

Series: Advent: Experiencing peace THROUGH hard times.

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12

(App to get lesson/slides, ask

questions. Color Pg)

Title: A Star, Strangers, and a Baby King

I especially liked how Bill asked in his sermon; *“Is there anything in your life that only God can do?”* This time of year, for so many, turns into an emotional journey, doesn't it? These **fragile tensions** in our little worlds seem to so easily crop up and we find ourselves holding our breath desperate for **some profound peace** that we hope will change everything. It seems like fear drives you through the season, but faith draws you into it...Advent is strange like that. It's the season when we light candles and sing about joy and peace, yet every year it's typical for some if not most to land right in the middle of real-life mess: deadlines, family stress, unanswered questions--heck a world that just feels dark in too many places. We celebrate the arrival of Jesus' Light, but we do it within a kind of dark tension. Somehow, amazingly, Advent teaches us that true peace isn't the absence of hard things - it's the presence of “*Emmanuel*” Jesus, right in the middle of them.

On a clear night up at the lake several months back, friends we met in the RV park came over and told us the space station would be visible that evening, its path due to travel directly over top of us. It's not a once-in-a-lifetime event, but it was pretty cool watching that star-like light move on a path you could actually follow across the sky. For some people, looking up into the stars and seeing something so unusual would seem like a sign pointing to something life changing. That's exactly what happens in the Bible story we're diving into today as God raised a Star in the night sky prophesied by [Balaam](#) back in the book of Numbers 24:7 for all the world to see. A star which would lead a group of strangers to a Baby King. It might be significant to the story for you to know that Balaam, by the way, was not an Israelite, nevertheless he was a prophet from Pethor near the Euphrates River north of the city of Babylon in Mesopotamia. The same region our stargazing strangers are from.

Advent history has captured three mysterious guys from a far-off land who see the star and follow it to the newborn king. We see them standing or kneeling quietly in nativity scenes and on Christmas Cards, holding shiny gifts. But if we peel back

the surface and step into the actual context, this isn't just a cute holiday tale. The Magi (the wise men) are far more significant to Jesus' story than we usually think. In essence, the Magi were not searching for a star; they were responding to a sign **they had been historically and religiously primed to recognize**. Their journey is packed with real-life drama, danger, political tension, and eye-opening surprises, the kind of situations not unlike Advent invites us to sit in.

As we gaze upon the Magi this morning and follow them, risking everything to kneel before a newborn King. Their perilous journey presents us with our own complex imagery: how can such profound peace be encountered in such contentious circumstances? We might be tempted to linger in this complexity. While the story of the Wise Men following a star to a Baby King appears as this **paradox of peace found amidst a journey of strife**, my ultimate aim today is not complexity, but clarity. The single, simple profound truth we must grab hold of today is this...

BIG IDEA: To follow Jesus is to share Him with everyone.

No matter where you're from, what you've done, or how far you feel from God, Jesus is Hospitable, He's Welcoming. He's not just for the insiders or whom we often refer to as God's people. He's for the outcast, the seekers, and even those who **are literally or simply feel lost** in the tension of life. That's the point of everything Matthew has written in this book as Balaam's prophecy is fulfilled, here in chapter 2:1-12.

The Setup: Strangers Show Up Looking for a King (Verses 1-2)

Jesus has just been born in Bethlehem, a small town only about 6 miles from the big city of **Jerusalem** where strangers show up at the palace and Herod "**the Great**" is the King in charge. He's a powerful and corrupt ruler and he's somewhat paranoid and ruthlessly protective of his power. Some of you may relate to him like some bosses who fear being outshone, envious of the talent around them. The types who claim others' achievements as their own and oppress those who show greater potential. All of a sudden these strangers roll into his domain with all kinds of riches and rare gifts to pay homage to a king that is NOT Herod! Who are these strangers? Matthew tells very little to identify them. They're from the East, far away and they're

wise. Which actually speaks profoundly to their identity. Because, the point is, like their ancestor Balaam, they're Gentiles, outsiders - not Jewish, not part of God's "chosen people" Israel.

