

Good morning! Our passage today that Stewart read is obviously a very familiar one. The story of the Magi. Or as we have come to know it, the story of the three wise men.

It's amazing to me that multiple people can see and even be a part of the same event and interpret it so differently. When we lived in Salerno, we overlooked the bay where Allied forces first invaded continental Europe. Even before Normandy. We had a good friend named Emilia who was a young girl, but remembered that day very well. One morning in September 1943 they woke up and Emilia said there were nothing but warships as far as they could see. The German soldiers there were scrambling the few cannons they had on the hill knowing this wasn't going to end well. But do you know what Emilia's mom said to her? We're rescued. She actually gathered up all her kids and ran to the beach which was a terrible idea because the allied ships began to bomb the beach. They all ran home though and Emilia's mom was right, they had been rescued. The Germans and Italians were witnessing the same ships and reacting to them in very different ways. The Germans saw defeat and the Italians saw rescue. And this is almost exactly what we have going on in our text today.

In our text today we see three people, or groups of people, who all witness the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, but they all interpret the events they see completely differently. First, you have Herod, the Priests and Scribes (that is the second group) and then the Magi or Wise Men. They all know about the prophesy, they all have heard about Jesus' birth and they all react very differently to the same news.

So this morning, I just want to look at these three groups, how they respond to birth of Jesus and then consider how we respond to the birth of the Messiah this Christmas season.

I. Herod

So first, Herod. Herod was basically a politician with an army. His father had done some favors for Rome and as payment, the Herod family was given the right to rule Judea under the supervisions of Rome. The Herod in our story though was a terrible, terrible man who had given himself the title, "King of the Jews." He was a Hitler-esk tyrant who was brutal to those around him, yet longed for the people to love and praise him at the same time.

He would execute people who got in his way or threatened his power including at least one High Priest, one wife and three sons. He also gave orders to execute most of the city officials upon the moment of his death so that he could ensure that there would be mourning and not celebrating when he finally passed. This could be the reason Matthew recorded that 'all Israel was troubled' when the wise men gave the news that the real King of the Jews had been born.

So here are these wise men from the East saying in essence to Herod, "The real King of the Jews has been born just down the road." And this so threatened Herod that he eventually gave orders for all boys in Bethlehem two and under to be killed. Which in a

town like Bethlehem probably meant somewhere between 20 and 30 children. And you can't help but wonder what in the world would cause someone to give such a horrific order?

I was thinking about how JD would feel if these excited people came up to him and said, "Have you heard the good news?? The real pastor of Grace Bible has come!" Or if you own your own business and some employee says, "Have you heard? The real owner of this business is here!" Or if you are a mom and someone started telling people that the real mom of your kids has arrived." Now this kind of news wouldn't be easy for anyone to swallow, but for some this news would be absolutely unbearable.

What made this news so unbearable to Herod? It was unbearable because he had no identity outside of being king. There was nothing more important to Herod than being the one in charge. And here comes Jesus threatening all of that.

But in the Christmas story, Herod isn't the only one whose identity is being threatened. Jesus is coming in and threatening all of our identities. He is threatening our identity as influential. He is threatening our identity as wealthy. He is threatening our identity as humble. He is threatening our identity as a good father or a good mom or a good spouse. A hard worker. A good student. Funny, moral, spiritual....whatever it is that we think defines us the most is threatened by the Christmas story.

It is threatened because Jesus is saying, 'Whatever you think defines you will let you down. Likely in this life, but surely in the next. Your identity will let you down. It isn't enough. It isn't enough to cover over your real problem: you are a sinner rebelling against the God of the universe. And you may make some killer grades or live a posh life right now, but that ultimately doesn't help you in light of your biggest problem.

But Herod couldn't see this. He didn't understand that Jesus was threatening to take something away only to offer something better. If anyone knows about losing identity it's Jesus. He gave up His identity as King of Kings and Lord of Lords in fame, comfort and honor to come into the world an outcast living in discomfort, shame and ultimately to take on a criminal's death. Talk about letting go of your identity!

