

No one is too distant from God

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[0 : 0 0] A reading from Micah chapter 5 verses 1 to 4. Therefore, Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor bears a son, and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.

He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

Good morning, church family. I'm Abby Bryant, and I will be reading from Matthew 2 verses 1 through 12. He asked them where the Christ was to be born.

In Bethlehem and Judea they replied, for this is what the prophet had 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 be the shepherd of 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 make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.

[1 : 5 5] After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east 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 worshipped him.

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. Let's pray.

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for giving us this time this morning to gather as a church body from all over the world. God, we recognize that even in these unprecedented times, you are sovereign over us.

You're a loving Father who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. God, I pray that you would soften our hearts this morning, that we would hear your word and be convicted. Bless Pastor Graham Scheer from Musselboro Baptist as he leads us through the passage this morning, and let his words be yours, not his own.

Continue to sanctify us and transform us into the likeness of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. It is in his name and his alone that we pray these things. Amen. Good morning to all of you.

[3 : 0 6] Isn't it great we've got a chance now to turn our thoughts to the Word of God? Let's go back to that passage that's just been read to us in Matthew's Gospel in Chapter 2. It might seem odd to us because we're not even anywhere near the season that we normally would give our thoughts and minds to these things.

It's at the end of the year, and we're still in the middle of this year. But let's look at it. We're doing that down the road in our church, and what's good for them is hopefully going to be good for us here too.

So let's just turn our thoughts to this for a short time. I can't really remember the first time that I heard the words, we three kings of Orient are.

It's one of the classics, isn't it, that's rolled out each year. But we didn't really sing it in our church, so I can't remember the first time that I actually heard these words.

But I do remember walking out of school one day, and one of my friends was singing this song. He'd switched the lyrics, and I just tuned in to hear what it was that he was trying to say.

[4 : 12] We three kings, he said, of Orient are, one in a taxi, and one in a car, and one on a scooter, tooting his hooter, and eating a milky bar.

He was trying to be funny, but I thought, who do you think that he is? He's trying to defame my faith and make fun of Jesus and so on. But here's the thing, the truth is that that version that he rolled out that day in our school is no less accurate than the version that millions of Christians have been singing over the years in the midst of carol services.

We three kings, for instance, we've assumed, haven't we, they were kings. But we've just heard the reading, we can look at our Bibles, there's no mention anywhere there that any of these men were kings.

Nor is there any mention that their number was three. We three kings. The number three obviously comes to us because Matthew tells us there were three different presents, but then who's to say that one of the entourage wasn't really generous and he just brought all of these gifts?

We wouldn't say if my wife Sarah got three different presents that she has three different husbands. We wouldn't immediately jump to that conclusion, hopefully.

[5 : 39] More than that then, there is, when we come to this text at least, the issue of timing. I think we've assumed an awful lot when we think of the timing that these three wise men came into the scene.

It does say in our Bibles at the start here, it all takes place, verse 1, after Jesus was born. And yet we've assumed, haven't we, as Christians, that he has just been born. Here he is, little Jesus.

He's lying in the hay, merely hours old in the stable. But again, I think we're making lots of assumptions. For instance, Matthew tells us here they've come to a house.

It's not the stable. So I'm really sorry to shatter all of the Christmas plays that we've been to as parents over the course of the years.

More than that, in the 16th verse, Herod there is killing all of the male babies under the age of two years. So it feels like he knows that Jesus is older.

[6 : 44] Is he 18 months? Is he maybe even two years? It's not really the scene, is it, that maybe we've conjured up in our minds of kings and camels, three kings and camels.

Jesus is lying in the manger, hours old, and so on. So all that to say, we need to watch that we don't stretch, as it were, the story of Jesus first coming into our world.

But what we do know, there's lots that we don't know, but what we do know as we set all of those thoughts off to the side, what we know are the following four things.

I want to give them to your church this morning first. I want you to notice, as we think of the journey that these wise men have been on, that first, no trouble should ever be too great in our search for truth.

Although where it was that these wise men have come from is hard to say, given all that we get from St. Matthew, is the East.

[7 : 58] So there's lots of different theories at this point. Babylon is in the running, not least, of course, because the same word for the Magi is mentioned, if you remember, in the second chapter of Daniel.

So maybe there, maybe Iraq, in that region, if that was the case, then I would walk 500 miles, might be one of the songs that they sang, because it's roughly 500 miles between these two fixed points.

So weeks and weeks and weeks on the road, journeying undoubtedly over deserts, hot in the day, cold at night, traveling in these days was full of dangers, wild beasts, muggers, brigands, and so on.

So in this story, there's a litany of inconveniences. I mean, how many reasons did they have to go back to their homes? Back to the colors and the comforts and the wisdom of the East, all the status that they had in the East.

