

Have you ever known someone so far away from God that you thought there was no way they'd ever come to know Jesus? Or heard a Christian's testimony and marveled at the fact that they ever came to faith? I was reminded of that this week as I read about two present-day saints. One you may recognize from the I Am Second campaigns, Brian "Head" Welch, the guitarist for a band called Korn who was living quite a destructive life before coming to faith in the Lord. I also read about former gang leader Rene Martinez, who now calls himself "a radical soldier for God." These men's stories are remarkable, going from self-indulgent, destructive lives where they ruled their own kingdoms, to the day where Jesus became Lord and they became worshippers of the one true God.

This morning we're going to encounter two different sets of characters that are expecting Jesus. One set is individuals who we may not expect to be followers of the one true God, and are surprise characters in the story of the birth of Christ. The other are characters we would expect to see not only in the Christmas story, but as eager worshippers of Messiah. Each group will respond differently as they expect the arrival of this baby born in Bethlehem, and their contrast will help us see the decision we each have to make as we live expecting Jesus. One is an example. The other is a warning.

You see, each and every one of us has a heart that will be ruled by someone. We each have a throne of our life, and he or she who sits on the throne becomes the object of our devotion and love. But here's the catch: there's room for only one person, and for Christians, we wrestle with who we're going to let sit there: Us or God. When Jesus is expected, a decision must be made, not just during this Christmas season, but each and every day of our lives. Will we, as *Joy to the World* says, let our heart prepare him room, or will we hold on tight? And if we do let Jesus reign, what will the result be? That's the contrast these characters will show us this morning.

When Jesus is expected, we can choose loathing or longing. This is a question of *desire*. Do we long to be in the presence of Jesus and give him our hearts and lives?

[Matthew 2:1-2] Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

The first thing I have to do this morning, unfortunately, is ruin some of your manger scenes. This event is likely 1-2 years after the birth of Jesus. So if you have three wise men bowing down at the manger, it's wrong. However, it's a great example to us, so don't get rid of them!

This is the first episode of the Christmas story where we don't hear from a heavenly messenger. These men are from the east, likely Babylon and Persia. They are dignitaries, representing foreign nations. They are also Gentiles. From the beginning of Jesus' life, God's promise of salvation to all people is evident. But how did they get there? How did they know to come?

We actually know very little about these men and about how they ultimately wound up in Jerusalem. There is some fascinating reading in all of it. But what has likely happened is a confluence of several influences. These men are called magi. It's the same word where we get

“magic”. These guys are a combination of scientists, astronomers, and astrologers. They study the sky and see signs in it. Additionally, they come from an area that was the home of exiled Jews for a long period of time. Their scriptures that pointed to a Messiah would have been studied and learned by the culture they were in. God uses all these influences, along with some celestial event, to direct them to go to Jerusalem. Some suggest the star is actually a star, a comet, or the Shekinah Glory, the very presence of God directing them on their way. Regardless, we see they are living with expectation and anticipation, waiting for the sign that this king of the Jews has been born, because they desire to be with him. (this is not an endorsement of astrology)

What is your desire to be with Jesus? These men have traveled hundreds of miles over many, many days, to be in his presence and worship him. If you are here this morning and on a search for God, I’m so glad you’re here. He wants you to find him. I invite you to visit our prayer partners, go down to the Hub and talk to one of our team, or come see me after the service.

[Matthew 2:3-6] ³When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶“ ‘And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

The news of this baby is not good for everyone. At this time, Israel is ruled by Herod the Great. It’s a fitting description because, if you’ve ever been to Israel, you see his fingerprints all over. Sea ports, structures, and a mountaintop he had scraped flat to build a palace on. All very impressive, and all a monument to himself. When he hears about the king of the Jews, he’s troubled, greatly agitated. You see, whether they intended to or not, the magi asking about he who is born king of the Jews is a slap in the face of Herod. “That’s my job. That’s my place. That’s my throne.” But it’s not his. He’s Idumean, an Edomite descended from Esau, and he has been appointed by Rome to rule in Israel. The baby who has been born needs no appointment. The throne is his by birthright, and Herod is threatened. He’s king, and he wants to keep it that way. He’s on the throne, and there is no room for anyone else.

Herod and the priests all likely know who the magi are talking about. Herod hears “king of the Jews” and makes the jump to asking where the Christ is to be born. I believe a lot of Jews just didn’t recognize who Jesus was when he came. But I also believe there were many who knew exactly who he was but had no interest in giving him his rightful place. These Jews should have been rejoicing and packing for the short trip to Bethlehem. The king had come. Instead, they were troubled because their position was threatened. They were troubled because another had arrived whose place should have been on the throne.

Do you see Jesus as a blessing or a threat? A sovereign or a usurper? The rightful king of your life or an invader trying to steal your throne? There is a question we must all answer at Christmas. God came as a baby to live a life worthy of defeating sin and death, and reign over all creation and as King in Israel. We have no control over that. The question we have to answer is if our desire is for him to reign in our lives; to give him his rightful place on our throne.

When Jesus is expected, we can choose scheming or seeking. This is a question of *pursuit*. If we long to be with God, how will we go about accomplishing that?

[Matthew 2:7-9a] ⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” ⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way.

If you read v7-8 by itself, it may seem somewhat harmless. The magi eagerly go on in their pursuit of Jesus, but Herod is scheming. Pick up the story in v13 and you’ll discover the lengths to which this man will go to keep his place on the throne. He finds out the star appeared within the last two years, and he orders the murder of all babies two years and younger in Bethlehem and surrounding region. Now, I’m not suggesting you are either a devoted pursuer of Jesus or a murderous megalomaniac. But I want us to consider the lengths we’ll go to keep our distance from God, eliminate his influence in our lives, and keep him off our throne.

