

If you have your Bibles, go ahead and grab them. Turn to Matthew, chapter 2. I want to wish you a merry Christmas if I won't see you on Tuesday night. I love this season. One of the reasons I think this season is so compelling to me is, first, it was in December I was actually hired here as the pastor nearly 11 years ago. It was also in December that I got released from the hospital after brain surgery.

Actually, one of the first things we did, a few days after, was come to Christmas Eve services. It was my first foray back into life here in regard to our covenant community. I didn't lead from the stage. Patterson did. I actually sat in the back up there during service and just enjoyed celebrating the birth of his Son. So there are a lot of things about this time of year that make me aware in ways I'm normally not.

I've been pastor here for 11 years. About six years ago now, maybe seven years, we decided one of the things we wanted to do was try to build a rhythm into how we do things. We wanted there to be a fall sermon series that gave way to a four-week series of Advent that gave way to a four-week series around prayer and big cultural issues. We wanted to put the stake in the ground and trust the Word of God to lean on our world and our culture for the good of our culture and discuss things like racial reconciliation and when life begins and talk about going to the ends of the earth.

Then we wanted that season to give way to a new kind of extended series in the spring. They won't always be, but one of those we want to simply be a book study. Starting in February, we're going to start the book of Acts. That should be a good time. So that was the rhythm we wanted to develop so you would know that in the fall we're kicking off a series, and then at the end of that series we're going to move into dwelling upon and considering the incarnation.

In those six or seven years, one of the things we had yet to do until this year was actually just walk through the narrative, really just read the story of the promise of Jesus' coming, and then read the story of Mary being told, and read the story of Jesus being born. Now you probably didn't hear that one, except for 10 minutes at the beginning of last week's sermon, because of "Icemeddon." Last week we looked at the angels appearing to the shepherds, and now this week, right before Christmas, what I want us to dial into is the coming of the magi, the visitation of the three wise men to the house in which, more than likely, 2-year-old Jesus was hanging out with his mom and dad.

One of the things that has been interesting for me as I read through the narrative once again and have been preparing these sermons is that there are all of these other large, big, spectacular doctrines, truths about the nature and character of God, woven into the story of Christ's coming. Even in the incarnation God is calling us upwards to consider all he is out to accomplish in the coming of Jesus Christ.

As I read this passage in particular, my mind drifted back to a sermon I read years ago by J.C. Ryle. I had to look that up because of some of the things I was seeing in the text, and I read his sermon again. He was just such a godly, just beastly man of God. Some of what I'll be pulling out of this this morning I actually learned from J.C. Ryle.

I want us to read the story of the three wise men showing up, and I want to point out three things we see in this text. They aren't very Christmassy thoughts, but if we do grasp them, our experience and understanding of Christmas will monumentally increase, thereby giving us a greater opportunity to experience the fullness of joy we should experience around this time of year. With that said, let's go to Matthew, chapter 2. We're going to pick it up in verse 1.

**"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.**

**They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."' That's Micah 5:2. "Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.**

**And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.' After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.**

**When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."**

There are three things I want to show you in this text that really aren't necessarily overly Christmassy topics, but they're here. They're present. Here is the first one. When we talk about all of the promises of God finding their yes in Jesus Christ, one of the ones we see right out of the gate is that the protracted, long promise of God to rescue and ransom from among other nations finds its firstfruits not when a herald goes out and begins to proclaim the good news, but God actively draws to himself these "three men from orient are."

Here's what we know about these three men. Are you ready? It's going to take us a while. Nothing. We literally know nothing about them. We know they're from the East. They could be Babylonians, or they could be Arabs. We don't quite know. Reason and conjecture would tell us... If you know your Bible, the 10 tribes of Israel were actually carried off into exile. That's where you're going to get Daniel and those writings.

