

I think we can all agree Christmas is a wonderful time of the year. Everyone loves Christmas. College students get several weeks away from study, adults get at least a few days off works, we all get time with friends and family. But I think most would agree that it is children who love Christmas most of all. It seems that for children, during the days leading up to Christmas, the entire world is enchanted. There are Christmas movies and Christmas cookies and Christmas parties and Christmas presents. My son turned four years old last Sunday. He loves dinosaurs. When he came downstairs for breakfast, we had set out a T-rex dinosaur over a plate of chocolate cookies. Hudson devoured the cookies and refused to put the dinosaur down for the rest of the day. He insisted on bringing it with him to church. When we got home, we had a few of his friends over for a party. One of them brought him a dinosaur fossil kit. He opened it up to find a small chisel and hammer, a brush, and a magnifying glass, and he got to dig out a three-inch T-rex tooth. I cannot tell you how excited my son was to discover a “real” dinosaur fossil. He kept saying, “I have to tell all my friends. I have to tell a paleontologist. Wait, I don’t know any paleontologists. How do I meet a paleontologist?” It’s so fun watching the way little kids respond to presents.

As we celebrate Christmas Eve together, we turn our attention to the greatest present ever given: the gift of God’s Son, sent into the world on that holy night. God becoming man is the highpoint of the story of the universe—the creator of everything entering into the creation story and the human experience. Sooner or later every person who has ever lived experiences limitation and suffering, sorrow and death. Christmas is not simply God choosing to dwell among us, but God choosing to become one of us, to voluntarily experience all that life has to offer—the trivial irritations like having imperfect family members and having to go to work and not having much money, and the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, betrayal and loneliness, despair and death. He willingly volunteered to endure all of that, and so he came to us, born in a manger.

When the gospel writers tell of the life of Jesus, they say things like, “It was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Caesar Tiberius.” That was how they told time and kept history back then. Everything was linked to the reign of the most powerful monarch alive, so clearly Jesus’ ministry is tied to Caesar. But 2,000 years later, when historians talk about Caesar, they date his birth and the inauguration of his rule and his eventual death from the day that Jesus entered into the world. All of history, even for the most powerful people, now revolves around the life of that little baby boy, born in that manger.

Matthew, one of the early followers of Jesus who wrote an account of his life, tells us about the events surrounding his birth.

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.” [We know from later in this story this was all a ploy. He really wanted the details of this king who had been born because he naturally assumed this king would be a threat to his throne. He was going to have this baby murdered.] 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)

When Jesus was born, people responded to him in three different ways: Herod attacked him, the religious leaders ignored him, the magi worshiped him. That wasn't what happened only when Jesus was born—those three responses have been played out again and again throughout history. They are played out even today.

Herod attacked Jesus. He tried to get information about the place and time Jesus was born so he could send his soldiers to that location to kill Jesus under the guise of wanting to worship him. When the Magi caught on through a dream to what Herod was doing and his plan was thwarted, Herod ended up killing all the baby boys in the entire town. He would do whatever it took to hold on to power. Throughout history people have done the same thing. Uncomfortable with the perceived threat Jesus poses, many labor tirelessly to eliminate him from the public square. I brought two books with me today: *The Voice of the Martyrs* and *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*. On every single page of these books is the real life story of someone who lost their life because of their devotion to Jesus.

When I was in Oxford two weeks ago, I met a man named Hassan, an Oxford graduate who was leading a church in Nigeria. His church had been burned down twice, and he had just adopted a little girl into his family named Esther. Esther's parents were martyred by members of Boko Haram, so he's raising her as his own. There are still many in the world who will do whatever it takes, pay any price, to eliminate Jesus.

Some of you are familiar with the French philosopher Voltaire, who lived and wrote in the 18th century. He wrote volumes opposing Jesus and Christianity and famously predicted in 1776, “One hundred years from my day, there will not be a Bible on earth except one that is looked upon by an antiquarian curiosity-seeker.” Fifty years after his death his estate was purchased by a Christian publishing house and the very printing press he used to print his anti-Christian literature was used to print Bibles for mass circulation. For some reason, when certain people hear the message of Jesus their response is to attack him, but with Herod, with Voltaire, and with countless others, Jesus has a startling ability not only to persevere through the attack, but to turn the attack against him into a counter offensive.

The religious leaders responded to Jesus not with a hostile attack but with ambivalent indifference. They were called by the King of the land and told, “These Magi have seen a star that they believe means the Messiah has been born. So tell us, where is he to be born?” They replied, “Well, the Scriptures say he is supposed to be born in Bethlehem. Is that all you need?” “Yep, that will do.” “Okay, we’ll get back to business then.” It’s almost impossible to imagine that these religious experts, who studied down to the minutia every single prophecy of the Messiah in the entire Old Testament, were told that the Messiah may indeed have been born and all they did was give an academic answer and then get on their way. The one who had been promised for thousands of years was here! You can’t just go back home and finish binging your favorite Netflix series. How is that possible?

But we do the same thing today. This is Christmas time, the time on the calendar the entire world slows down for a few days and remembers Jesus’ birth. Many will attend a Christmas service because it means a lot to Grandma; they’ll sing Christmas carols about God coming into the world to save humanity; they might join in with their family and say a nice prayer over Christmas lunch. But then, after going through the Christmas motions and enjoying the holiday, they jump right back to life as normal. That would be like a kid with an annual pass to Disney world who goes for one afternoon, really enjoys it, but then never goes back. In a world where we have access to so much—so much education, so much entertainment, so much information—we go from screen to screen, news story to news story, social media page to social media page. We have grown accustomed to trivializing everything, even the sacred. But we have a reminder today to slow down, to pay attention, to realize the value of the gift we have been given, and to treat Jesus with the worth he deserves.

That is what the magi do. Instead of attacking Jesus as Herod did or showing indifference as the religious leaders did, they sought him out, they offered him gifts, they bowed down, and they worshiped him. Filled with joy and wonder, gratitude and amazement, they responded to Jesus in the way of which he is worthy, setting an example for all to follow.

This is a picture of two brothers, Dennis and Lee Horton.



Early in life they were unjustly arrested for a crime they knew nothing about and were imprisoned for 27 years. Behind bars they got their education and became peer counselors, helping other inmates dealing with anger issues. They were released last year. I saw an interview with them where they said, *“Just to be able to look out a window, just to be able to inhale fresh air, just to see normal people interacting, it woke something up in me that had died long ago, it’s like I’ve been reborn into a new day. People always look at us wondering why we smile and laugh all the time.”* When you have your life given back to you, how can you not? *“The person I was no longer exists, I’ve stepped through the looking glass into the other side, and now I see everything is beautiful.”* Once you’ve been given your life back, it has to change everything!

That is why Jesus was born. He came on Christmas to give us our life back. To give us our hope back. To give us our freedom back. With a gift like that, how could we do anything besides follow the example of the magi, seek Jesus out, offer him whatever of value we have, then bow down, and worship.

One of my favorite Christmas traditions is singing Silent Night by candlelight. It’s a reminder to me that Jesus came to a dark world. He came to a world filled with injustice and hostility, sadness and death. He met us right where we were. The Bible says of Jesus' birth, *“A light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”* Let me invite a few people from the front to come and light their candles. As the light spreads, let’s be reminded that Jesus has entered into our world to overcome the darkness with his light. His light spreads from one person to the next as we display his love and as we share the gospel with those in our lives. I’ve asked our staff and their families to join me on stage. Let’s sing this song together. From my family to yours, may the light of Jesus be with you on this very Holy Night.