

Freedom and Sacrifice

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[0 : 00] Good evening to everybody. So glad that we can be here together. My name is Tommy.

If we haven't met, I'm a pastor here. And especially this weekend, I think, for obvious reasons, I've been so looking forward to being together in a setting like this.

I can think of no better cap to a weekend that had, I think, a lot of emotional ups and some downs as well. I was excited and proud to see so many pictures of people from the Advent community participating yesterday in what amounted to be a very epic experience, I think a historic experience in our nation's history.

So glad that many of you were there. I have to be honest, I think for Laura and I, a lot of what we felt over the course of the weekend, essentially can be summed up with the phrase political homelessness.

You know, we've just been feeling alienated from the country that we love in many ways. And in wrestling with that, the passage that I've been reflecting on this week very unexpectedly offered some comfort.

[1 : 16] I mean, Matthew chapter 2, these verses that we just read, are not typically thought of as comforting verses, not a comforting story. But there are things in here, realities in here that are very comforting.

It's interesting to note that in the childhood of our Savior Jesus, that he and his family lived as refugees. That they very much knew what it meant to be homeless, living in a land that was not their home.

And we've been looking at these snapshots from Jesus' childhood the last few weeks, the childhood of Jesus. We don't have many of them, but we do have a few. And what we're seeing again and again every week is that the gospel writers included these stories for a reason.

They're trying to tell us something about Jesus through each of these snapshots. So this week we come to this snapshot in Matthew chapter 2. It's a story that is often skipped over during the Christmas season for, I think, pretty obvious reason.

After the Magi, the three kings who were not actually kings, nor were there only three of them. The Magi come to visit the child Jesus. They're told by Herod.

[2 : 24] Herod says, I want you to tell me where Jesus is because I want to go and worship him too. And in reality we know that he intends to kill Jesus. And when they refuse to do that and they go home by a different route and Herod learns this, he grows angry.

And so he has all of the male children under the age of two killed in the region. And so this is why this is sometimes referred to as the slaughter of the innocents.

And in most kind of Christmas celebration lineups, this doesn't make the cut. But we're going to look at it tonight. And it shows us, as all of these passages do, it shows us two things.

It shows us first the paradox of the human condition. The paradox of the human condition. And then it shows us the promise of the gospel.

Why is the gospel uniquely suited to address the paradox in the human heart? So this is Matthew chapter 2. Let's pray as we get started. Heavenly Father, we've heard a lot of promises, a lot of hope, a lot of, we've heard visions of what our future might be.

[3 : 31] We've heard many, many, many words, many speeches this weekend. But we know that the one word we most need to hear is your word. And we need your promise and your willingness to be true to your promise.

And we desire ultimately your vision for our future. And Lord, that is something that you are intending to do in us tonight, Lord, to speak your word to us and to lay your vision out in our hearts.

We long for our imaginations to be captivated by you, Lord. And so we pray tonight as we gather around your word that you would speak to us. And that through these written words, you would reveal to us your living word, Jesus Christ.

And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. Amen. So the paradox of the human condition. In other words, we have two countervailing forces or longings or desires in our hearts.

And we see this represented by two people or two figures in this story. You have the Magi and you have Herod.

[4 : 40] And they each are, in many ways, representatives of the human race. So I want to look at each. The first we want to look at is the Magi. What do the Magi represent?

And if you know, if you remember us looking at this a couple of weeks ago, if you were here, the Magi are pagan astrologers. And they come from a completely different cultural, ethnic, religious background.

And yet, even though they have nothing to do with the culture in which Jesus was born, they nevertheless are willing to travel roughly 900 miles at great risk and expense to find Jesus.

And it shows us that people from the other side of the world will stop at nothing to find Jesus. And what that shows us is the first longing, which is a deep and desperate desire to know God.

And we drew this out a couple of weeks ago, but I want to come back to it and say, that's the real thing that the Magi show us, is that there are people within the human heart, there is a desire, a desperation to know God, to connect with the transcendent, to commune with the divine, a longing for something more.

[5 : 56] And you see examples of this all throughout our culture. At any given time, there are all kinds of examples of this, and I think we experience it in different ways in each of our lives. Just to give a couple of current examples, Martin Scorsese, who has just come out with the movie Silence, he spent 20 years on this film.

20 years. It's a long time, even in the film world. And Silence is a rather obscure story, probably by most people's standards. It's an amazing story, an amazing book, about Jesuit priests who travel to Japan in search of one of their brothers.

And it wrestles with the silence of God, and suffering, and waiting, and faith, and all of these deep questions. But people ask, Scorsese, who has this incredible filmography, right?

