

Series: THE INVASION OF PEACE

SUNDAY DECEMBER 20, 2020
PEACE... WHEN FOLLOWING GOD LEADS TO A BARN

Matthew 2

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1. We humans have been fascinated with the stars since the beginning of time. The study of the **facts** about stars is called **astronomy**; you know, how many there are, how far away they are, how they're organized—things like that. But sometimes the study of stars has dipped into **astrology**—that is, that the positions of the stars in the sky affects everyday events on this planet—and in our lives.

-Starwatchers have **always** noticed that the planets moved around the **sun**—the star we live next to—but that the other stars stayed the same.

- a. The high power telescopes of the past 100 years or so have shown us things that both astronomers and astrologers could never see. For example, some stars are **immense**—like **Pistol Star**--100 times as big as our sun—and 10 million times as bright!

-What fascinates me is that we are just now, with these massive telescopes, seeing the light of stars that are **millions** of light years away. In fact, one of them—Icarus — is 5 **billion** light years from earth. The light from that star started making it's way to earth when there was **nothing** here! Does that creep anyone out besides me?

- b. The word **star** is now used to refer to a person whose become popular or well known because they do something well; as in **rock star, hockey star, football star, reality TV stars**—and, of course, **Movie stars**—with an entire sidewalk in Hollywood dedicated to them.

-Most people have a least **one** star of this variety that they've followed. There was a woman in a previous church who followed **Elvis**—and had a huge **velvet Elvis** painting in her living room! Some of you followed Justin Bieber—and even went to hear him—and screamed when he sang. **You know you did!** And I'm also guessing that some of you followed a star who **deeply** disappointed you! Follow almost star long enough, and that will happen.

- c. As you know, the Christmas story talks about a group of people who followed a star to find Jesus. Most collections of Christmas cards have an image of 3 men riding camels, wearing weird hats—usually silhouetted against the night sky. It's actually an **amazing** story—with history that dates back over 500 years. They're called **magi** or **wise men**.

-Here's the deal; they **expected** a king—born to royalty—kinda like Prince George. What they **found** was a baby born in, well, a **barn**—laid in a feeding trough. By the time they actually arrived, this baby **King** and his Mom and Dad were living in the equivalent of a basement apartment in Bethlehem. **Were they disappointed?** Let's read the story and find out!

-But let me give you this principle: **Don't look at the exterior of *any* situation and decide what God is up to!**

2. **After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 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. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has 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 shepherd 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 search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." 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. 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 worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12 NIV)**

-Now, let's just take this apart, piece by piece. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This was where David, the best-known king of Israel was born and then tended sheep in the surrounding hills. This is what it looks like *now*. The name means **house of bread**—and it's where Samuel, the prophet, anointed David as king. It was only 5 or 6 miles from Jerusalem—about a 2 hour walk.

- a. All of this happened during the reign of Herod—known in history as Herod the Great. We talked about him last week. You have to remember--He wasn't called **Herod the Great** because he was a truly great person; it was because he built a **lot** of amazing things—many of which have become tourist attractions in the Holy Land.

-Herod was made king of the Jews by Caesar Augustus—mainly because he had defeated an enemy of Rome, the Parthians, and driven them out of Jerusalem. It was because of his indebtedness to Augustus that he built the magnificent port city on the Mediterranean Sea just north of Tel Aviv—and called it **Caesarea!**

-Now, Herod had **some** good in him—but it almost always came out when he was trying enhance his reputation—or **get** something from the people he ruled—or **his** boss—Rome. He built some **amazing** things—no doubt about that—things that people are still amazed by. One tourist to the Holy Land said, **"I came to walk where Jesus walked—and saw what Herod built!"**

-But what we see in this story of Jesus isn't Herod the warrior or Herod the builder—it's Herod the Paranoid. A king who would stop at nothing to protect the biggest deal in his life: his role as King of the Jews. When anything threatened that—he literally went nuts! As I told you last week, he murdered two of his wives, his mother in law,

his brother in law—and three sons because he thought they had their eyes on the throne.