Most scholars will agree these men probably found some of the writings or had considered some of the things in Babylonian history as equated to the prophet Daniel, and that's what has these men trekking across the first-century world. But even that is a guess. We don't know. We know they see the star and are compelled to take an unbelievably dangerous journey across the first-century landscape to head west to find this Savior of the world. You see in this text the firstfruits of God's promise to rescue and ransom from among the nations.

Now I want to say this. I don't think it's bold, because it's true, although I think people sometimes get agitated when I say it. The more Americanized and Anglo you make Christianity, the more you castrate it from its actual power. Our God is not the God of Anglo Westerners. It did not begin that way, and it will not end that way. God has raised up this country in regard to wealth, travel, and ability to go for a given season for his purposes, and there will be a day he has no need any longer for us as we are currently arranged.

We must never see ourselves as the city on the hill. We are not. That's not Jesus' point. I'm grateful for Ronald Reagan. He just proof-texted pretty brutally there. The kingdom of God is the city on the hill. The glory of Christ is the hope of the nations. No governmental structure. No way of doing economics. Now are some more intrinsically wise than others? Well, absolutely. Has God shed his grace upon us? Amen. Yes. I'm a military brat. Yes.

But the more you make Christianity Western, the more you rob it of what it actually is, which is why I had to address Ms. Kelly last week about her "Jesus is white" comment. The reason I needed to press on that like I did is that he wasn't. When all is said and done, we're going to be surprised at just how diverse... I don't know what we're going to be singing language-wise in glory. I mean, we simply don't know. What we do

know is that our God is the God of the nations and that he is drawing men and women from every tribe, tongue, and nation on earth for the glory of his name, and he will not be stopped.

Most people become believers in Christ because there is a herald. Someone shares the good news with them. But what about *these* boys? Nobody shared the good news with these men. These are men God drew unto himself. Two months ago at elder-led prayer, Brian Walck, who's one of our elders, got up and was leading us in a prayer for the nations. He told this great story. Brian is involved all over the world. He owns a business that works with guys and trains them in business alongside churches. He's just a brilliant man of God.

He told this story of some friends of his who are in the Middle East and not in a country you would wear an "I Heart Jesus" shirt in. They were making a trip across the country. It was an ill-advised and foolish trip. The car is getting low on gas, so they pull into this gas station to get fuel. They pull in and begin to fuel up the car, and they see an older man. He's really weathered, has his turban on, and is just glaring at them.

They're a little bit nervous for their lives. They're in the middle of nowhere. You know there are certain countries where there is no 9-1-1. You know there are certain places where there's no one coming to help you. They're in that type of situation. So they hurry up and get the gas and nervously get in the car. As they begin to drive away, he confides in his wife that he's wrestling because he feels like he's supposed to turn around and share the gospel with that guy.

He's like, "This is just so foolish. We're going to get ourselves killed out here." So he's kind of processing out loud to his wife. I've never met these people, but I love this woman, because here's her response: "I would rather be the widow of a martyr than married to a coward." I mean, you want to talk about a woman who would go after a man's heart. Yeah, I'd turn around. "We'll see about that, woman. We're both dying tonight!" I mean, if you want to provoke a man, that's how you do it: call him a coward.

They pull back into this gas station, and he walks up to this older man. He's like, "Listen. This is probably going to sound crazy to you, but I'd like to share this with you." As he begins to share the gospel with the man, the man said, "I had a dream two nights ago that I was to come here and wait and that someone would come and tell me this." This is the kind of stuff God does, sometimes through heralds and sometimes not through heralds.

It wasn't a guy who came into this man's town up in the mountains and shared the gospel. God compelled him, brought him in, drew him near. We're seeing all over the world... I have a dear friend in the Middle East now planting churches, and God is really doing a work. Some of it is through dreams and visions. God

is saving people not with simply the proclamation of the Word, but rather because he draws men unto himself, because he is the God of the nations.

In fact, Psalm 86:9 says, "**All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.**" Then again Jesus himself in Matthew 24:14 says, "**And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.**"

I had a meeting this week with a young man in his early twenties. He was not a believer. In fact, he would call himself an atheist. One of the things he said to me at my table in my office was that he doesn't know how I can believe what I believe when religion has been responsible for so much murder and so much oppression and so much injustice. How many of you have heard that argument before? Let me answer the way I answered him.

