



Sunday, December 10, 2023

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon Title: Hope and Wonder

The bright hope for tomorrow. Seen in creation. As we read in **Romans 1:20**, "For God, since the creation of the world, has made himself known to us that we may know Him." And we see that in all of creation. We see it in creation around us but we also see it in the vast creation that is there. In the stars. We can see the glory of God. When you look at them in detail, you can see how that works. Anthony talked about his love of astronomy. Astrology is something different and that's not something that we normally do. It's the study of stars and the study of astronomy. But to see God in that and to see that space. And when we look back at Romans 1, where it says that it is in creation that God makes Himself known. Today we have the story of God making Himself known to a group of wisemen - to a group of Magi - who will then see and give themselves to worship in the king. And we see this story in Matthew 2.

So I invite you to turn with me to Matthew 2, where we will read the story of the wisemen. It is the only place where this occurs. The other gospels do not include the story of the wisemen and sometimes, like even in our Christmas carols, we sometimes call them kings, which they were not. They were people who were under the king and usually gave wisdom to the king. They were people who, like Daniel when he was taken into captivity and he was sought out by the king for wisdom, those are these people. They're learned people. They are spending their time in guiding the king. And so these are the sages of the ancient world.

We often also think that there are three of them because there are three gifts. Hence there are three wisemen. We don't know that for sure. There could have been, you know, a dozen of them. Who knows. But that's not the important part for today. Today, we want to look at, through the wonder of God, how it leads not only to hope, but then we're also going to end up at a place of peace and rest for these wisemen.

So Matthew 2:1-12 - **1** After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem **2** 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." **3** When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** 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.

5 “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

6 ““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.’

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** 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.”

9 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. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** 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. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Join me in prayer. Dear Lord, we thank You for Your Word. Lord, we thank You that in Your Word, we can see how Your wonder and the glories of Your creation draws people to You. Lord, help us to live in that space of wonder. As we look at the wisemen today, at Herod and at the people of Jerusalem, may we never lose a sense of wonder and awe in how You reveal Yourself to us. Lord, we pray that the Word spoken may be Your words. We pray, Lord, that you will open our ears and our hearts that we may hear You. And Lord, that You will fill our hearts that we may have Your peace. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Let's begin the story with the wisemen. The wisemen had this expectation of finding the king. They come to Jerusalem looking for a king. They have the sense of they are going to find it. There is this hope in knowing that they have found the king. We read in **Matthew 2:2** where it says, "... **2** 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.” These wisemen knew there was a king and they were willing to travel, knowing that they could find this king. They had seen the star God had revealed to them that a king would be born. And so they went. Their hope of finding the king came out of a place of wonder. These are wisemen who have been studying the stars for years.

Now there's a couple of things about this. One is, they're wisemen who are in the east. They are probably in the land of Persia. It is not sure exactly where they are, but they are away from the land of Israel. And yet, within that land - and it could be because of some remaining Israelites who were still there after the captivity - but yet in that remaining space, they knew that there was a king who would come from Israel. And as they were looking at the stars, they saw in the stars that there is this king that was born. And sometimes we need to remember that God, in His glory, speaks in ways to people that we cannot explain. And sometimes God, in His glory, will speak to people in creation where people see creation and the wonder of it all. And they go, "There must be a God."

In evolution theory, there is this "big bang theory." And it is this development of stuff. When I was in California, there was a guy by the name of Ray Comfort, who would stand on the street corners and have conversations with people. And one of his favorite questions was, "Do you see that building over there? It kind of just happened. There it was, all of a sudden. And they would go, "No! Someone had to build it. And before that, someone had to design it. There was an architect who came up with this." And then he would simply ask, "And creation is any different?" And when you look at certain architectural structures, you know who the architect is. You can see their hand in that construction and in that building. And when you look at creation, you can see the hand of God in creation.

And here too God has, within creation, shown himself and the glory of Himself to these wise men. And because of it, they leave and they go and they think, "Okay, so there's a king born so let's go to the obvious place and check out where we go." Right? You're going to Israel? Well, go to Jerusalem. It's the capital city. It's the home of the king. That's where the king would be born. For many people, that's where they begin with this wonder of God. It's like, "Okay, where is He? Let's go looking." But at least they begin to look. We've not lost the sense of, "There's got to be a greater architect out there." So there's got to be someone who has created this. And so these wisemen go and they search.

Now there's always interesting questions like, "Okay, if they follow the star... " And as we just read in the story, the star appears to them after they see Herod. And you think, "Lord, why didn't you just direct them straight to Bethlehem? They were following the star." And keep in mind, Jerusalem and Bethlehem are less than a day's journey. They're pretty close together. But sometimes I go, "Why did they do this?" But when we look at what happens after this, we see that in this aspect of having them talk to Herod, there are greater pieces that happen. Some of it is not good. But there's an announcement that the Messiah has come.

