests and teachers of the law were actually two separate groups. Priests were Sadducees; law teachers were Pharisees. Both groups attested to Bethlehem as the city where a promised Messiah would be born. When this group of Magi went that direction and didn't return, there is little surprise that Herod flew off the handle. He ordered the slaughter of all boys two years old or younger in the town, maybe two dozen kids. We think of Jesus as this magical cherub baby, sweetly born under the stars on a silent night with flocked pine trees and softly falling snow, sheep and camels and donkeys (if Disney was involved the animals would sing). No. Jesus born into a mess. Joseph and Mary took him up and fled to Egypt to escape the terrorism. They were displaced persons, refugees, bobbing like a cork on the waves of war, violence and terrorism.

All of that, I would say, is pretty normal historical stuff. It's not all that difficult to square those events with life as we experience it today. But there are some mysterious elements too. What about this star? It could have been a collapsing star, or a comet, or a particularly rare alignment, we don't know. Whatever it was, it was positioned in a way that drew these men to Jerusalem then on to Bethlehem. More important than the light or lights they saw was how they interpreted them. Have you ever had something happen a little strange? A shooting star during a prayer. A bird that sat on the ledge just when you were wondering if God cared. Looking up and seeing Orion when you are halfway around the world, and remembering God is with you wherever you go. The whole world is a stage for God's love when your

eyes are open. They brought gifts. Gold, for royalty—as though expecting to meet a king. Myrrh, as though expecting to meet a priest who deals with death and burial. Frankincense, as though expecting to meet a prophet who gathers people in sacred spaces to hear the Word of God. We are never told there were three men; we are told there were three gifts. Just to be historically accurate.

They too were warned by a dream not to return to Herod. Say what you'd like about this. You know, I'm not averse to the supernatural, but I'm trying to look at these events with clear eyes with you. Not my truth, but the truth. Dreams work in many ways, and I'm sure you have had a few that impacted your decisions. My guess is everyone who interacted with Herod had a few bad dreams. These guys were smart enough not to loop back around to that guy again. So. What do we know? We know there was a man, named Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem just outside of Jerusalem. Although born away from his own home, on the run, to unremarkable parents, his birth made a mark on history. That's where we begin. Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem at the end of the rule of King Herod. We will see what happens next.

I have just returned from Cuba. I had the honor of preaching at First Presbyterian Havana, a church that has been at it since 1906. They are going strong. Even evangelizing, seeing some Santeria and others coming to faith in Jesus, but mostly keeping the church alive in the middle of communist Cuba and a declining neighborhood. Their mission statement is "A Light in the City." In Cuba, much of the infrastructure is crumbling. Buildings fall apart and collapse regularly. But when an important visitor comes, the government repairs the streets. When the Pope came, for example, they figured out exactly where he was going to drive. Those roads got paved, those buildings got repaired, and the fronts of all those buildings all along the way were painted fresh. A block over, and it's a mess again. We do this with Jesus. We think we need to clean up the mess before he arrives, throw paint over the crumbling parts of our lives so he can't see them. I want to come to church with my life together, with everything shiny and impressive and fresh. Jesus did not come to see how well things were going in our system.

Jesus doesn't come to your life to marvel at the fresh paint and perfect frontage. Jesus was born into a mess; Jesus still comes into the mess. It's the mess he's after. Don't try to clean up your mess for Jesus. Jesus came for the mess.

Isaiah 52 foretells the coming of Jesus. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" (Isaiah 52:7-8 ESV) The beautiful feet are the feet of Jesus. The feet of good news, to announce the reign of God, to publish salvation. The people wait. Then Jesus comes! "Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem." (Isaiah 52:9) "Jesus is coming," they might have thought. "Let's fix these ruins. We don't want him to see the ruins, the waste places." But that's exactly what Jesus is coming to see. "I can't come to Jesus," we think. "I can't allow the light of Christ into my life. I can't start going to church. I can't go to MOPS or Bible Study." Why not? "Because my life's too ruinous and messy; filled with waste places. I'd be ashamed." We fail to receive help because we don't want Jesus to enter our mess. But it's from the ruins and the waste places we burst into songs of joy. The mess is exactly what Jesus is coming to see. The waste places are exactly where Jesus intends to bring healing.

Here is Jesus. God's own Son. Born to a humble couple in a manger, a feeding stall. Jesus determined to prove he is not afraid of the mess. "Oh, I can't allow the light of Christ to shine on that." Yes, you can. Yes, you must. Jesus came into the ruinous, horrible, broken era of Herod. He came to the sickened systems of Jerusalem. To the broken dreams and false expectations of shepherds, priests, even Persians. Jesus came to enter the mess, your mess. Jesus came to administer grace, to forgive you even where you condemn yourself. Jesus came to bring you home. No shame in where He found you. He knew where you were. He knew the ruins and the waste places of your life. That's how he knew where to go to find you! Born in Bethlehem, raised on the run, there was a man called Jesus of Nazareth. Some say he came to save us from our sins.

STUDY GUIDE

JESUS • "Born and Raised"

Matthew 2:1-13

UP: UP: Connect with God through Spending Time in His Word

Begin your study in prayer. Read and reflect on Matthew 2:1-13.

- 1) What appears to be the most significant Kingdom reality at play within this passage?
- 2) What do we learn about the environment in which Jesus was born? (physically, politically, socially)
- 3) We read in verse 3 that "when King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." What was so disturbing? What was King Herod's understanding regarding the Jewish anticipation of the Messiah? Why was "all Jerusalem" also disturbed?

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

- 4) The gospels are filled with direct quotes from the Old Testament regarding the coming of the Messiah. Is this significant for our context today as it relates to proclaiming Christ to the watching world? Why or why not?
- 5) What would you like to learn more about regarding the historical reality of Jesus? What is a next step you can take toward this end?
- 6) For the watching world to "get it" that Jesus was a real historical person, are there any stereotypes of Christians held by the wider culture that Christians can strive to alter? What are they and how might we live differently to better reflect the love of Christ?

IN: Connect with Each Other

Pastor Tim writes, "We think we need to clean up the mess before He arrives, throw paint over the crumbling parts of our lives so He can't see them ... We fail to receive forgiveness because we don't want Jesus to enter our mess ... (but) it's the mess Jesus is after. Don't try to clean up your mess for Jesus. Jesus came for the mess."

What is your testimony of letting go of trying to clean yourself up and instead allowing Jesus to have full access into your life?