Really, the issue is not religion. The issue is the human heart. You want to talk about oppression, genocide, murder, and strife, let's take it out of the world of religion and put it into government and economics. Does anybody remember communist Russia? A completely religious-free zone. How did *that* play out for human flourishing? Do you want to talk North Korea? Let's not pretend religion is the issue. The issue is a broken, busted human spirit that needs to be redeemed by the gospel.

You can say the same thing for economics. You can say the same thing for...you name it. The issue is not religion; the issue is a busted human heart that longs for control and power and is greedy by its nature. When all is said and done here, what I said to him was at the center of the Christian faith is a man being murdered by his enemies while praying for them. What makes God's call to mission so profound for the believer is any conquest of salvation does not come by the might of the sword or by intimidation; it comes by the proclamation of the Word or by the spilling of our blood.

We don't kill to get converts; we lay down our lives to show there's something more valuable than this life. Some of you are like, "Martyrdom on Christmas? Are you serious?" Yes, I am. The manger and the cross are connected, and if they're not, one of them doesn't matter. I don't have time to build this all out, but I will in January when we cover the nations. Jesus Christ did not shed his blood for those who *might* believe; he shed his blood for those who *will* believe, and he has invited us to be a part of his gathering. That's awesome.

That's why we go into southern Sudan, and it's why we go into Guatemala, and it's why we have people in Taiwan and Asia and in countries I can't name right now because this will be podcasted. That's why we're serious about going to the ends of the earth and why we're going to get more and more serious as we

better organize, better facilitate, and better roll out men and women to the ends of the earth. Because the shedding of the blood of Jesus purchased for the Father many sons.

God's primary way of calling those sons and daughters to himself is through a herald. We go so we might preach. We go so we might serve. We go so we might love. We go so we might help. We go that we might proclaim good tidings of great joy. We've actively prayed that God would send all the more of you out so you might see. Even if you don't go long term, it's helpful to get out of here for a while. It's helpful to see just how blessed you are.

If you're like, "I've been to Paris," that's not what I'm talking about. To just go and see. Can I tell you what I'm not thinking about around Christmastime? This. But it's there. So serious is God about the ends of the earth being redeemed and ransomed that in the story of the incarnation three wise men from the east head west. That's the first thing here.

The second thing you see here that is heartbreaking and a little bit scary is that you can know the Bible and miss Jesus. I think it's probably easier to preach this in this day and age than it has ever been, because we have turned into a culture that is voyeuristic. Confession time. Are you ready? How many of you would admit...? I'm not saying, "How many of you *have*...?" because I believe the percentile is probably 95 to 98. How many of you would admit you have Facebook- or Twitter-stalked someone? Go ahead, look around. No shame. You're just like, "Oh, I wonder what they're doing."

Here's what happens. Between online social media and *People* magazine and *Us*, we are drawn in to believe we know people we do not know. Our whole culture is built around the lives of others, mainly the lives of others we don't really know. We start talking about them like we know them. "I cannot believe he said that to her. What? Did you not read? Did you not see on Twitter?" It's a voyeuristic society that would have us knowing about without knowing.

Unfortunately, far too many of us know about without knowing. We're men and women who can give some of the stat lines about Jesus of Nazareth. We know where he was born. "Oh yeah, he was born in Bethlehem. Great little town. It's an old little town. Yeah, he took some fish and some loaves and gave lunch to, I don't know, a 'kabillion' people or something. It was awesome." You remember Sunday school felt board stuff. (Well, probably not anymore. I'm going to have to change that illustration. That's probably now officially gone. Does anybody felt board? Never mind. I'm going to keep using it.)