Why spend 20 years on this project? Why did it matter so much to you? And in the interview, this is part of his response. He says, yeah, the cinema and the people in my life and my family are most important, but ultimately, as you get older, there's got to be more.

Much, much more. He says, the very nature of secularism right now is really fascinating to me, but at the same time, do you wipe away what could be more enriching in your life, which is an appreciation or some sort of search for that which is spiritual and transcends.

[7 : 25] And I love that. Martin, why do you spend 20 years of your life on this project when you have so much going for you? And he says, you know, I have a great career. I have a great family. I know that's great, and I know I have, you know, essentially what most people want.

But as I'm getting older, I'm wondering, is this all there is? There's got to be more. And as fascinating as secularism is and as, you know, and as potentially liberating as people may feel it to be to live in an increasingly secular culture, he says, I wonder if, as we go in this direction, that we're missing something very profound and more valuable.

What do we give up when we give up the search or the longing for that which transcends, right? And this drove him to make this film. Making this film was in many ways a part of him enacting or responding to the longing in his heart.

And, you know, you may hear this and think, well, you know, I don't really resonate with that, and I'm just not a religious person, and I don't really think about this stuff. And I would say, okay, fair enough. You don't think about religious things, and that's fine.

But I would wonder, what are the things that you love? And then what is it like to love the things that you love? What does it feel like to love those things? You know, you talk to somebody who loves music, and you get them to play one of their favorite songs, and you ask them why they love it so much.

[8 : 47] And many times music evokes in us a kind of longing, a hunger, and it's almost as though you're wanting something behind or beneath or under or in between the notes.

There's something that is awakened in you within the beauty of the music, right? If you're familiar with the Writer's Almanac, Garrison Keillor, they featured a poem by a woman named Ann Porter, and it's called Music.

And I just want to read this poem to you. When I was a child, I once sat sobbing on the floor beside my mother's piano. As she played and sang.

For there was in her singing a shy yet solemn glory my smallness could not hold. And when I was asked why I was crying, I had no words for it.

I only shook my head and went on crying. Why is it that music, at its most beautiful, opens a wound in us? An ache.

[9 : 57] A desolation. Deep as a homesickness for some far off and half forgotten country. I've never understood why this is so. But there's an ancient legend from the other side of the world that gives away the secret of this mysterious sorrow.

For centuries on centuries we've been wandering, but we were made for paradise. As deer for the forest. And when music comes to us with its heavenly beauty, it brings us desolation.

For when we hear it, we half remember that lost native country. We dimly remember the fields, their fragrant windswept clover, the bird songs in the orchards, the wild white violets in the moss by the transparent streams.

And shining at the heart of it is the longed for beauty of the one who waits for us. Who will always wait for us.

In those radiant meadows. Yet also came to live with us and wanders where we wander. And you read this and Porter is pointing to that longing in our hearts.

[11 : 14] In every heart there is the desperation for the one who waits for us. The one who always waits for us.

The one who on some deep level we know is out there. When we say there's got to be more, what we're really saying is, where is the one who waits for us? How do I know that being, right?

So this is the first longing in our hearts reflected in the Magi and their long journey, right? But there's also another longing in our hearts that runs against it.

A countervailing force with equal ferocity that rages against the first. And this is what we see represented in the person of Herod. And essentially it is this, that on the one hand we are desperate to know God.

But on the other hand we are determined to stay in control. To stay in control. And I think that on some deep level we know that if we were to ever come face to face, not with the God of our own imagination, but with the real God of the heavens and the earth, that we would recognize not only that we are not in control, but that we never had control.

[12 : 26] And that longing rages against the idea of such a God who would rob us of the throne.

And you see here, Herod, he gets word from the Magi that Jesus is going to be born and they call him the King of the Jews. And his heart rages against the kind of being who would threaten his throne.

And he recognizes that he would do anything to stay in the throne. And so he stops at nothing to put an end to the claims about Jesus.

And it says that he is willing to put all of the male children, ages 2 and under, to death in order to protect his power. Now, we might imagine that that's, we don't know how many that is.

In fact, Bethlehem was a small region, and so it was probably somewhere in the neighborhood of 30 children, right? Now, I'm not saying that to minimize the death of 30 kids, but what I am doing is addressing the fact that some people say, well, if there was this mass murder, then why don't we read about this in history when we read about other things that Herod did?

[13 : 35] And the reason is because Herod did other things that we do know about that were much, much, much more likely to be included in the history books. In other words, he wiped out at one time 300 leaders and nobles because he saw them as potentially a threat to his throne.

So Herod wiping out 30 kids would have been a blip on the radar at most. So Herod does this, and what he's really saying is, I'm willing to sacrifice these children in order to stay in control.