So let's jump to Herod for a second. Herod does not have hope. Herod has fear. Herod was such a suspicious person that anybody who he felt might have this concept of overtaking his throne, he would simply kill, including his kids. He was so afraid of losing power that he put to death anybody who was a threat, as we see later on. Later, it talks about how Herod killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem who were under two because of figuring out when the star had appeared and so on. But you can see how Herod's first idea is, "How do we get rid of the threat? How do we clear out this possibility so that it will not happen?"

But here's the other thing that Herod knew. Herod knew there was a threat. He was afraid of it. But he also knew that there could be some truth in this. And so where does he go? He goes to the religious leaders. It says there in **Matthew 2:4**, "4 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." So Herod also knew. And he knew where to go to get the answer. So as some would say, Herod went to church to talk to the leaders there to say, "Hey, you guys have read the scriptures. These guys are talking about the King of the Jews. Where's it going to be?" And they tell him it'll be in Bethlehem. But here's something which is a very unique part of this story. God is using Herod to announce to the people of Jerusalem the birth of the Messiah. He has now gone to the leaders of the Jews and said, "Where is this Messiah to be born?"

Some may say it this way, "You've been waiting 400 years for this Messiah. I'm wondering what these guys over here are talking about, where is it happening?" This should have alerted the leaders and the people of Jerusalem. They should have said, "Hey, look, this has been brought back to the forefront. Could this be? Could this be what we've been putting our hope in for a long time?"

So here you have God using Herod to announce the King of kings who is going to free the people of the world. Kind of reminds us of a story from years ago, when God used Pharaoh and Moses to free the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. And if you go through Matthew, you will see how Matthew continuously sets up Jesus as the new Moses, the new person who redeems people, the new person who gives people rest and peace and freedom from the slavery of sin. As Moses gave people freedom from Pharaoh and Egyptians.

But then we have this interesting piece. In **Matthew 2:3** it says, "**3** When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." The people of Jerusalem had also lost hope. They had also seen that this isn't happening. It's been 400 years. But there's a different piece to this as well. Not only have they lost hope, but they have lost their sense of wonder. The sense that scripture has this incredible awe to it, the way God has spoken to them. They have lost this sense because even the leaders, as they've been telling Herod, "Yeah, he's supposed to be born in Bethlehem." We can see later on for the next 30 some odd years that that didn't change anything in them. They had lost their hope. They had lost their wonder in scripture. And it was a matter of, "Where is God when we need him because we have lost our hope that he is here."

You could put it another way. Their present situation has overcome their hope. They are living under Herod who has such great control. And Herod lives out of this place of fear that all the people of Jerusalem are now also living out of this place of fear. Rather than having hope in God who will take care of things, there is now this sense of fear in, "Oh no. What is Herod going to do? How is society going to react to this situation? Am I going to be in danger because of this?" No longer having this hope that God is here and God is present and seeing the wonders that God does every day in our lives, they've lost hope. They've allowed their current situation to overcome all of that.

Then we go back to the wisemen. These wisemen continue on in their search of hope. They have not given up. They continue on and they go, "We are going to find this hope. We are going to find the wonder that God has revealed to us." And it says in **Matthew 2:10-11** that, "**10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him." So they came to Christ. And here we see how hope leads to worship. Hope is not something which is just empty or in and of itself. Hope leads to worship. When we have our hope and the God of wonder, it leads to a worshipping of the God of wonder. And in worshipping God, we identify who He is and we give Him what we can.

And the three wisemen gave him gifts as well. They gave him gold and frankincense and myrrh which in many ways are symbolic for the life of Christ. Gold was a gift that you would give a king, frankincense was used in the temple as a piece of worship, and myrrh was one of the spices which was used in the process of burial.

So here, these wisemen give the King of kings these gifts which identify him in that space. And so they worship. But here's another thing about worship. Worship leads to surrender. These wisemen at one point had to surrender all of their power, any authority that they had within their places - and they weren't kings obviously - but they came to a child and they said, "We are surrendering ourselves to you." It is that place of surrender.

And I guess one of the questions is, what areas in my life do I need to surrender? Are there places in my life that I have hung on to that I have not yet surrendered to the King of kings? And I hold on to them instead? And what we find out is that when we hold on to those things, it affects our hope. It also affects our peace because surrender leads to peace. Jesus is the King of kings and the Prince of peace. What do we surrender to Christ? It is not just a matter of worship. That is what we do and what we receive is peace from God.

Isaiah 26:3 says this, "**3** You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you." This aspect of peace comes when we give ourselves completely to God. In **Psalms 4:8** it says, "**8** In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety." So if we want rest and peace, we need to surrender. Peace renews our hope. Peace brings us to that place where we understand that the wonder of God is there. It increases our hope for any time in the future, when we are wondering if this is going to work, we know. Because we have seen God work and we know that we have surrendered to the King of kings. We understand and feel the peace that comes within us and that in itself renews our hope for troubled times later on. Knowing that God is there.