He did all this though so He could give us a completely new and unfailing identity. He took on the identity of a criminal so that we could take on the identity of perfect sons and daughters. And when we can rest and revel in the grandness of our new identity as a loved, treasured and protected son or daughter with no spot or blemish on our record of any kind, then all the other identities in our life cease to seem as precious as they once did.

Jesus comes to trade identities. That is the Christmas story. But Herod couldn't see it. Herod chose instead to keep his fleeting identity as a small town tyrant.

And this Christmas, there will be those who look at this baby in a manger and scoff just like Herod did. They will laugh at those who claim Him King and they will continue to do

whatever they can to hold onto identities that will never fulfill them. And Jesus says that their end will be the same as Herod's: destruction.

II. Priests and Scribes

Ok, secondly, you have the priests and scribes. The wise men ask Herod where the child King is and Herod, also obviously interested to know where this child king is calls in all the Jewish priests and scribes so that they could tell him about this prophecy the wise men are referring to. So, the priests come in and say, "Oh, he's in Bethlehem. The prophet Micah told us that out of Bethlehem would come a Ruler and Shepherd of a Israel."

And then do you know what they priests and scribes did? Nothing! They went back to life as normal. It's like saying, "Publisher's Clearing House is at the door, butI'd rather just watch the bowl game." I can use that illustration since all the college students are gone. Not one of them knows what Publisher's Clearing House is. High schoolers, you can google it.

The priests were acknowledging with their lips that they believed the prophecies of the Old Testament, but they completely denied them with their actions. These wise men have traveled for weeks to see the baby who would be King of Kings, Lord of Lords, the long awaited Messiah, but the priests and scribes won't even travel a few miles to even check it out. What in the world happened to them?

Life had gotten good for them. They had just enough Yahweh to be socially acceptable and even financially cosy, but they didn't want so much Yahweh that it was going to cause them difficulty. Not so much Yahweh that it might upend the good thing they think they have going with Herod. They had become apathetic and indifferent.

They had knowledge in their head, but no grace in their heart. And Jesus has strong words for them in Matthew 15 as He quotes the prophet isaiah:

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me...

How horrible that those whom God had chosen to be vessels of His glory breaking into the world and ultimately to all the nations of the earth don't even care enough about His coming to even go and check. They gave the God of this universe affirmation with their lips, but not one step with their foot. Man, I'm glad we don't have to deal with that today.

According to the Barna Research Group
 9/10 Americans believe Jesus was real person
 More than 7/10 call themselves Christian
 6/10 say that Jesus is God
 6/10 have made some kind of commitment to Jesus
 Yet, only 3/10 go to church at least once a month

So that means that 4/10 Americans say that Jesus is the God of the universe and I going to identify myself with Him, but only as long as it doesn't affect my Sunday mornings. 4/10 Americans say Jesus is my God, but only as long as it doesn't create any difficulties or discomfort in my life.

This election season many Christians have mourned the loss of what they call 'Christian America.' Now, I certainly want our country to honor and glorify God as much as possible and be a safe place for my children and grandchildren. But, I also deeply believe that this move in our country away from God is simply revealing a reality that has been true for a long time: we have affirmation on our lips, but no grace in our heart.

To me, it seems like clearer and more accurate lines are being drawn between Christians and non-Christians in our country and I am convinced this is a good thing for the mission. Angela and I were in San Diego last month doing a conference (so way outside of the Bible Belt) and the percentage of people who would call themselves Christians out there is much lower than it is here. But a much higher percentage of people there who identify as Christians actually *live* as Christians.

So, on one hand, it was hugely refreshing and encouraging that almost every Christian we met wanted to talk about how Jesus was changing their life. On the other hand though, it was so easy to get into meaningful conversations with people who don't identify as Christian. It was almost impossible to talk to someone for more than five minutes and not have some sort of spiritual conversation because the gulf of difference of values between us was so apparent.

So what does this reaction, or lack thereof, on the part of the priests and scribes have to do with us today? I think two things. First, let us not fear the transition happening in our country, but know that God is in control. In the 10th century it appeared as though Christianity might fail completely world-wide. Islam had taken over all the middle east, North African, Spain and a third of France. Christianity in Asia was being stifled out completely. And Vikings were invading Europe from the North burning down up to half of the churches and monasteries in Northern Europe. At one point there was legitimate concern that the Bible might cease to exist and men and women gave their lives to protect it.