We know some of the stats of Jesus. We know some of his good works. We know how well he played in that game, but we don't know him. You see that painfully in this text. Look again in Matthew 2, starting in verse 3. Marvel at this with me. **"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with**

him..." I understand why Herod is troubled at the coming of the Savior of the world, the King of the Jews, but why would Jerusalem be troubled there? You would think Jerusalem would be glad if this Savior was born. Look who Herod assembles. Verse 4:

**"...and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"**"

Here's something that blows my mind upon reading this. Why didn't they start gathering their stuff and go? These are the chief priests and the scribes. They know the promise. They are the experts on the Messiah who is to come. See how quickly they answered? Herod is like, "Where is he going to be born?" "Well, it's easy. The prophet says this: in Bethlehem of Judea." But they're not gathering their stuff. They're not making a beeline to Bethlehem. They're not searching the sky for the star.

In fact, even upon giving the news, we see nothing in Scripture to indicate they moved at all. What happened to them? How can you be trained in and know beautiful, deep truths about who God is and be unmoved by them? One of the things I've tried to say for years here (I've said it in different ways in different seasons) is we must always be on guard against getting overly familiar with divine things.

When you get overly familiar, when you don't meditate and think and dwell on the magnificence of the things we're talking about, you tend to get playful with something you don't get playful with. You tend to get indifferent toward what you should not be indifferent toward. Now we have men who are experts in the Scriptures who get news from King Herod. "Hey, apparently the King of the Jews has been born. Where would I find him?" "Oh, it's easy. Micah 5 says he'll be in Bethlehem." Yet they don't move.

This is an ongoing problem for many of the Pharisees, chief priests, and scribes in the first century. In fact, in John 5, starting in verse 39, Jesus says to a group of them, **"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life."** I love this text, because its argumentation is brilliant, like you would expect it to be since he's God.

He says, "You study the Scriptures in vain, because you're going to the Scriptures because you think the Scriptures give you life, and yet the Scriptures are telling you /give you life, and yet you won't come to me to have that life." It would almost be like me reading a book about dating Lauren on a date with Lauren, reading the chapter about how Lauren doesn't want me to read books on our dates, but not putting the

book down. Just going, "Okay. Yeah. Don't read when you're on a date. Where's my highlighter? 'When you're on a date with Lauren, don't read.'"

"Will you put that book down?"

"Hey, I'm trying to learn how to date you here."

That's what's going on. They've become experts on who he is but refuse to come to who he is. I don't tend to think about that inconsistency in my life around Christmas. I have a dear friend. He has been in a discipleship group with me for about a year. He's one of our interns. He had a great conversation with a friend and was talking to him about his faith. "Oh yeah, I'm a Christian." He goes, "Okay, what does that mean?" He was like, "Well, you know..."

Here's what I've learned in this area. Almost everybody thinks they're a Christian, but that question, "What do you mean when you say that?" reveals that a lot of people just simply aren't. I'm glad your parents went to church. That doesn't make you a Christian. Praise God that they took you to Sunday school. Praise God that you might have been baptized when you were 7. That doesn't make you a believer.

To have no marks of repentance, to have no real seriousness about submitting your life to the Lord or following after him, reveals far more that you're probably not than you might be. Are you tracking with me? Some of you are like, "Golly! It's Christmas, Chandler. Back off." No, no. How awful would I be, how wicked would I be, if I did that?

If this is true that he has come not to condemn the world but to save the world from condemnation, then how cruel would I be under the banner of the incarnation to not press you on, "I'm a Christian because when I was 7 I was baptized. No fruit, no seriousness about following the Lord, nothing that distinctively marks me as a Christian, rather than I'm better morally than some dudes I know. No humility. No understanding of the Word. No desire to know the Word. No desire to submit in areas of finance." (I'm not about to take an offering.)

"I'm a Christian."

"Why?"

"Because I'm American, yo." No. That doesn't make you a Christian. What we see here in this text is that there can be a disjoint between knowing about and knowing. May we continue to work out our salvation

with fear and trembling, growing all the more confident in our salvation as the Holy Spirit works and moves and transforms our lives.