Historical records indicate to us; they're literally "wise" guys, most likely from Babylon, they're extremely educated in astronomy, philosophy, science, they're scientific theologians of all the world's religions, making deductions concerning divinity. They've come all this way with a conviction based upon a 1400-year-old Star prophecy of Balaam, that a significant King has been born and that King was directly related to the Jewish people. They've come seeking a higher truth, they ask; *"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."* Bam! The hammer drops in Herod's mind, "king" - "worship." Herod is called "King, Herod the Great" but these guys are looking for the REAL King of the Jews. And that star was God's way of guiding them, like a divine GPS saying, *"This way to something so rare that it will change your life-that it will change the world."* These are foreigners who are seeking Jesus. The story shows right off the bat that Jesus isn't just for the Jewish people, God is drawing people in, to the manger from everywhere.

The Drama Builds: Trouble in the Palace (Verses 3-8)

Things get tense quick in Jerusalem because Herod realizes all those gifts aren't for him and hearing about this "new king", he's more than disturbed and so is all of Jerusalem. Why? Because Herod's got the power, but he's insecure and insecurity becomes volatile. He's like that bully at school who freaks out over competition and gets angry at the thought of losing his popularity. Herod calls all his chief priests and teachers of the law or the insiders, his own Magi (so to speak) who know the Bible inside out. *"Where's the Messiah supposed to be born?"* he asks. *"In Bethlehem in Judea"* and the quote a 700yr old prophecy from Micah 5: *"But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old from ancient days. Therefore, he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor*

has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD.”

The reality is that Herod's insiders (the religious leaders) know the prophecies, even after having the evidence of this star, they don't budge upon hearing the news while the outsiders keep seeking. **Herod makes moves though.** He arranges a secret meeting with the Magi and pretending to be God fearing he says, “*Go find this child and report back so I can worship him too.*” His moves are a plot to eliminate the threat to himself and put these strangers in his line of fire. The tension is thick now and notice the conflicts arising here...it's now more than mere political intrigue. Herod has heard God's promise from the prophecy and escalated this to a direct assault on God and His Son. The wise Men discover not only that they're in the wrong place but also those who gave them the answer they were looking for, didn't seem to care. The “*outsiders*” are getting it right while the “*insiders*” are missing it. The Jewish keepers of these truths were not watching, not seeking. Even after the evidence of the star, they took no action to lead the way. The Scholars possessed head knowledge but not heart knowledge of God. The detachment rendered them incapable of introducing God to the world, even when the signs and opportunity were literally at their doorstep.

Notice what happens here though with the Strangers from the Far East, it's ever so subtle. The Magis' seeking hearts were a necessary key but more than this... somewhere they had gone wrong and how were they going to get right? They actually needed the scriptures to get them to their final destination. Whatever extraordinary uses like a star God employs in leading, He always brings us to His word (The Bible) in order that we might meet the “Living Word”, His Son. There's no way to God, except through the Christ of God, who is delivered to us in the Word of God. A **star** and the **word** of God led these outsiders to Jesus, this powerful discovery ensures that Jesus's arrival is practical proof: salvation is for **everyone who seeks for Him**, even when those closest to the promise miss it entirely.

The Peak: Joy, Gifts, and True Worship (Verses 9-11)

Now the story hits a high point. The star goes ahead of them just six miles down the road to the small town of Bethlehem, to a house where **Mary** is with Jesus. The scripture says they were “*overjoyed*” when the star stopped on that little house in Bethlehem. They see the child, and what do they do? They bow down and worship, these **wise strangers** realize that worship is the first reasonable response. They didn’t come in as arrogant educated men; they came in as humble strangers in need of a savior offering themselves first. Putting all the pieces of their journey together, they open their treasures: gold, frankincense and myrrh, hints toward Jesus’ royalty, divinity, and future sacrifice on the cross. If you know the whole story, despite all the ensuing drama and tension and tragedy that follows, **this is the climax**, the turning point where seeking turns to finding, and revelation leads to adoration and the tone shifts from tension to peace; Emmanuel, “*God*” was with them.