That was the 10th century. Now, Christianity is flourishing world-wide at an unprecedented level. Mostly in the Eastern and Southern Hemisphere's, but it is thriving none-the-less. And I truly believe that as American Christianity is revealed for what it is, there will be a huge opportunity for the mission to move forward in our country as well.

Second implication for us today, let us make sure we are not the priests and scribes. Paul says in Romans 10 with the deepest sense of mourning and loss that God cut most of the Israelites off. They were cast out of the Kingdom. So, let us not think for one second if He would cast out the Israelites, that He would hesitate for one second with a

cultural Christian who gives lip service to the God of the universe, but show no evidence in our life that we believe any of what we are saying.

III. The Wise Men

So we have seen two very depressing reactions to the birth of Jesus in King Herod and the priests and scribes. Let's now look at a very different reaction on the part of the wise men.

Do you know how much we know about the wise men? Almost nothing. We don't know who they are. We don't know where they came from. We don't know how many there were. Their number three has developed over time because there were three gifts, but it could have been two, it could have been 20. We have no idea. We don't even know how they knew about Jesus. We don't know what the star was and we don't know exactly when they arrived.

So here is my conjecture of what happened. They were from the East. We do know that. That could be Babylon or Persia (so Iraq or Iran). I think it is likely that these men were the educated elite where they come from. I think there is a good chance that they had copies of the prophecies from a time when Israel had been exiled to their country. It could have been when the 10 tribes were carried off to Babylon. Maybe Daniel had something to do with first exposing the educated elite in Babylon about the Scriptures. I think because the text makes the point to say Mary and Joseph had moved into a house by the time the wise men arrived and that Herod wanted all boys 2 and under killed means that they arrived a couple years after Jesus' birth.

So this means that most of our manger scenes that include them are inaccurate. That wouldn't be the only mistake in our Nativity scene at home. I was trying to explain to Turner this week that despite what we see on our table at home, baby Jesus was not white skinned, blue eyed and full of flowing blonde locks. But that is for another sermon:)

As for the star, who knows? There are all kinds of astronomical guesses about comets and planets and other phenomena in the sky in that location at that time. I guess it could be something natural, but personally I lean away from something natural. The star described moved and then stopped over a specific house. I think the light that led the wise men was the same light that led the Israelites out of captivity. I think it was the Shaking Glory of God leading the way. I think there is a good chance the wise men knew Numbers 24:17

I see him, but not now;

I behold him, but not near:

a star shall come out of Jacob,

and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;

So I can't prove that, but it makes the most sense to me. Honestly though, Matthew doesn't seem concerned with any of these details. I think Matthew wants us to see two

things very clearly about the wise men. He wants us to see that they had faith and that God used them. So let's finish by looking briefly at those two things.

First, Matthew wants us to see that the wise men had faith. And there are four aspects to their faith. Their faith wasn't like the priests who wouldn't take one step to check and see. The wise men, first, had faith that sought. They dropped everything to walk across the land and find this child. Now, there is a lot out West that I would like to see, but nothing that is going to motivate me to walk out there. Yet, these men knew that there was something of such value that they had the faith to seek it at great risk to themselves. Imagine how surprised they would have been when they arrived in Jerusalem to find that no one in Israel seemed interested in or even knew about Jesus' birth. They walked for weeks and no one in Jerusalem would walk a few miles. They had faith that sought.

They also had faith that cost. They gave gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. All incredibly valuable and prophetic gifts. We all know what gold is. Frankincense was an incense used in the temple to anoint the priests. And myrrh was used to embalm dead bodies. It took about 100 pounds of myrrh to embalm one body so the trade in the middle east for this product was huge. Even conservative estimates about how much the wise men brought, would likely have been very expensive. Not only expensive though, but prophetic. There is no way to know if they fully understood at the time, but they were giving this young toddler the metal of a King, the incense of a priest and the myrrh of someone who was going to die. They had faith that cost.