Since that's so heavy, it brings me to the third thing we need to see in this text that's something to really rally around. Something we see from the very beginning is the only way to come to Jesus is by faith alone. Let's think about this. Let's put ourselves into this story. We have three wise men from the East, maybe Babylonians, maybe just a group of Arab kings. They see this star. Maybe they heard some things out of Daniel's writings. Maybe they heard some things in Babylon. We don't know. Then they set across the first-century world. They head west to find this king.

I like to go west. In particular, Santa Barbara. In fact, does anybody want to start a campus out there? Who wants to come with me? Santa Barbara Village. We'll make this campus a video venue, and I'll just move out there. I have to be on the ground to make that happen. I like to go west. Here's what it involves: a three-and-a-half-hour plane ride, someone to watch the kids, and the packing of a bag. *Bam!* Headed west. I'll be there in three and a half.

That's not how things work in the first century. It's unbelievably dangerous, unbelievably costly, and extremely uncomfortable. These men blindly, or by faith, start heading west. They don't even know where to go. They stumble into Jerusalem and ask the question, "Hey, we're here to worship the Savior of the world; where is he going to be born?" Does anybody know how crazy that is? "Bethlehem." "Okay."

Remember that the Bible even says Bethlehem is a ghetto little tiny town. The Bible called it the least of all of the towns of Judah. It isn't like Judah is a giant metropolis either. Yet here is where the Savior of the world is born. So what do they do? They head that way. Then they get there... Here's food for thought. The Bible tells us Jesus wasn't all that much to look at. That's what the prophet Isaiah said. You wouldn't look at Jesus and be like, "This is God in the flesh."

He wasn't like eight feet tall, deadlifting 6,000 pounds, just yoked out of his mind, and people are mistaking this guy for God. That's not what was happening. He was unsightly, if you will. There was nothing majestic about him that he should be praised. That's what the prophet Isaiah would tell us about the appearance of Jesus, and what other first-century writings would tell us about Jesus. He wasn't a magnificent-looking creature. He was a man. Fully God, fully man.

Now they show up to this house. Most scholars are going to say we're probably looking at him being about a year and a half to 2 years old. Remember the story? What did they do? They fell on the ground and worshiped him. Faith drives that. If there's nothing overly impressive about him... You don't fall on your

face and worship a 2-year-old unless God has granted to you an amazing measure of faith. It's the only way one will come and the only way one has *ever* been able to come to Jesus: by faith alone.

I don't know if you've been around 2-year-olds. I've never been around one who makes me want to worship them. They make me want to do other things to them, but worship doesn't tend to be one of them. Yet three wise men, wealthy men... The gifts they bring are legit, but the gifts they bring... Because some people are going to go, "I hear you saying 'faith alone,' but they kind of purchased their way in there, Chandler. The dude brought some myrrh. I mean, surely he's getting some favor from God by bringing myrrh."

No, no. They're not getting favor because of the gifts; they're getting favor because of the faith. It's the same way you and I must come to Jesus Christ even to this day. You have no gift to bring. You get that, right? What are you going to give him that he needs or doesn't already have? What are you going to give him? Your life? Are you serious? What part of your life do you think is yours? Like, seriously. What part of it do you think is yours?

"My unwillingness to come to him." Brother, you're glorifying God in your disobedience. We covered this. You're setting yourself up to be an object of God's wrath. Congrats. You nailed him. You have nothing to bring, nothing to give, nothing to lay before his feet. It is by faith alone. That's what the apostle Paul would tell us later in Ephesians, chapter 2, starting in verse 8. It says, **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."**

When I was little, my parents would give us a tiny bit of money to buy them presents at Christmas. Do any of you guys do this? It wasn't a lot. We were not a wealthy family. We'd get like, "Here's \$15. Here's \$20. Buy your mom and me a gift." Here's what I know about those gifts. They were pretty ghetto gifts. I mean, I remember getting my dad Brut soap-on-a-rope, where you could hang the soap, and then you could take it off the thing. Then I'd always get my mom perfume she would never actually wear. I was like, "Oh, that smells good" and would get that.