I talk to people regularly who say they feel distant from God, and one of the things I ask them is if they have created that distance. There are times where even the most devoted followers of Jesus go through spiritual dry spells. But for many of us, myself included, there are times we are distant from God because, if we’re honest, we want that distance. We may struggle to admit it, but we scheme to live our lives apart from God. Sometimes we do it overtly. I know someone who went into college proclaiming “See you in four years, God.” That was bold. But there are subtle things we do to keep our distance from God to diminish God’s influence. We do it by neglecting our spiritual practices, seeking fulfillment from fleshly things that feed our ego or our appetite, or numb us to things we don’t want to deal with. A full belly is sometimes more preferential than a full spirit. Or we may dabble in disobedience. God won’t notice! Distance destroys devotion, and you will ultimately find a self-ruled kingdom unfulfilling. If you are struggling in your pursuit of God, consider your desire for God. And if you are struggling in your desire for God, consider if you are resisting the rule of God, because you may be missing out.

When Jesus is expected, we can choose worry or worship. This is a question of *result*. If we long to be with Jesus and pursue him diligently, what will be the fruit of that? Herod sends off the magi and, feeling threatened, worries about his place on the throne to such an extent that it ends in horrific violence. It’s quite a different outcome for the magi.

[Matthew 2:9b-12] And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

The star that led them to Jerusalem apparently reappeared and led them directly to the house where Mary and Jesus were. They recognized that they were finally at their destination, that they were on the verge of being in the presence of this infant king, and the result was abundant joy.

I talk about joy a lot and define it as delight and fulfillment in the presence and promises of God. But this week, as I considered this story, I think an easier way to say it might be that joy is holy anticipation. It is the expression of hope. It's like being in the waiting room of a maternity ward waiting for those doors to open and see a beaming new father declare "it's a boy". There's a baby coming, and I can't wait to see him! It's this anticipation that causes us to eagerly give up our throne. **When Jesus sits on the throne of your life, worship is sure to follow.**

While Herod will rise up in an effort to keep his place on the throne of Israel, these magi fall down in worship and in recognition of who belongs on the throne. Worship is declaring the worth/worthiness of God! It is a recognition of who he is and what he's done. We do that in song, in praise, in prayer, and can do that with every aspect of our lives, every part of us and every action we take being a declaration of the greatness of God.

And after they fall on their face to worship, they do the same with their treasure. These are gifts fit for a king and, in fact, match up with historical records of what magi gave to other world leaders during this time. Joseph will use this treasure to sustain his family when an angel tells him to flee to Egypt because Herod is about to go on his rampage. The Bible says, "where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I also believe that, where your heart is, your treasure will be also. That if God is on the throne, we will give him more than moments of worship, but we'll give all of ourselves to him.

We don't know the magi's understanding of the Gospel and what this Messiah will ultimately do. But they offer all of themselves to all of what they know about Jesus. You may be here this morning and have just the smallest understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for you. That's enough to worship. We want you to grow in understanding, but you are currently fully capable of worshipping the Lord by offering all you know of yourself to all you know of God.

I think what so many of us are missing, me too at times, is this holy anticipation for an encounter with God. We struggle to rejoice with exceeding joy and, therefore struggle, to make room for Jesus on the throne of our lives. I want to offer three thoughts that might ignite in you a desire, a pursuit, and ultimately a life of worship with Jesus on the throne.

Pray with the physical posture of how you want your heart to be. Does the glory and majesty of Christ bring you to your knees? My devotional life changed when I started praying on my knees. It is a posture of humility and adoration that influenced my heart to do the same. Now, I know for some of you, if you got down on your knees, the greatest Christmas miracle would be you getting back up. But consider a bowed head or open or raised hands. It is a physical reminder of a spiritual reality, and it's impossible to sit on the throne when you are bowed down in worship to the king.

Worship with contagious worshippers. Let worship go viral in your heart. Desire, pursuit, and worship are catching. These magi have come together, into the presence of God, to worship. That's what we do every week here. Now, God is everywhere, and if you are a follower of Jesus, you have his Spirit within you. So you're never not in the presence of God. But if you remember during our church series, I said that if this was merely a Christian concert, with gifted singers performing for our entertainment, don't bother showing up. But it isn't. We have been called as

the family of God to come together regularly to declare the worth of God. We do that primarily by singing songs of praise at the beginning of our worship service. There are days where you need to be the encourager to others and days you need the encouragement from them.

In light of that, I want to respectfully ask something of you. I want to have a quick family conversation. We start worship right at 9:30 and 11:00 every Sunday. Unfortunately, we struggle a little to gather by that time, so I'm going to lovingly ask you if you would do your best to be in here and ready to go by 9:30 and 11:00. I ask that so that God would be praised by a growing number of us, so that you would not miss out on the blessing and opportunity to worship the Lord with your family, and so that those who are here would not be interrupted as they worship the Lord. I get there are days where you just can't get out the door on time, but please do your best to do so, so that together, as the family of God, we can worship our Lord, and encourage/infect one another in doing so.

Remember how far away you were. We can look at drugged-out rockers, gang members, and pagan astrologers and marvel that they ever came to faith in Christ. But here's a secret: **we were no different.** While our lives might have looked a little more normal and under control, we were just as far away from God as they were, ruling our own kingdom, and separated by an eternal gap we could do nothing about. But 2,000 years ago, in Bethlehem, a shepherd was born, and he would lead us and love us across that cavern that separated us from God. Each and every one of us who call Jesus Lord, and who have invited him to sit on the throne of our lives, are miracles, saved by the work this baby would grow up to do. You remember that often, you will give us your place on the throne and worship the one who sits there.

End with worship song.