Third, they had faith that had wonder. They arrived in Bethlehem, found the child as the star rested over this house and they rejoiced in joy and wonder. One of my kids loves to pull up a chair and just sit at the Nativity scene and stare and wonder at it. He imagines what it was like. Where everyone was. And if there is one aspect of the wise men's faith that most convicting to me, it's this wonder. Wonder is so easy to lose in this season if we don't work at it. There is budget stress, there is family stress and all the stress can make this season one of anything but wonder.

For those of us that *can* actually relax, that relaxing can so easily find its way into our spiritual lives which will also rob the wonder out of what it is that we celebrate next Sunday. Wonder often takes initiative and work. So whatever it takes, let's work hard this week to read to ourselves, to read to our children, to pray and sing together in our homes to cultivate that wonder the wise men had.

Lastly, the wise men had faith that worshipped. Can you imagine bowing to a toddler? I can think of a lot of things a toddler makes me want to do, but bowing and worshipping just isn't on the list. I think there are probably 4 or 5 future presidents of the United States under the age of 18 living today. Even if we could know who and where they are, we would never be tempted to worship them.

What you worship is what you value above all else. The wise men put everything aside to find the thing they valued most... a baby in Bethlehem. Does our faith cause us to worship? Does our faith push all other potential objects of worship to the side? I just

want to simply say that if our faith doesn't seek, if it doesn't cost and if it doesn't wonder, it will never truly worship.

So the wise men had faith. Secondly, Matthew wants us to see that because of that faith, God used them. Almost every scholar I read agrees that the gifts the wise men bring likely ultimately payed for the flight to Egypt Herod that follows our passage. These men had no way of knowing that God would use their gifts to literally save Jesus. Until God told them in a dream to go back a different way, they probably didn't even know Herod was event threatened by this child. Not only did God use them in a very direct way to bring about our salvation, but we are now talking about them and learning from them over 2000 years later!

If we want to have a life that matters, a life of significance, it starts with a faith like the Wise Men. I heard a story recently from a source I trust immensely about an American businessman in a dangerous part of the Middle East. He was there on business, but had brought his wife. They were at a gas station and there was an Arab man, just sitting on a bench there. The man and woman finished gassing up their car and began to drive away and the wife could tell something was very wrong with her husband so she asked him what was going on. He said, he just had this deep feeling that he was supposed to share the gospel with that man on the bench, but he knew it would not only risk his business there, but also he and his wife's life. So he was torn. His wife looked at him and said, "Honey, I would rather be the widow of a martyr than the wife of a coward." So they turned around. The Arab man was still on the bench and the American went over and introduced himself, explained he was a Christian and asked what he was doing just sitting on the bench. The Arab man looked at him and said, "I had a dream last night that I was to go to this bench today and wait for a messenger from God."

In this man and very much this woman, we see a faith that sought, a faith that cost and a faith that wondered and God used them in ways they had never dreamed.

But God didn't only use the wise men as an example of faith for us, He used them as an example of His faithfulness to us. Thank back to Genesis 17. God had begun to make a nation for Himself through Abram. When Abram was very old, God changed his name and made him a promise.

No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

Up until this point in the Bible, the saving grace of God has only been on one nation. But the birth of this baby would change all of that by fulfilling all the promises made in the Old Testament. And here you have the first fruits of that promise. The King is born and it isn't the priests and scribes who respond, but the pagans from the East.

God is using these wise men as proof of His faithfulness to carry out what He had promised to do: bring the saving message of grace to all nations. I have never thought

about this before this week, but in the story of the wise men, we have our first New Testament picture of the Great Commission being inaugurated.

Conclusion:

Herod, the priests and scribes and the wise men all watched the same miraculous events unfold around them, but they each responded very differently to them. Herod resisted, the priests ignored it and the wise men worshipped. What is our response? Which group represents us the best. My hope this week for all of us is that we would think about the wonder of our saving God coming in the form of a baby to ultimately rescue us all and the it would well up faith in us that would stir our hearts in wonder and our feet to action.