- b. Now, I'm telling you this just so you'll know what kind of a powder keg the Magi walked into. Let me explain **why** their presence created such a stir. First: **we three kings of orient are** is wrong. Their names weren't Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. -The title **magi** gives it away. There were Parthians—from Persia—and probably descendants of the **magi** or **wise men** that the prophet Daniel led. These guys were the best educated people in that day. They were the **kingmakers** in **Parthia**—enemies of Rome—and therefore, Herod.

-Here's what I know; there were **more** than 3 magi! This journey they made was 1150 kilometers—and likely took them about 3 months. People of this stature would have a caravan—likely of 100 or more—to serve them, cook for them, put up their tents, and guarantee their safety. This was a **big** deal—and they likely had a small army. Anyone ever heard of or seen Persian horses? They're **massive!** And that's what they would've likely been riding on—with camels and donkeys to carry the equipment.

- c. So, put all these pieces together; 1) dignified kingmakers, 2) traveling with as many as 100 others, 3) from an enemy country that Herod driven out of Palestine—now walking the streets of Jerusalem asking, "Hey! Does anyone know where the newborn **King of the Jews is? We know he's here—cause we saw his star!**

-And then these electrifying words: **WE'VE COME TO WORSHIP HIM!** That was like lighting a fuse in a bomb factory. And that totally explains why... **When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.**

- d. Herod's next move—to ask for the advice of the religious professionals--s a little strange given the fact that for him, religion and God, were a political move to gain favour. But his paranoia kicked in, so he checked out what the **magi** said with the religious professionals. He knew that the prophets had written extensively about the Messiah or **Anointed King sent from God.** And, of course, the scholars knew exactly where He was to come from—and quoted the passage from Micah 5:2.

-Now, Herod **could** have said, "Wow! If God has been working this plan for 1000s of years, **I** certainly don't want to stand in His way!" But he didn't. I mean, after all—he'd already murdered a bunch of family members to keep his crown—why not the Messiah?! So he sent the Magi off to **find** the Messiah for him—so he could go and murder him—and likely them as well.

3. It's this **next** part of the story that I think shows how the **Invasion of Peace** looked at this intersection between God and humans—and, to be honest, has **always** worked—pretty much all through the Bible, and most certainly in **our** lives. Let me put it like this: God is **always** good, **always** loving, **always** generous, , **always** kind and faithful, but doesn't usually work through **happily ever after** scenarios.

-First, the Bible isn't a fairy tale; it's the true account of God's invention in history. Evil and chaos is too deeply entrenched in our world for an intervention of peace to go smoothly.

Finally—and this is **huge: God is not a helicopter parent who swoops in to shield us from tough experiences**—He works **through** them.

- a. Now, here's how that principle applies to this story. There's evidence that this star the Magi saw was not a chance thing that one fanatic brought to their attention. I think it goes way deeper than that.

-The summary of their message to Jerusalem and to Herod has rung down through history:

“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.”

(Matthew 2:2 NIV)

-Notice how specific this is. They didn't just see a light—or a star that aroused their curiosity. The star is called **his star**. And it was clear that there had been a birth—and that the baby born was the **King of the Jews**. And it wasn't just to satisfy their curiosity. **We...have come to WORSHIP him.**

-Let's talk about the star. There are a bunch of theories about what it was. Scholars have speculated about a **lot** of scenarios—the alignment of some stars with Jupiter, a slow-moving comet—but the best explanation for it isn't a natural one. It was the blinding light from the angels who announced Jesus' birth to the shepherds on the hillsides of Bethlehem.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (Luke 2:8-9 NIV)

-Immediately after that, thousands upon thousands of angels filled the sky, announcing:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:14 NIV)

-There are several occurrences like that in the Bible—and the appearances of these sort occur with a light so blinding a person can't even look at it. It would make sense, wouldn't it, that a sky full of angels would so bright and intense it could be seen for hundreds of miles. Whatever the star was, the sign to them was **very** clear.

