

2nd Advent - Wisemen

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Preacher: Pastor Cal Morrison

[0 : 0 0] I probably should have said it's in Aramaic, so you wouldn't have understood a word unless you know the language. It's in Aramaic. Clearly, the child is a child and no longer a baby, which is how it would have been.

And there were not just three wise men, there was an entourage, which is how it would have been. And it's just such a wonderful depiction of that moment in time. Christmas is one of the busiest times of the year on the road.

A study back in 2019 found that British motorists would clock a combined four billion miles over the Christmas break. That's about 450 miles per driver over Christmas.

Around a third of the three and a half thousand people surveyed said that they planned on driving for two or more hours on Christmas-related journeys.

Six in ten said they planned on driving up to 500 miles. Sounds like a Proclaimers song, doesn't it? Crawford and Elsa just made a 200-mile trip to see their family.

[1 : 1 9] What distance would you go to see family? To be with family at Christmas? What distance would you go to visit someone you long to see?

Many people will be traveling some distance to visit family at Christmas. Most people will either be traveling or they will be the ones receiving visitors. Hands up if you are planning to visit someone this Christmas.

Hands up if you are expecting visitors this Christmas. Most of us.

Here's the thing. Of all the people that we visit, that we travel to see, or of all the visitors that we receive in our homes, how many of those are strangers?

Who is planning on going to visit a stranger this Christmas? Who expects a stranger to come to their house? What would your reaction be if on Christmas Day, you just get settled, you think, okay, we're not doing the traveling today, we're doing it on Boxing Day, we don't have family coming around today, we're only cooking for ourselves.

[2 : 3 6] Suddenly there's a knock at the door, and you think, I didn't think the postman were out this time, but it must be a parcel or something, or a Christmas card. And you open it, and there's a group of people, a group of strangers, saying, we thought we'd come and visit you.

Would you let them through the door? What would your reaction be? What would your family's reaction be if you said, this Christmas we're going to travel a bit farther?

Remember, there's actually, there's a couple in Dusseldorf in Germany. There's a couple in Dusseldorf. They've just had a baby. It's only around 800 miles or so.

I'm sure your family would say something like, I take it you know this couple. Imagine their surprise when you said, actually, not really. It's more about the baby than the couple.

We're just, we're going to see the baby. Do you know the baby? Do they know you're coming? No. What questions would your family have if that was what you suggested doing?

[3 : 46] What possible reason would there be to make that trip? What relevance would they have to you? Would you even be received?

See, one of the interesting things, I think, about the gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus is the distances that different people go. For instance, no one else on earth travels farther than the wise men to see this child.

No one. No one travels further than the wise men to see this one baby in Bethlehem. The distance that they travel is only beaten by the angels that we learned about last week.

You see, the angels came from heaven to earth. But of all the people in this story, no one travels farther than these foreign stargazers. Yet, the story is really about the baby.

And in John's gospel, we get to see that the furthest distance traveled is actually by the baby himself. But that's a different part of the story. You see, we don't really know much about these wise men.

[5 : 03] Matthew doesn't tell us much. But with a little bit of background, a good guess would be that they came from the old Persian empire that was founded by Cyrus the Great.

The Jews had been deported back hundreds of years ago. They'd been deported to Babylon, hundreds of years before this point. And then the Babylonian empire was conquered by the Persians under Cyrus in 539 BC.

So there were many Jews in the Persian empire. And as such, their religion, their culture, their scriptures were mingled with the culture in Persia. And it was eventually Cyrus who was moved by God to let the Jews return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple.

And then that was eventually completed under Darius, you remember. So we know that there was a Jewish influence in Persia.

Although many Jews returned to Jerusalem, not everyone did. Many remained in Persia. But what is the interest of these people, these foreigners?

[6 : 09] What's the interest in the king of the Jews? You see, these wise men themselves are not Jews. We know that from some details in the story. But they have some knowledge.