That same **Peace** is with you. To have peace doesn't mean the absence of trouble. In the middle of our tension...whether it's personal anxiety, relational conflict, or even global unrest...it’s the experience of **Shalom**, a **wholeness**, a **well-being**, a **flourishing** inside your core that remains steady despite chaotic external and sometimes even internal circumstances. This peace is not a temporary feeling, but a profound state of trust and centeredness rooted in something beyond difficulty, anchored by the promise of Jesus in the middle of hard things according to John 14:25-27, “*These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.*”

It was a small trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, but spiritually, it was huge. This is the Peace that the strangers felt...Outsiders from afar kneeling before a baby King, the Messiah, under a Star while the plots and schemes of man were coming against them. And what’s to say of those who knew, who had solid knowledge of prophecies, who were disinterested in travelling just 6 miles to go and worship? Matthew organizes the story to emphasize the peacefulness of worship over earthly power and greatness and turmoil. These Gentile seekers of a Baby King

arrived with treasures of the earth in their hands, but didn't they leave with heavenly treasures in their hearts? The story really doesn't ever end.

Not The End: God's Protection and ongoing care (Verse 12)

The Christmas narrative in Matthew 2 is less a tale of tranquil nativity scenes and more of a raw account of **real-life tension, fear, and peaceful resolve**. The conflict set up by the arrival of the strangers - pitting **Herod's murderous schemes** against **God's redemptive purpose** resolves, even escalates into a demonstration of **ongoing divine care**.

- The Magi are **warned in a dream**: "*Do not return to Herod.*"
- **Joseph was also warned in a dream** to "*flee to Egypt*", escaping Herod's assault, taking Mary and the newborn King to safety, until Herod's death.

Looking back to Matthew's original readers of his gospel. They were an audience facing genuine personal crisis and national turmoil. They were struggling under Roman occupation and navigating deep societal conflict. For them, this story would have been a lifeline, a powerful testament of two absolute truths:

1. God's immediate and absolute presence and ongoing care in the midst of their mess.
2. The certainty that no human plan or ruler, however powerful, however corrupt, could thwart a predetermined divine purpose.

That peace, that resolve, that immovable will of God, set the stage for the book's grand finale, emphasizing the universal scope of the Gospel: The Great Commission to "*go and make disciples of all nations*" (cf. Matthew 28:18-20). A fundamental question for us this morning: "*Is the story as powerful a testament to you, today?*" **Those with ears to hear and eyes to see have peace to share**. The ultimate challenge and invitation for us this season is the Gospel's call for us to cultivate **eyes to see & ears to hear**. Advent encourages us to look past the "**glitz and glamour**" and the accompanying tension. It invites us to use these powerful, ancient stories not to judge our circumstances, but to bridge the gaps between ourselves and others. True Peace doesn't come from perfect gatherings. It comes from perceiving God's inclusive plan in **imperfect gatherings**, a plan powerful enough to turn our deepest

tensions into testimony. The essence of possessing the peace Jesus provides amidst tension and strife lies in this truth: **Following Jesus and Sharing Him with everyone is the way we actually experience the peace Jesus promises.**

In closing, the morning challenges us with a few critical questions:

1. When we speak of becoming the offering, sacrificing our comfort and transforming our lives into a beacon for others: *“What substantial choices or costs must we embrace today to truly shine like that guiding star, leading others specifically to Jesus?”*
2. If our church family is to shine so brightly that seekers cannot miss the King: *“What tangible steps must we take to cut through the noise of conflict, tension, and struggle in our community? How can our faith family collectively demonstrate the King's presence in a world overwhelmed by strife?”*
3. If our peace is truly forged in the act of becoming an offering, then that peace must show up in our conflicts: *“What specific, difficult relationships or situations of strife in our week need to be approached not with anxiety, but with the posture of an offering? How does choosing Christ's peace change the actual words we use or the reactions we have in the tension of our daily lives?”*

I hope the story this morning has left you with a renewed vision: The peace of the Newborn King wasn't an escape from reality, but a profound gift of peace within reality that is accessible to all who seek Him.