I'm willing to sacrifice their lives in order to benefit myself, right? Now, it may sound extreme as I've kind of framed this. It may sound extreme to you to say, and we have the same kind of heart.

And you may be taken aback by that. And so I want to consider a bit whether or not this is a true claim to make about the human heart. Are there not ways in which we are more than willing to sacrifice others to get what we want or to preserve our autonomy or to stay in control?

So I want to just walk through a few examples, see if any of these resonate. The first example that we address, we do so for a couple of reasons. One, it's because most Christians, when they read this passage, the first thing they think about is abortion.

[14 : 57] And so I feel compelled to address it for that reason. Another reason I think that it's relevant is because I think, given some of the controversy around the march, it's maybe on some of our minds. But this comes up a lot when Christians look at this passage.

And I want to say a few things. In our church, when we've addressed this, we've at least endeavored to be as sensitive as we can be to the fact that this is an incredibly complex issue.

And I know that this actually personally directly affects a number of people. There are a number of people in our congregation who have had abortions. There are a number of people in our congregation who are very passionate about this. And so this is not about to become an angry pro-life rant.

So if you're tempted to tune out or turn away, that's not what's about to happen. We recognize, I think, that there's enormous complexity and many facets to this issue, right?

You have to take into consideration all of the hard cases of rape and incest and the health of the mother. You have to take into consideration the impact of unwanted pregnancy on single-parent households, right?

[16 : 01] You have to take into consideration the reason for all of the single-parent households and how this enables men to be absolved of any responsibility for their actions in many cases, right?

That they're able to have what I think most men want, which is sex without responsibility. And that's a huge part of this. Whereas women, no matter what choice they make, are saddled with the responsibility of that choice regardless, right?

It's also something that we have to consider from the impact of an unwanted pregnancy, an additional child on an already impoverished household, and the impact on the mother and the ability to raise the other children well, right?

So all of these are factors that we have to take into consideration, and I would never want to oversimplify this or be reductionistic about it. But for reasons of our consideration in the realities that exist within our hearts, I think that this is still a worthwhile example to consider.

I think some of the statistics may be surprising to you. I know that they were to me. The World Health Organization and the Guttmacher Institute, which is essentially a research policy pro-abortion rights group, they did a big study last year, global study of abortion.

[17 : 14] And one of their more surprising statistics, they found that 73% of women around the world who have abortions are married. So not the kind of single mother that you might sometimes think is the case.

That is sometimes true, but they said 73% are married. And as to why, Guttmacher's done a bunch of research on the why behind this. And I'll just read the end of their study. They say this.

It is clear that the hard cases, rape, incest, life or health of the mother or baby, are a very small fraction of cases. It's around 1%. At the other extreme, AGI's surveys suggest that a significant fraction of abortions are obtained by mothers who have the means to care for a child, but do not want their lives inconvenienced.

So a significant number of people seeking abortions throughout the world have a spouse and they have the financial means to care for the child, and it is more a matter of convenience.

I think that that's something worth considering. There's an article written a few years ago by Mary Elizabeth Williams called, and just the title alone, So What If Abortion Ends Life?

[18 : 25] And here's what she says. Throughout my own pregnancies, I never wavered for a moment in the belief that I was carrying a human life inside of me. I believe that's what a fetus is, a human life.

And that doesn't make me one iota less solidly pro-choice. The fetus is indeed a life, a life worth sacrificing. And you know, I read that, and I realized that this is a growing way of thinking.

And I do think that as Christians, that's something that we need to take into consideration. What does this tell us about the human heart when there are a subset of people, there's a subset of people who would say that sacrificing a human life for the sake of convenience is a worthwhile sacrifice?

Right? This isn't meant to shame anybody or to call anybody out, but this is a reality that I think that we need to struggle with here. It is worth sacrificing the lives of children for the convenience of adults.

Now, if you think that I'm getting too one-sided, let's come to the other side, and we'll hammer liberals and conservatives alike, right? Think about the environment.

[19 : 34] Think about the environment, right? Think about things like coal or plastic, right? Two amazing inventions. When we realized that we had packaged energy in coal, when we realized that we could make things out of plastic, right?

Massive technological advancements enabled by those things. But think of the enormous impact that coal and plastic have had on our environment. Enormously negative impact, right?

Think about the phone in your pocket right now, or the laptop in your bag, right? So, you know, AT&T; has this program now where you can subscribe and you can get a new phone every year.

And that's great. It keeps you up to date. Latest iPhone or whatever every single year. But what happens to the old phone? What happens to your laptop when you throw it out? Well, it goes somewhere. And chances are it's going to end up in a giant e-waste pile somewhere on the other side of the world, right?