They have some interest in Jewish prophecy. You see, when they say, where is he who is born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose. What are they talking about?

In their world, it wasn't uncommon to regard a new star as an omen of a major event, like the birth of a king. But why the king of the Jews?

Why him? You see, in Numbers 24, Balaam said, the oracle of him who hears the words of God and knows the knowledge of the Most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty falling down with his eyes uncovered.

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.

[7 : 16] They probably would have known that. Then you had Daniel himself prophesying in Persia, and he talks about many kingdoms coming and going, but that God would set up a kingdom that would last forever.

So these wise men, these magi from the east, clearly think that this child is important enough to travel up to 800 miles. Clearly, to these wise men, to these foreigners, this child is significant.

If they're willing to travel up to 800 miles to see him, to give him gifts, to worship him, it begs the question, who is this child?

You see, there were ancient superhighways at that time, such as the Royal Road, stretched from east to west, from Susa to Sardis. It was rebuilt by Darius.

Perhaps they traveled along this until they got to an even older highway called the King's Highway that went north to south from Syria to Egypt.

[8 : 29] Perhaps they turned south onto this and made their way to Jerusalem. It was not an easy journey. It was a massive and costly journey. Hundreds of miles with an entourage of people, resources, animals.

What does that say about this baby? What does that say about what kind of king that they thought he was going to be? And although they were strangers, the truth is even if a two-year-old couldn't quite express it, they were both known and received by that child.

You see, although Matthew tells us very little about the wise men, he shows us a very stark contrast between these foreigners who have traveled hundreds of miles and the locals who won't even travel a few miles to see the child.

foreigners traveling to see a foreign king to worship him. Locals who won't even go a few miles south to see their own king.

These men from the east have traveled hundreds of miles going on very little information. Signs in the sky and vague prophecies. They end up at the capital city.

[9 : 53] It's an obvious place to go. Well, a king's been born. Must be born in the capital city. He must be born in the palace. They turn up to the palace exactly where you would expect a royal baby to be.

However, they are met with a striking ignorance from the very people of this king. The ones who were given the oracles of God are completely ignorant of this.

And the very royal family is completely unaware of this newborn king. I don't want to get into this side of things because David will go into this next week. But when you see what the wise men ask, where is he who is born king of the Jews?

You need to understand the context of that. Herod was appointed king of the Jews. He was appointed king, not born king, appointed king.

Herod was not even a Jew by birth. He was a non-Jew who was appointed the king of the Jews by the Roman Senate, given the title king of the Jews, yet he was not born king, neither was he even a Jew.

[11 : 08] These strangers turn up from the east, showing up at the palace asking about he who is born king of the Jews is particularly troubling to Herod.

Time is up for this pretender. Rome does not get to decide who is king of the Jews. Yet Herod seems to know that this was coming, whether or not in his own lifetime.

He seems to know that this was coming because he seems to know they're talking about the Christ. It's from his lips that we hear the title Christ. Only him and he alone is the one who talks about the Christ, turns to his advisors, well, this must be the Christ.

Where does it say that the Christ is to be born? Clearly he's not here. The big surprise isn't that Herod was troubled. The surprise is that all Jerusalem was troubled with him.

Why? So, he gathers the religious leaders. He gathers the Bible experts and they tell him immediately where to find the Christ.

[12 : 19] They tell him immediately where it was predicted the Christ would be born. In Bethlehem. For as the prophecy goes. And then he summons the Magi secretly to find out when the star appeared.

He's doing his sums. He's conniving. He's working things out. His intentions are highly suspect. And I wonder at this moment it must have become incredibly uncomfortable.

It must have become incredibly awkward for the Magi, for the wise men. They would have been having to play dumb at this point. Surely they realize king's not born here.

Something's amiss. Something is wrong. Something's going to go south here. So Herod's saying yeah, yeah, yeah okay we know about this.