Bethlehem was not in the same league as the East. And yet still they keep traveling. So here's the question, you see. Why?

[9 : 20] Why? Now, there's all kinds of things that we could think over at this point, different practical, helpful tips to be much more focused and disciplined when it comes to our quiet times.

For instance, we're so easily distracted. We close our Bibles. We get different messages on our phones and so on. So that's an angle that we could explore.

But here's where I thought we would go with this text. The wisdom of this world is so quickly dated. These upper crust and wise, learned men who would have gone to Oxford and Princeton, Harvard and Yale and so on.

Here are all of them. They are hunting and searching for truth. They have not found, as the song says from Bono and U2, they've not found yet what it is that they are looking for.

The wisdom of the 40s and the 50s and the 60s is laughable to us all these years on in our lives. It's dated. What we learned about gender when we were youngsters, it's dated.

[10 : 38] What we learned from Freud as students at uni is so dated. We look at it now. It's like fashion. It's like finding a shirt you find in a wardrobe that your grandfather used to wear.

It's not the cutting edge thing that we thought that it would be. And 50 years on from this point, our children and grandchildren will read of the wisdom of this age.

They will say of all of us, you're dated. Look at the things you were learning in school, they will say.

How out of date are all of your thinkers? Look at the way that they thought about gender. Look at the way that they thought about different issues like moral and ethical sexual issues.

It's like the famous quote from C.S. Lewis. He once said, all that is not eternal is eternally out of date. A great quote.

[11 : 44] And here are men who are, as it were, trying to scratch that itch in their lives. They've gone to the best schools. They've sat under the greatest teachers. And all of them have money and status and wisdom.

But something within them is whispering to them. What you're missing is the truth. You've still not found what it is that you are looking for.

And so they pack their bags. Did they have camels? We don't know. Off they set. Maybe it's days and weeks and maybe even months on the road.

It was a journey that was laced with lots of obstacles. They had every reason, as it were, to be really easy on themselves. But onwards they travel.

Onwards they go. Some of us won't even come down the stairs for the truth. We won't deal with addictions for the truth.

[12 : 41] We won't turn off our TVs for the truth. We won't set our phones to the side for the truth. Some of us won't leave our beds for the truth in the morning.

Set everything else off to the side. Listen. Every other thinker and wise sage and teacher is destined over time to completely pass away.

The 40s was dated in the 1980s. The 1980s is dated in the 2020s. And our thinking will be last season in 2055.

But these wise men found as they went to this house that they had found eternal truth. They would never pass away. They would have walked 10,000 miles.

They just wanted truth. It was real. Second.

[13 : 43] No trouble is too great in our search for the truth. Second. No one is too distant that they can't find the truth.

And what's interesting when you come to the fourth gospel, John's gospel, is the statement that he puts right at the end of that book.

Where he says he didn't have the time to record all of the events, all of the stories, all of the days that he spent with Jesus. There were loads of things he's saying. Loads of miracles.

And so every story is chosen with reason. Now why choose this story? There was a reason, for instance, for giving to us a story, say in Mark chapter 4, when he told the wind and the waves to stop it.

It was his authority over nature. A reason for giving to us that story in Mark 5, when he raises the wee girl, gives her back to her parents.

[14 : 44] It was his authority over death. And so why this story? What is he saying to us? Matthew, you'll see he builds the whole story of the birth of Jesus.

He keeps the magi right in the very center. And what is he saying? It's to signal to you that even the most unlikely can come to this truth. I want to remind you this morning, it's not a criticism to say this.

I want to remind you that virtually all the world's faiths have a direct link to ethnicity in this world. Hinduism in India, mainly, broadly speaking.

Like Buddhism is in China and other Asian countries. The Jews have their faith, of course, Islam on the whole, among Arab peoples. But Christianity in Matthew, it's not built in these terms.

He starts his gospel with souls saved in the East. The magi, he says, from which we get our word in English, magic.

[15 : 56] He ends his gospel, Matthew 28, sending the church into the whole of the world. We know this morning that the church is growing in China and Africa and South Korea.

We know that heaven will be laced with all of these cultures. We know that Jesus will meet Paul in Acts. And then think of this. Isn't that strange to you?

Isn't it unusual to you? No signs he was regal. There's no miracles here in sermons. Most of the people who were saved in these times were saved when there were miracles and sermons.

But no sermons and miracles from Jesus in this text. There's no crowds in his wake. No music. Just Joseph, Mary, little Jesus. And yet, somehow, because of faith, you see, the gift of faith, they look at this child they believe.

A reminder, is it not, to all of us this morning, that if the Spirit of God can implant faith into the hearts of pagans as they stare at a toddler in a house in Bethlehem, what might he do with our friends?