Here's what was crazy about those gifts. Those gifts were actually bought for them with money that was theirs. So I actually didn't give them anything. This is what C.S. Lewis meant when he told the story of sixpence none the richer, that a father who gives his child sixpence to buy him a gift for his birthday or Christmas is actually sixpence none the richer. He didn't gain anything. You and I have nothing to lay at the Lord's feet except faith, because we'll have nothing to boast in but his saving majestic grace and mercy granted to us by faith alone.

So serious is God about this message that it's here present in the incarnation. By faith, the wise men risk their lives and walk across the ancient world. By faith, they stop in Jerusalem. By faith, they worship a 2-year-old who is reliant upon his mother to feed him, care for him, and protect him. We see in the text no miraculous sign. He doesn't call them by name when they roll in. Yet they worship him. Faith alone.

The message in all of these messages over the last three or four weeks has been the same: God is a God who keeps his promises. That really means two things we need to be anchored into in this season. First, that God has promised to save us from our sins and the coming of Christ is him keeping that promise. He has also promised us to be sufficient, regardless of whether or not this year is a good one.

I already said early on that four years ago, Christmas Eve service, I sat up on those back seats up there and could hardly hold myself together. Maybe it was Decadron. Maybe it was the words, "anaplastic oligodendroglioma, WHO grade III; you have a couple of years to live." Maybe it was still recovering from surgery and the pain meds, but I could hardly hold myself together up there, and it was a difficult Christmas for our family. I'm wondering if it's going to be my last. *They're* wondering if it's going to be my last. It was just heavy.

It snowed a ton that year. The kids were outside playing. I couldn't do anything because I'd just come out of brain surgery. You don't want to slip on the ice after that. It was a weighty Christmas. Here's what I can tell you. He was enough. He sustained. He was sufficient. We were not abandoned. It was a rich season for us. Then you know what? This year I feel awesome. I feel in great shape. I have a ton of energy. The kids are all in great spots. My little 10-year-old is growing in grace. My 8-year-old is starting to show signs of faith. I like my wife. Not just love her; I *like* that woman.

We're going to open presents, and we have family coming over, I think. Maybe we're going somewhere. I'll find out after this service. They're all in here now. I'm concentrating on Christmas Eve. Then from there it should be an epic day, and God will be sufficient there too. The beauty of the incarnation is that God has invaded dark places and put an anchor down for our souls, regardless of our circumstances.

If you've come in and this is truly a "joy to the world" year for you, then praise God. Enjoy it. That's a gift. But maybe you've come in and you're beat up and banged up. This is your first Christmas without a spouse, or it's your first Christmas after the death of a loved one, or you're new and lonely, or you can't get to where you'd like to be, or you're struggling, or you're sick, or somebody you love is sick, or some kind of jostling has occurred so you're aware of how fragile things are. The hope of the incarnation is that God knows and that he'll be enough. Lean heavy into him. He keeps his promises. Let's pray.

Father, thank you for these men and women. Again, I just praise you that these things are true. I thank you that you save from among the nations, that you draw to yourself men and women from every tribe, tongue, and nation on earth. Your coming is all about that, as seen in the wise men. In fact, we're in this room praying together because you're about the nations, because we *are* the nations, particularly in light of when that word went out in Psalms.

Father, I thank you and praise you that your grace covers the inconsistency between knowing and knowing about. Father, where there might not be belief in here, I pray you would grant it. Where we have known about, where we have been a casual observer, where we have been a kind of Bible stalker, would you instead, Father, do the work of illumination, that we might believe more fully, surrender our lives completely, repent of our sins, and become children of God?

I thank you that the only way to come is by faith; the only way to come is by trusting you are who you say you are and you have accomplished what you say you have accomplished. Might we repent of our sins and plant our roots deeply there. It's for your beautiful name I pray, amen.

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