- b. Now, sometimes if you're unsure about something—and your reputation is on the line, you reserve making public statements—and investing a lot of time and money --until you check it out. These guys—who are described as **WISE men** are not at all cautious; they're confident. They **had** to be—because they invested too much for this to be just a plausible theory.

-They gave up over 6 months of their lives—traveled 1150 km or 700 miles through tough, dangerous country to Bethlehem and back. Imagine paying for a whole **caravan** of up to 100 people on a six month trip.

-Something else. What if they got their signals mixed? What if they, the kingmakers, the smartest people in the room—were **wrong**? The **magi** were well-known—and I'm guessing that a lot of people knew about this trip.

-What if they had to slink back into the country and admit that they had wasted 6 months of their lives and invested an immense amount of money in a mission that failed? What if the **wise** men had to say, "We were mistaken!"

- c. So they **saw the star**, they **planned the trip**, they **made the trip**, and they **found the baby King**. Were they **underwhelmed** with what they found? What **was** underwhelming, I think, was the complete ignorance in Jerusalem. If I'd just made a long trip like this, I'd be thinking, "Surely the Jewish people would be aware of this king—and celebrating that he'd finally come!" But the response was, "What are you **talking** about? **What King?**"

4. What you **don't** hear in this account is **any** uncertainty or disappointment at all! **They knew what they had seen!** So Herod gets the news from the Priests and teachers of the law that, in fact, the Messiah's birth was to take place in Bethlehem—just 5 miles away—a 2 hour walk from Jerusalem. And when they pulled their caravan together—that same star appeared to guide them the rest of the way. Their reaction was **pure ecstasy**. The original account of this uses all these superlatives—**they were filled with exceeding great joy!** These guys were **dancing in the streets!**

-Now, this passage says that the star went ahead of them—and then stopped over the home where Mary and Joseph and Jesus were living at that time.

-Now, here's what is **really** important for us to understand. This was the climax—not of a trip to Bethlehem from Babylon—but a journey that had started 500 years earlier. Let me just lay out the details:

*This was a climax of a **long** journey—longer, I'm thinking, than the journey from—presumably, Babylon—to Bethlehem. I think it started way before that—with Daniel. Almost 550 years before Jesus' birth, Babylon conquered Jerusalem and Daniel's family was killed and he was hauled off to serve Nebuchadnezzar.

*Daniel had had his family killed—and then was deported to Babylon.

*Daniel interpreted a dream Neb had about the four empires that would precede the coming of the Messiah—and was given a place of high authority.

*Daniel served Darius, the king of the Persian Empire who came next—and became the head of the magi or wisemen.

*In the process of all this, Daniel wrote a book about his vision for the future of Jerusalem and the world of that day—and the coming of the Messiah—in **stunning** detail.

*With the authority and influence Daniel had in both Babylonia and Persia—I think it's safe to assume that Daniel's book and other writings didn't just make it into the Jewish Scriptures—but stayed on to influence the Magi—who continued to have a role in Persia.

And in that book, it's clear that this Anointed King will do away with the kingdoms of this world—and build a kingdom that will never end.

- a. 500 years later—at the exact time Daniel said the Messiah would come, these Magi saw the star—**His star**—in the East and followed it without a moments hesitation. What did they expect when they got to Jerusalem—Daniel's home town—and then Bethlehem? Probably more than a poor young couple living in a small home caring for a young baby—a baby who had to be laid in a feeding trough because **no one would make room for him!**

-The **difference** is that they were **wise men**. And **wise people know that you can't look at the surface of anything and make a call about what God is doing.**

They'd been around kings all their lives—and they **knew** that people who **seem** impressive are really just scrubbed up human beings with expensive clothes draped over them. The people around them are **paid well** to do what they're told and treat them like they are important.

- b. Maybe what reveals their character and the contents of their hearts more than anything else is that fact that these prestigious visitors, wise men, recognized who Jesus really is—even as a baby, bowed down ...and **worshipped** Him.