Communion Liturgy:

The Lord's Table is a representation of just that...We gather in a season often marked by both **fear** that drives us and **faith** that draws us in to a table prepared for us where we remember, celebrate and participate in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And we demonstrate that He is for everyone who believes and is ready for those who seek HIM--like the Wise Men who were outsiders from far away, following a star to find Jesus, the newborn King. They brought gifts and worshiped Him, showing us that no one's too far, too different, or too lost to come to the Living

Christ. If you're new or visiting with us and seeking Jesus this morning, this table represents His invitation to you, no matter your background or where you've been, no matter how lost you believe yourself to be. Jesus gave His body and blood for all who believe in Him.

In the tension of that night Jesus was betrayed, He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and said, *"This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* After eating, He took the cup, saying, *"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for you."* In this we are reminded that **peace is not the absence of trouble**, but a profound wholeness and trust, rooted in the promises of God. Just as the Wise Men found Jesus and offered their worship and gifts, we come to offer our worship and gifts and remember His Sacrifice and acknowledge His gift of salvation, open to all who seek Him. COME.

"Drawn to the Manger" Plays thru Communion (a song written by Gary Farmer)

Sunday to Monday Connection:

- **Question:** See questions in the lesson above and the takeaways below.
- **Next Step:** Discuss questions in the lesson above and the takeaways below.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to investigate further what all this might mean for you, please come talk with any of our leaders, or the person who brought you.

Takeaways to discuss with your people (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

Quotes related to this passage:

- **Balaam:** "Balaam was a prophet referenced in both Old and New Testaments, with the book of Numbers providing the most detailed account of his life. He came from Pethor, a location on the Upper Euphrates in northern Mesopotamia¹, and enjoyed a widespread reputation throughout the ancient Near East as someone capable of pronouncing curses. When King Balak of Moab witnessed Israel's military victory over the Amorites, he hired Balaam to curse the Israelites. However, the central tension of the narrative emerges from a fundamental conflict: though Balaam came to curse Israel, he could only bless them, as God exercised sovereignty over his words. Before reaching Moab, Balaam encountered an angel of Yahweh through his donkey, a creature that miraculously spoke to redirect him. Despite Balak's repeated attempts, Balaam pronounced four blessing oracles rather than curses, with the final one predicting Israel's dominion over surrounding kingdoms including Moab itself. The biblical portrait of Balaam grows more

complicated beyond Numbers. Later tradition records that Balaam advised the Midianites to lead Israel into idolatry at Peor, resulting in a devastating plague (Num 31:16). He was eventually killed by the Israelites during their conflict with Midian (Num 31:8). The New Testament reinforces this darker legacy: Peter describes him as one who “loved gain from wrongdoing” (2 Pet 2:15–16), while Revelation portrays him as teaching Balak to place stumbling blocks before Israel through idolatry and sexual immorality (Rev 2:14). Balaam thus represents a paradoxical figure—a non-Israelite who functioned as God’s prophet yet remained subject to divine commands—whose greed ultimately corrupted his initial obedience, transforming him from an unwilling instrument of blessing into an architect of Israel’s spiritual compromise.”

Considerations for discussion leaders:

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the “sweet spot”, spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

Other Articles/Songs/Videos: Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

Bibliography (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

- The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016)
- Chris A. Rollston, “Balaam,” in Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2000), 144.
- John H. Sailhamer, Old Testament History, Zondervan Quick Reference Library (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1998), 46.
- Richard R. Losch, in All the People in the Bible: An A–Z Guide to the Saints, Scoundrels, and Other Characters in Scripture (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 54.