I think there was a big study done recently on 12 different countries in Asia, right? Where e-waste goes to be processed. There's an enormous amount of regulation around this, but a lot of times people don't follow it or they do it illegally.

[20 : 41] And you know what happens is you have the poorest of the poor who realize that they could make ten times the amount of money that they make waiting tables going and processing e-waste.

And so they take the e-waste and they break it down and they sort it. In a lot of cases, they burn it, right? And these chemicals like lithium leak into the soil and they damage the soil and the water, but they also leak into the systems of the people who are processing it.

And so they get everything from all kinds of severe illnesses to it causes mental illness, it causes genetic conditions that are passed on to children, right? And so what you have is you have rich, wealthy countries and societies producing an enormous amount of e-waste and then you have the poorest of the poor who are saddled with processing the e-waste and they're getting sick and they're dying and entire cities are being poisoned as a result.

Right? This is a classic example of a system that says it is worth it to sacrifice these lives to make these lives better and more convenient. I mean, it's a classic example of that.

And really, climate change as a whole, the human role that has been played in climate change is a beautiful and horrible example of human beings saying, I want my life to be convenient and I'm willing to sacrifice future generations, right?

[21 : 57] And so you have Herod who kills 30 kids. Well, listen, there are 15 abortions every day in D.C. right now. Every single day. Just in D.C., right? And we say, you know, Herod sacrificed 30 kids, but at the same time, there are a lot of people who refuse to acknowledge, who refuse to engage with the very real environmental crisis that exists right now.

And that's a way of saying, I don't want my life to be inconvenienced and it's worth sacrificing future generations. I'm not trying to make anybody feel guilty. I mean, you're like, man, I needed something uplifting and this is not uplifting.

Just hang with me. I'm trying to make a point, right? Now, you can go and you can say, I'm going to keep this phone forever and I'm never throwing anything out. That's not what I'm trying to get you to do. What I'm trying to help you see is that this tendency is not just in some people, extra bad people, that it's actually built in at every layer of our society.

It's actually so built into the way we operate in the world that it's almost impossible to change it. There are so many layers upon layers upon layers that are built on the foundational assumption that some lives are worth sacrificing other lives for.

That some conveniences or benefits are worth the cost that they might bring to other people. Me over you. I come first. It's built in at every level, right?

[23 : 18] So think about the entire election. The entire election and the culture that we live in shows the extent that people will go to to get their message across or to gain power or to gain influence, blatantly lying if necessary in order to do it, right?

Gentrification is another complicated issue, right? A lot of complexity around that. It's market-driven. It's driven by economics, right? It's driven by changing trends. And yet, ultimately, you have people who say, it is worth it to me to have these people relocated or this small business go out of business in order to live in the kind of neighborhood I want to live in.

Right? Even down to, and this will be the last example, even down to the way we treat people we love. You can say, you know, I'm aware of all these other issues, but when it comes to my life, I do my absolute best.

And I would say, glad. I'm glad you're doing your best. But think about for a second the ways that we treat people we love. Think about marriage, right? Some of you married. Some of you hopefully want to get married one day.

Those of you who are likely to get angry and have angry outbursts, why do you do that? I can tell you why I do it.

[24 : 35] Why do I say things that are hurtful to the people I love? It's because it feels good. I mean, we don't like to admit that, but that's why you do it.

You're angry, and it's all building up and building up and building up, and you just say, and when you're hurting like that and you're angry, there's a part of you that wants to hurt somebody as a result, even if it's just a microsecond of relief, even if for just that half a second you say it and you say, ah, and for that moment you feel good, and then the regret kicks in.

But for that moment you're saying, it is worth it to me to hurt you in order to make myself feel better, to feel that relief. Microsecond of relief, right?

If you're prone to criticizing the person that you're with, dating, and if you're kind of constantly criticizing, what's going on there? Right? To some extent, isn't that you saying, you know, it's worth it to coerce you, it's worth it to coerce you into being the person I want you to be rather than doing the hard work of loving and accepting you as the person you actually are.

Right? It's much easier to just try to force you to be who I want you to be. It's a lot harder to love somebody who may not always play by our rules. But we do this stuff because we have these hearts that's wired into us.

[25 : 52] So every human being, if you take a step back and look at this, every human being is a paradox. On the one hand we say, I desperately want to know God. On the other hand we say, I desperately want to stay in control and make sure that I come first.

Simplified, you could say it this way. At the same time we both want to be with God and we want to be God. I want to be with God and I want to be like God.