-You know what the word **worship** means, don't you? It's a short form of **worth-ship**. To **worship** something—whether it's your car, your boat, your pet, or your boyfriend—which **could** be the same—means to give it or him...or her... a place of **ultimate** worth in your life. That's why **sacrifice** is always an act of worship. What you **worship** is typically where you make your sacrifices of your time, your money, and even your reputation. You lay it **all** out there!

-To worship God is not to just sing Him a few songs and pray a few prayers. Worship **changes** your priorities. It's understanding the **power** and the **kindness** and the **grace** and the **forgiveness** of the God we serve—**AND** recognizing Him when He's in a role that is out of character. You know, as in being nursed—diapers changed by a young Mom in her teens.

-This was much more profound than even **they** thought it was. They're thinking, "This little baby will grow up to be the greatest king ever—a better leader than David, Solomon, Darius—and Caesar Augustus! I'm pretty sure they didn't see that little baby in Mary's arms as He's described by Paul:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17 NIV)

5. And **that's** why these **magi**—because they **truly were wise men**—gave Him their best. Worship causes that:

Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matthew 2:11 NIV)

-Gold is always associated with royalty and ultimate value. Frankincense was usually associated with worship. They kept it in the temple to sprinkle on things offered to God. Myrrh is the puzzler—because it's associated with death. It was mixed with wine as a sedative and offered to Jesus. They also used it to prepare bodies for burial.

-Without digging into the deeper meaning of all this—the important thing about their worship is that **they didn't just offer nice words and give Mary and Joseph a card that said "It's a BOY! Congratulations!"** on it. See, there are people who think that it's okay to keep everything valuable for yourself and then come with empty hands to worship God. What that says is, "**I'm** the person of worth, here!" That's **not** true...and it's **not** okay.

-To **worth-ship** someone means that you give your best. At the surface level, it looks like their gifts were God's means of making it possible for Mary, Joseph and Jesus to escape Herod under the cover of darkness and then survive in Egypt for the next few years. But it was **way** deeper. Imagine investing at the **ground level** in the One who would split history, change the world forever, and save **everyone** and **everything!**

-And **that's why they're called WISE MEN.** People who are truly wise see what **no one else sees.** They **understand what other's don't understand.** They see immense worth where others see poverty and scandal—and pretend not to notice. They see that God honours those who focus—not on **doing things right**—which the religious professionals did, but on **doing the right THINGS!**

a. Now, here's where I want to click this story into your life—and mine. How many of you have ever been disappointed; like the path you were on didn't take you where you were hoping to go? Or what you **expected** didn't materialize? Sometimes we follow a star—expect a Saviour--and end up at a barn. That is, some messy place that doesn't at **all** look like we thought it would.

-Years ago, Lori and I felt God nudging us to plant a church. We felt very much drawn toward reaching people in North America who were far from God and would likely never enter the doors of a church. So we did some research and realized that the Pacific Northwest had more unchurched people than anywhere else in the US. So—we traced out that lead for some time—and it led to a dead end street.

-We were asked to consider leading a church in Regina, SK—and we worked with them for 6 months. We thought, **This is it!** And it fell through—and it was someone from **that** context that led to us coming to Markham. After an exciting run of 11 years, that led unexpectedly to a barn—a dark messy place—from which we, with a small team of others, planted a church in one of the most unchurched areas of North America: Toronto.

-I would never **begin** to compare our journey to that of the **magi**—I don't study the stars, I've never done magic and I've never traveled with a caravan for 600 miles. Here's what I know. Any time you listen to—and follow God, there will be amazing times—when it feels like God is **crushing** every obstacle in the path. And there will **also** be pain. And darkness. And mystery. And exhilaration.

-But, **peace does not depend on how well things go and how right you were about the direction.** The peace—and the joy comes from your worship—the worship

of obedience, of having a **just say the word and I'll do it** attitude, as well as the worship of acknowledging **WHO** is first—Who is **always** first. And peace and joy **also** comes from the gift you bring. From making a **great, wise** investment of your time, your energy, your devotion and your possessions.