[17 : 19] What might he do with our mums and dads? What might he do with you? No one too distant. No one from God is too estranged.

One of our members has just given her own story to our church of how she came to faith, ruined with drugs, all kinds of drugs.

She turns on the X Factor. One night, girl was singing Amazing Grace, and God suddenly came to her. She saved. No one. Too distant.

So, no trouble is too great in our search for the truth. Hope that's you.

No one is too distant that they can't find the truth. Third, no offering is too costly once we have found the truth.

[18 : 18] Which brings us, of course, to the gold and the frankincense and the myrrh and so on. Now, Herod, at this point, is the ultimate contrast.

And I don't know if Matthew has set things up in this way so we can see it as clearly as this in this text, but here, he says, are these worshippers who are bowing in awe and wonder at Jesus.

They can hardly even take it in that they've met the Lord Jesus. And then here is this king who hates King Jesus. As I say, whether Matthew has done that, whether he's set it up in that way is hard to say.

Herod himself was actually not a real Jew. His father was an Edomite. His mother, a princess, out-of-state princess. And so he was always, as it were, looking over his shoulder for a rival real Jew who might take back his throne.

So he murdered his wife. He killed three of his sons. He killed numerous uncles and cousins and others. He was always concerned about plots and plans and threats.

[19 : 31] Others who might, as it were, step into his shoes. The emperor once said, this is quite funny, it's safer to be Herod's pig than his son.

He is feeling threatened. He's sensing a rival. The rumors had been rife for years and years that a king was coming born in this area.

So it seems that Herod was now fearing the worst. He's not prepared to be sharing his throne. But the camera quickly shifts to this scene in the home where the Magi worship him.

It's a contrast, you see. So here's the thing. Here's the deal. Jesus is king.

It's not that we make him king. The issue is, can he be king in me? In my private life.

[20 : 33] In my life when no one's around me and able to see me. In my thought life. All of the things that are there in my mind. When it comes to honesty. When it comes to everything.

When it comes to our Mondays and Tuesdays and Wednesdays. It's not just that Jesus is king on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. But Jesus is king on all of our mornings.

These gifts were costly. Gold and frankincense and also myrrh. What can I give him? Poor as I am.

If I were a shepherd. I would bring a lamb. And if I were a wise man. I would do my part.

But yet what I can. I give him. I give my heart. Everything. Wasn't it Lord Melbourne?

[21 : 37] One of the former leaders that we've had in this nation of ours. Well known friend of Queen Victoria. Wasn't it him that said in a speech once. What a state of affairs it would be in Britain.

He said. If religion was allowed to invade a man's private life. But that's the whole point of this text. Isn't it? It does. He's the king.

It's having Jesus as king as we sit before the TV. It's Jesus as king when it comes to our time.

I wonder who it is you're most like in this text. Is it Herod? Viewing Jesus as a threat? An inconvenience? A rival?

Or is it these men who we find on their knees? Bowing in awe and sheer wonder. No trouble is too great in our search for the truth.

[22 : 43] No one's too distant that they can't find the truth. No offering's too costly. When we have found this truth. Lastly. No one's future is too predictable when we follow the truth.

So what's this? What's this about? And what does it mean to you and me? Do you know there are times. I can think of times in my own life. When I've been almost absolutely sure I could predict the future.

It's just so clear. Everything's been moving this way. It's going to pan out in this way. But it doesn't. And all of a sudden there's a fork in the road.

And it just didn't seem to fit with the leading of God as he brought us in our lives all the way up to this point. This is often the case when it comes to guidance. God has been bringing you down this road.

To you it's been clear this is his will. But it isn't. Strange. It's strange. Strange. He is leading me this way. He is taking me this way.

[23 : 54] But he isn't. It's so unsettling. Certainly as a bolt from the blue it comes. God is taking me here. Maybe for you like some of us in our church.

Having to put off your wedding date. Due to this virus. Losing your job. Some great disappointment in life. A cancer diagnosis.

Now you see here it's the same as Matthew gives to us. This scene. It's this phrase in the 12th verse. He says buy another root.

The sequence is key here. The wise men are with Herod in verse 7. He sends them off to find Jesus in 8. He tells them to bring them their news and so on.

And so off they set. They find Jesus in that house. Surely then they'll pop back into Herod as he asked. Then it's back east and back to our homes.

[24 : 53] But suddenly here is God as he speaks in our dreams. And now we're off by another root. Their plan's over.

It's all changed. It's not even close to what they predicted. They thought it was this way. It wasn't. So let me just mention a couple of very brief things to you.

And then all of this is done. Just a couple of brief things first. They were part of something that was so much bigger. And so are we.