And this exists in our heart. And so that begs the question, what hope is there then for hearts like ours? And that's where we get to the promise of the gospel.

When you look at this passage and you look at Jesus, even though Jesus is just a child in this story, there's already such a powerful contrast between Jesus and Herod. And if you just go down the list, Herod is not actually a king, but he's doing everything he can to act like a king.

Not a king, but he's acting like a king. He's playing king. Jesus is a king by virtue of his birth. And yet there's nothing kingly about his life.

[27 : 01] And here he's actually, as I said before, living as a refugee. Right? Another difference, Herod is doing exactly as he chooses no matter who it hurts. It's going to be my way or off with their heads, right?

But Jesus, from the very beginning of his life, is not living as he chooses. He's not living as he chooses. He's doing exactly what his heavenly father had planned for him to do.

Throughout the passage, it says again and again, this was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophets. This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophets. And the writers put that in there to show us that Jesus, this isn't just happenstance.

Jesus is actually following, very meticulously, a plan that had been laid out before the foundations of the earth were laid. He's following that plan. And in that plan, he is becoming a representative.

Right? He's becoming a representative. Originally, Israel had grown up in Egypt in slavery. And then through the Exodus, they had been freed and they had been sent out into the world.

[28 : 06] And God called them to be a light and a way of salvation to the Gentiles. But they failed in that calling. They became too much like the nations.

Right? They began to worship the gods of the nations and to live like the people of the other nations. And so God sent Jesus to be what Israel never could have been. And so it says this was to fulfill Jesus' calling to be the true Israel.

Jesus, like Israel, coming out of Egypt. Right? To be a light and salvation for the whole world. So he becomes the true Israel. And then more than that, if you continue to read the story, you recognize that it's not just Israel he came to represent, but all human beings everywhere.

And you say, well, why is he wanting to represent all human beings? Well, in preparation for his inauguration. Right? But Jesus' inauguration wasn't anything like the inauguration that we saw on Friday.

His took place on a wooden cross. Right? His inauguration was his crucifixion. Right? And on the cross is where we see the real difference between Jesus and the rest of humanity.

[29 : 15] And you can put the difference this way. We sacrifice others in order to get what we want. And Jesus sacrifices himself in order to give us what we need.

And that's the real difference. I'm the kind of person who will, at the end of the day, I will sacrifice others to get what I want. Even if it's just to feel slightly better about myself. But Jesus came to sacrifice himself in order to give us what we need.

And what we need, the hope that exists for people like us, what we need is this. If sin is us trying to take God's place, then salvation is God being willing to take our place.

And that's exactly what happens. Right? And when you recognize that Jesus came to represent me, to take my place, to die in a way that would atone for all of the damage that I've done because of my heart.

When you recognize that, and you stare that truth in the face, what you're seeing is the only thing that can convince a heart like mine to give up control. When I look at the cross, what I see, what we see is, as I look, as I struggle to give up the throne of my life, I recognize that here's a God who gave up the throne for me.

[30 : 42] And when that hits you, and it really hits you, you begin to look at your hold on the throne of your life, and you begin to realize, I would rather he be in control than me.

I would rather a God who was willing to give up the throne for me, that's the kind of person I want in control of my life. He will actually do a better job than I will because he actually treats me better than I treat myself.

Right? He actually loves me more than anyone else, even me. And when you realize that, it begins to loosen your hold on the throne of your life. You begin to be willing to give it over.

It's this act of incomprehensible love. And you know, we believe as Christians that this love can, is, and will change the world.

We think that this love, that says, I will sacrifice myself to give you what you need, to see you grow and flourish, that that's the kind of love that will ultimately save and restore and renew all of this.

[31 : 47] As we long for our country to get back on track, as we long for the world to become a safer place, a more unified place, a more just place, a more peaceful place, all of these things that I know that we have been praying all weekend, and for as long as we can remember, that the way there is this love.

And so we actually believe as Christians that we are now called to love in that same way, that we are to be known for our willingness to sacrifice our own convenience and our own benefit and our own privilege to see others benefit, right?

So in the way that we care for not only unwanted pregnancies and children, but also moms and families, right? In the ways that we engage and care for the environment, right?

In ways that we pursue justice in our ever-changing neighborhood landscapes, and simply in the ways that we love one another, right? In these and many other ways, we're not alone able to fix what's wrong with the world, but we are able to stand as witnesses.

There is a better way, and it starts with Jesus on the cross. Right, so to all those who are desperate for God, but to all those who are determined to stay in control of their own lives, this invitation remains, and that is to lay our crowns at the feet of the God who laid his crown down for us.

[33 : 12] So let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.