Romans 5:5-8 summarizes, "And hope does not put us to shame." Hope in God does not shame us. It does not leave us void because God's love has poured out onto our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. You see at just the right time. Just the right time. God came to the world at just the right time. God came to the wisemen at just the right time. God comes to you and to me at just the right time.

I'll be honest with you, sometimes we don't think that's the right time. But if we're honest with ourselves, it's like, "Lord, you're a little bit late on this one." The people of Israel thought that. "Lord, you're like 400 years late! I ain't got 400 years. But notice it says, "God's love poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit." And you see at just the right time, God demonstrates His love for us. That while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. That is the gift of Christmas. That is the wonder of it all. To think that in this place God says, "You, a sinner. While you are in that place of sinning, while you are in that place before you even knew about me, I died for you. We can be amazed at creation and that wonder of everything around.

But if we're going to talk about wonder this morning. Let's look at that piece. How is that possible? How is it possible that God, in His love, decided to send His Son to die for us? In **Romans 15:13**, we've seen this one before. It says, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." When you look at the wonder of what God has done for you and for me, may that bring us hope.

So, then I've got a couple of questions for you. The first one is... Am I in a place of wonder of what God has shown me? Think back over the last week. Last week, we said with the waiting and the watching, are you looking for where God is and how God has interacted in your life? And today we ask that same question. Am I looking? Am I at this place of wonder going, "Wow. Look how much God loves me." And for some of us, we might have had a week where we're like, "Lord, I'm not sure you love me because this was not a good week." But I bet even in those very difficult weeks, there were things that happened where we can say, "Yeah, I know God was still here." We might need God to speak and God is sitting in the chair in the room just quiet. But may we remember that God is always here.

The second question... Am I eagerly seeking the Prince of Peace? Think about these wisemen. They knew that there was a King in the east and they had to travel by camel. They're not flying over. They traveled by camel through the desert. And this is not a short trip. It's not like, "Hey, I'm going away for the weekend. I'll be back on Monday morning." This is like, "I'm going away for a couple of weeks. Maybe a couple of months." This is the intentional pursuit of a King.

I sometimes wonder about myself. How much am I intentionally pursuing the Prince of Peace? Or do I kind of live my life day to day and go, "Oh yeah, you know, maybe I'll do it over here or do it over in this time." Am I like the wisemen after seeing the wonder of God intentionally and eagerly seeking the Prince of Peace?

The next question. What gift do I need to give to Christ? Do you remember it says to worship this aspect of giving of yourself leading to surrender? Are there areas in which I have hung on to things that God has given me that I need to give to Him? Which is connected to the next question... Is all of my life an act of worship? We believe that everything we do is an act of worship. The way we interact with the person in the store, the way we drive and interact with the other people on the road? Oh, that might be hitting a little close to home. Right? Everything we do is an act of worship. It's a day I'm reminded to ask myself that question, "Is everything I do each day an act of worship to God?" Because we remember that God is always with us. Jesus promised to us that, "I will always be with you."

So if you need to, like we've demonstrated here before, have a chair beside you and know that He's sitting there. That would be interesting, wouldn't it, to walk around the store with a chair sitting beside you the whole time? It'd be a reminder though. Big conversation starter too. And maybe that's part of it, right? Not only is my life an act of worship but am I living my life as an act of worship so that other people around me notice. So they too want to hear about the wonder of what God has done.

So that puts us back to this aspect of hope leading to worship, worship leading to surrender, surrender leading to peace and peace renewing our hope. So this Christmas, when you think about the wonder of everything there is, when you see the wonder in children as they get gifts, when you look at the beauty of what is produced for Christmas, do you see the wonder of God's gift? Do you see the wonder of God taking on humanity becoming one of us so that we may live? Augustine says, "'Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee."

And that's the invitation which we get this Christmas. Jesus, who is the bread of life, who was born in Bethlehem (which means the house of bread) whom God has, by the wonders of His creation, invited people from around the world to come to worship Him. God says to us today as well, "I invite you to come and worship me. I invite you every time you see the wonders of creation, the wonders of God working in your life or in other people's lives, come to the manger and worship, to bring your gifts and to surrender your heart so that I may give you peace. And that I may renew your hope for the world, knowing that I am the King of kings and Prince of peace.

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You that You are the Lord of lords, the King of kings and the Prince of peace. Lord, we thank You for inviting us again this morning to this part of worship, to this place in which we may see the wonder of who You are and surrender our hearts and our lives to You. And Lord, we thank You that when we do that, there is a peace which cannot be explained. Even though there are times of trouble within our lives, we know that You are there with us. Lord, may You give us that peace, Lord. And in that peace, will You also renew our hope? Renew our hope, Lord, that as we see the wonder of You, we may be renewed and refilled. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*