Where's the star? When did it appear? Go to Bethlehem. Tell me where he is. Yeah, okay. Let's play dumb. Very awkward.

[13 : 22] Very awkward. To turn up at the palace only to find out that the one who is on the throne doesn't have a birthright to it. Only to turn out at the palace to find out that the child that they seek is not his.

Not the child of the king. He's a pretender. Now they're on their way south to Bethlehem. There must have been a really awkward scary meeting with Herod.

When they leave they see the star and no wonder they rejoice exceedingly with great joy. Finally we can go to see the king. You see previously the star took them so far but they made their own assumptions about where royalty would be.

You see it was then scripture which directed them and so now with a more sure word when they saw the star again it brought them great joy because they knew they could rely on the scriptures.

It seemed like all the prophecies were coming together but how curious how curious that it says that only they left Jerusalem. How curious as if it wasn't strange enough that the king and the people were completely unaware now it seems like they just don't care.

[14 : 49] No one from Jerusalem is willing to travel a few miles south with them not to show the way not to show them how to get there not with any interest about this prophecy not with any interest about their own king their own messiah.

What does it say when the foreigners in this story are the only ones who want to show up to worship the newborn king but the religious ones don't? What does that say?

What does it say when the outsiders are searching for the Christ but those on the inside just don't care? In fact more than that they would rather that he just doesn't get in the way of their gig.

It doesn't seem like anyone went with them. It doesn't seem like any local showed them the way. It doesn't seem like any Jews from the capital city even cared about the Christ.

Who is going to lead people to Christ? It's like the people shouting Hosanna and the Pharisees complained but Jesus said if the people were silent then the very rocks would cry out.

[16 : 09] In this account although the scribes have given a location for where the Christ would be born no one is willing to take them there. No one. Instead they need guided by a star.

Is anyone going to take them to Christ or is it left to a star? It reminds me of the creation account in Genesis chapter 1.

God commanded the stars to rule the sky and commanded the man to rule the earth. Yet the man disobeyed and the stars obey.

It's the same in this story. The star is the one obeying God while the king the priests the scribes all Jerusalem leave these foreign Jesus seekers to fend for themselves.

If the people are silent the rocks will cry out. If the people don't care and don't want to lead people to Christ God will send a star. And they turn up and they say the most incredible thing for a foreigner who's travelled 800 miles to say when all the local ones don't care.

[17 : 18] we have come to worship him. Of all the people to come to Jesus you'll know stories of Jesus feeding of the 5,000 and then they follow him.

You're not here because you saw signs you're here because you've got a full belly. Of all the people who come to Jesus some for food some for a miracle some to arrest him some as you'll hear next week even as a baby to kill him of all the people who come to Jesus who comes to worship him.

When Jesus was born most of the people closest to home were either unaware or they just didn't care. Yet these far away foreigners had their eyes open.

Isn't it good to have your eyes open? Isn't it good to seek Jesus? Who is this baby? Who is Jesus? Who is the Christmas child?

Well he may be born in a manger but he is the one who is born king. He is the rightful king and his kingdom will last forever.

[18 : 29] He is the one and the only one worthy of worship. And here's the rub for us for the people in this story for everyone ever since.

Whether we are aware of Jesus or not whether we believe in him or not whether we love him or not whether we want to see him or not doesn't change the fact of who he is.

He is the one born king and will reign forever. The question is who are you? Who are you? Are you like the king?

Are you like the people of Jerusalem? People close to home the religious leaders? Scribes who know the prophecies? Or the foreigners? Or it will travel any distance any distance to see a child at any cost to worship the Christ.

You see in John chapter 4 when this very child has grown up he said that God is seeking true worshippers and he knows that as a babe those true worshippers were not his own people.

[19 : 49] They were far off strangers but they were exactly the kind of people that God is looking for and that is exactly the kind of people that God is looking for today. People who would worship the Christmas child.

who would go any distance to see to know to bow down to the Christ for he is the one who is born king.