

Let's do a quick Christmas-themed either / or survey by show of hands. Decorations: real tree or fake tree? (There's nothing like that real tree smell. Nothing like picking up all those pine needles, either.) Movies: *Home Alone* or *Elf*? (*Die Hard* almost made the list.) Drinks: egg nog or hot cocoa?

We need wisdom for all the decisions we have to make for the holidays. For our Christmas Eve services, we are going to read from Matthew 2, and we are going to see two ways of responding to the Christmas message: with the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of heaven.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "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." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 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. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12)

This portion of the Christmas story begins with a group of people known as "the magi," which is the Greek word for "wise men." The magi were part of the intelligentsia of the ancient world. They were the most elite, learned, and academic people around. They were well-known for studying philosophy, history, and, most of all, astrology. They searched the heavens, tracing the stars and looking for signs of things to come. They thought that's how the gods communicated to them about global events. A few decades earlier in 44 BC, right after the most significant political event in recent centuries, the assassination of Julius Caesar, a comet appeared in the sky. We have reliable historical accounts of this not only from Rome, but from China as well. Modern scientists have retraced history and believe that a comet appeared in the sky for seven days. It was one of the brightest comets to ever visit earth, so bright that it was clearly visible in the middle of the day. A coin struck in the first century BC depicts the emperor on one side and a comet on the other. We look back at that and think, "Interesting coincidence: the emperor dies and there also happens to be a comet in the skies," but they clearly believed this was the way the heavens spoke about future kings. So when these magi, these ancient astrologers, saw a bright star in the sky, they followed it for 600 miles, from modern day Iran to modern day Israel, wanting to learn about the newborn king so they could bow down to him, worship him, and present him with gifts.

When they got to Israel, they naturally went to Herod, the man who was known as the king of the Jews, to ask him about the new king who had been born, assuming it was the birth of his child that prompted the star to appear in the sky. But Herod looked around and said, "I haven't had any kids recently," so he assumed this future ruler would be a threat to his throne—and any threat to his throne had to be eliminated. That was par for the course for Herod. During his reign he killed three of his own sons because he thought that they were conspiring with others to take his throne. Anyone who posed a threat to Herod's rule was removed instantly. So he asked the magi, "When you find this new born king, please,

come and tell me, so I can worship him, too.” But we know it was all a charade. He had no intention of worshipping Jesus, only of eliminating what he perceived as yet another threat to his throne. At the very first Christmas, we see juxtaposed two very different ways of responding to the news of Jesus' birth: worldly wisdom that looks like protecting your own kingdom and heavenly wisdom that looks like celebrating God's kingdom.

Herod epitomized the first response to Christmas: *protecting our own kingdom*. He heard that a new king was born, a king who would come to rule and reign, and he strategized a way he could stay on the throne. But this is not only the way of Herod; this is the way of the world. This is inside all of us. No one wants to be told they are losing their status, their title, their job, their place of honor, and it's being given to another. Here's a simple example: For years, Aaron Rodgers was the quarterback for the Green Bay Packers. He won a Super Bowl and four MVP awards. He was widely considered to be the best quarterback in the league. But he needed more help—a great tight end, a great running back. When his team's turn to draft a great player came, who did they draft? Not a tight end or a running back, but another quarterback, someone who would eventually take his job. How did Aaron Rodgers respond? Was he happy? Joyful? Excited? Did he quickly bring the new quarterback under his wing to show him the ropes? No, he pouted and fussed and eventually forced his way out of town through a trade. He didn't want anyone coming for what he believed was rightfully his.

The truth is, in some way, shape, or form, we all do that. We like to be in charge; we like to be in control; we want to be the one holding the ball, calling the shots, and setting the direction and trajectory of our life. But then we look at that little baby, born in Bethlehem, lying in a feeding trough, and realize, he's King of kings and Lord of lords. That means he's in control. He's in charge. He gets to sit on the throne, not me.

Although at first this seems like a threat, it's actually the best news in the world. When the angels announced the birth of Jesus, they said to the shepherds, “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). You heard that right: a new king has been born! He's the Lord! He'll be in charge, not you! But this is good news that will cause great joy. Why is it good news? Even though Jesus being in charge means we are no longer in charge, he's a better leader than you or I could ever hope to be. That's why it's good news he's in charge. He's wiser, more loving, more just. He never takes a misstep, he never strikes the wrong chord. We can be like Herod—a foolish, conceited, self-deceived leader who heard the news of Jesus' birth and tried to protect his kingdom—or we can chose a better way, the way of the wise men.

In contrast, the magi's response to Christmas was to *celebrate God's kingdom*. They pursued Jesus, traveling 600 miles to meet him. They left their homes and their families, put their careers and personal lives on hold, all in the hope of meeting the new-born king. Jesus was their highest priority. That should challenge and inspire us. With our phones and our computers, news and social media, we live in an age of constant distraction. Our attention and focus is consumed by unimportant things. This Christmas let's pursue the most important thing: getting to know Jesus.

The magi did more than pursue Jesus. When they found him, what did they do? They worshipped him. They discerned his infant worth and they bowed before him. I remember being in college when Kate Middleton married into the British royal family. Even though she became a princess, she had to learn how to interact with royalty. She had to learn how to curtsy and when to curtsy, and other small gestures to show deference to the queen. She had to learn rules such as the queen was the last to leave a room, but the first to get into a car. The same is true for us with Jesus. We can begin and end our day with a prayer, thanking God for the gift of life and asking for his strength to honor him in all we do. We can read the

Bible and ask for guidance and wisdom to live a life he desires from us. That's what worship looks like in a practical way.

The last thing the wise men did was bring gifts to Jesus: gold, frankincense, myrrh—a very unique combination of gifts. Gold made sense, as it was the customary gift for a new-born king. But frankincense was a very unusual gift—it was a spice used by priests in the preparation of sacrifices. Myrrh was used by undertakers to embalm corpses. These gifts would have confused people at his birth, but they were a prophetic way of revealing to the world what Jesus' life would be about. Jesus would be a king who leads us; he would be a priest who sacrifices to take away our sins; and he would give up his own life, surrendering his body over to torture and suffering, and ultimately even to death, so that we could be saved. These gifts were confusing at his birth, but over the totality of his life, everything came into perfect view. This is what Christmas is all about—Jesus was born not just to be our king, but to give his life to be a sacrifice for our sins, so we can be forgiven. The Bible says if we confess with our mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved. If you make that decision today, to believe in Jesus, to trust in him, you will receive the greatest gift of all, the gift of salvation and eternal life!

I want to invite our church staff and their families onto the stage so we can end with a candlelight moment. As they are coming out, let's pray together.

Candlelight: The Bible says that Jesus is the light of the world. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. As we share the light, it's a symbolic picture of the love of Jesus spreading in our lives and spreading throughout the world.