- b. I don't know what these guys, these magi knew about God. See, fire was the big deal for them. You can see a **little** into who they were by the fact that we get the word **magi-c** from their name. The leadership associated with their name is seen in the word **magi-strate**—which also comes from their name. But the **biggest** thing about these guys is the openness of their hearts, and their willingness to lay **everything** on the line—**risk it all**—and then **persevere with great confidence!**

-But then, that's exactly what Daniel—their **far off** mentor did. Life was going along quite smoothly for him in Jerusalem. I mean, he came from a family of means—perhaps royalty. And then his family was slaughtered—and he was hauled off to a place with foreign gods, a foreign language, and foreign customs. It would've made **sense** for Daniel to say, "God, if that's how you're going to treat me, I'm not interested in You!"

-But he didn't. He had a center line down his highway. **He didn't just look at the exterior of his situation and make a call without finding out what God was up to.** When he opened his life to the power and grace of God in the middle of his pain—Daniel found **peace**—and he **brought** peace. -He served God first--and he served the kings he was forced to work with—with respect and power. In the process these pagan kings were brought face to face with the God who runs **everything!** Daniel's influence was **still** being felt, 500 years later—and it's **still** being felt today—2500 years later.

-And these magi, these wisemen—**returned the favour!** They impacted not just Jerusalem—but the world. Remember how the prophecy about the Messiah in Isaiah 9?

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. ...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:2,6 NIV)

The greatest lights in the universe are called...? Well, they're not LED—they're **stars**. Does it make sense that people walking in darkness 700 miles away would see the greatest light of all—and be LED to the Wonderful Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father—and the Prince of Peace?

-I don't think their understanding of God and what He was up to went very deep—but they were teachable—open. Know why? **CAUSE WISE PEOPLE ARE LIKE THAT!** God can do almost anything with an open heart—with people who don't need to nail down the edges and be right about everything. How are **you** doing on that?

6. Can I just mention what concerns me when it comes to **who** we follow, **how** we make our decisions, and **where** we get our advice, take our cues, and find our peace—or at least our

culture's version of it? We're always encouraged to look at **the STARS**. That is, celebrities who shine brighter than the other people in the arenas we are fascinated with.

-A **lot** of people follow rock stars, sports stars, movie stars, fashion stars—the successful people who've made it big—made lots of money, become the envy of all the wannabes—like you and me. But the list keeps changing—you know, from Elvis to the **Beatles to the Rolling Stones to Lady Gaga and beyond**. In money, it's Bill Gates—and Jeff Bezos. Maybe the next star will be the creator of the COVID vaccine!

- a. Case in point, many of you know Sean Connery—best known for his role as Agent 007, “**Bond...James Bond!**” He died on Halloween, 2020. They just recently revealed the cause of death—old age and pneumonia. His wife said, “You know—he was suffering from dementia—and **that's no way to live!**”

-But that's the bottom line, isn't it? Follow someone—and if you look close enough—not only do they **not** have peace, most aren't sure what the point of life actually is. Over the years, the **magi—wise men** had seen powerful, wealthy people—who did great things—**just like Herod**—come and go. Most of them way, **way** more impressed with themselves than God was.

-Maybe that's why—when they were encouraged to lay it all on the line—give up 6 months of their lives—travel to a foreign country—and use up a chunk of their money and time on this planet to follow a **great** light—Someone who's kingdom would last forever—they **jumped at the chance!**

- b. So, by those standards...are you a **wise** person? Wise enough to see that you look **older** in every selfie you take? Wise enough to see **who's** real—and who's not? Wise enough to invest your life, your time, your money—your **WORTH-SHIP** in Someone who will never do what you expect—and then do what you **never** expect. Someone who may lead you to follow a star and end up at a barn—but will **never, ever** disappoint you. And who will always take you home—a **different way than you came!**

-Wise people don't **wish** upon stars—they look for the **right** ones—and **follow** them. My prayer for you and me is that we will have that kind of courage...and wisdom—and devotion. And that we will find the **PEACE** that only comes from having the One lead you—who **knows where He's going!**