And you remember, don't you, the way this is framed in the last book in the Bible. As the devil at this time of year, Christmas, he waits. He comes and he waits to eat Jesus as he comes into the world.

It's an awful scene. He comes to eat the Lord Jesus. As all the forces of evil have gathered and they're pitted against this baby. And all are coming to worship his name.

[25 : 54] And it's into that battle that these wise men have come. It's hidden from view. Couldn't see it. They haven't spotted the devil sauntering down the Bethlehem streets.

Their struggle was not merely against their own flesh and blood. But it was against the rulers and the authorities and the powers of this dark world.

And all the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Sometimes we miss that. And maybe they miss that. All that they were was a small cog in this great and eternal wheel.

As God was working his plans in the world. We often see things from our little perspective. We're blinkered. We get so frustrated. Why is this happening? And what we can't see is that God is doing things that are bigger than me.

[27 : 01] And so can we. Because isn't it striking here. Prior to the schemes of Herod. Prior to the changes.

They knew that God was sovereign. So can we. Lest. They were being conformed to the image of Jesus. And in all of our sufferings.

And conforming me into the image of his son. Just to make me like him. To make me mimic him.

[illegible]

Thank you.

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I'm just going to start a couple of days before lockdown started when I was already actually stuck in the house with some mild COVID symptoms at the time. And during that time, I'm just going to say, you know, leaving behind two boys and that was a big shock.

And then, of course, we were sort of plummeted into lockdown and all the restrictions because of that. And I think that just those circumstances just made it very clear to me very early on that just how little control we have over our lives.

[34 : 56] And, you know, my day to day life, as many people and other people have found, have been quite dramatically changed because of the restrictions and there's very little we can do about it.

And more soberingly, my colleagues, family and their day to day lives have dramatically changed forever. And, you know, there's nothing they can do about it.

So, yeah, I was just very aware of that lack of control and also just aware of how fragile the things are that we often depend on for security and for comfort, for satisfaction, whether it's our jobs, our finances, our freedom, our health, our family, our friends, whatever it is.

And, you know, these things are fragile. And I think lockdown has showed to me clearer than anything else has before that we actually can't rely on these things. And I think it's, you know, even as a Christian, we say we rely completely on God.

And I think practically that's not actually always the case. And some of the things we've mentioned, we end up putting some of our self-worth and our security and our trust in these things.

[36 : 07] And I found even personally myself during lockdown that I've started to place a lot of importance in productivity. And, you know, I think productivity is a good thing, but it's not something to base my whole self-worth on or comfort or satisfaction, whatever.

You know, it itself is fragile and, you know, not necessarily something that's going to last. And so, yeah, I think more than ever, I've been made aware that God is the one true source of stability, of comfort, of provision, of satisfaction.

You know, he's the one thing that doesn't change him and his promises. And they remain the same forever. And that's been really reassuring. Also, I think in lockdown, many of us have had more time.

Some of us have. And I've had more time. And unfortunately, I've spent some of this time on worrying and overthinking, indulging myself in worst case scenarios.

And I think ultimately, what if my life doesn't turn out the way that I want it to? And that's been a big thought. And thankfully, I've also had some time to read about famous Christians' life like George Muller, Elizabeth Elliot.

[37 : 26] And I think it's fair to say that their lives have been marked with significant challenge, significant struggle and suffering at times. But I think it's also fair to say that throughout those times, God had a plan and God's grace and his presence are evident.

And, you know, in certain cases, I think the people that I mentioned would be glad that these things happened to them so that God could use those circumstances in the way that he did.

And also, the Bible itself talks a lot about that and the accounts of various people's lives in the Bible. That's true of them as well. Thinking of one place in Daniel 3, where Daniel's friends are faced with being thrown into a fiery furnace because of their faith in God.

And I think the attitude of his friends has been very challenging, where they basically say God is able to save us from this fiery furnace.

But even if he does not, we will still follow him. We'll still trust him. He's still good. Yeah, that's been a real challenge. And I think the main thing that's came through for me in lockdown is just to see that God is good regardless of my circumstances, regardless of anyone's circumstances.

[38 : 44] And at the most difficult times that we face, even if we live out our worst case scenarios, God is present. His grace and his presence are evident throughout.

He has a plan for it and many blessings come out of it. And I think that's something that, you know, George Muller would have testified towards, Elizabeth Elliot, various people in the Bible.

But I have found that myself as well, that despite the challenges that lockdown has presented, it's certainly presented many blessings as well.

And, you know, the interest some of my friends have had in their faith and having time to think about where they stand with God. And even just the gift of time and the time to reflect on your life and just the time to spend with the family that you maybe do live with and time to appreciate God's creation.

And I just think that that is something that's so true, that God is good regardless. And he's with us throughout all the struggles as well. Thanks for listening.