

LOVE THAT CHANGES THE WORLD**Matthew 2:1-12****(Read Matthew 2:1-12)**

Intro: In the 1950s there were Gillette's Friday Night Fights for those who had the relatively new device called the television. My parents, being good BIC people, and probably not able to afford one, we did not yet have a TV, and if we had, we likely would not have been allowed to watch the fights. Boxing is just too much like war. In the late 90s ESPN resurrected the fights – I think it was called Fight Night, and it ran until a couple years ago. I was always amused at the people who watched the fights – from dyed in the wool BICs to “little old ladies” who could not and would not miss their Friday night appointment with the TV.

Over the past decade or two we have a new Friday fight offering. It is called the Black Friday Fights where shoppers come to blows or worse over a purposely limited number of must-have items. It's crazy! So crazy, in fact, that you can actually find this kind of stuff online, and even yearly compilations the best and worst. One meme cynically says “Black Friday: Because on in America do people trample each other for sales just one day after being thankful for what they already have.” It's unofficially the beginning of the Christmas season – ostensibly the season of peace and goodwill – but we have headlines and memes that read “SEASONS BEATINGS”.

In so many ways we've gotten off track with the real meaning of this season. And even when TV shows and Christmas movies try to pull us back to the “true meaning” of Christmas – they miss it by a million miles. Their version of true meaning often includes any or all of the following mixture of conjured up feel-good tales of: romance, giving, romance, peace, romance, mysterious Santa-like characters who bring everyone together, romance, reconciliation, romance, and maybe a tiny and vague nod to the biblical origin of Christmas, but mostly ROMANCE! And because they never really get to the actual meaning of Christmas, it leaves the viewer with a false impression that risks taking him/her into the doldrums on December 26 when the thrill and rush of the Holiday is in the rearview mirror.

Christ Followers should know to keep the focus of Christ's first coming centered on his love for the entire world. And from that, help us to keep our focus on loving him and each other as we come together to worship the Christ Child. I want to remind us of this today on the Christmas Eve morning, and I'm going to do it in a slightly different way. I will have about 2/3rds of this talk and then we will celebrate communion and then finish the sermon.

Only Matthew has a record of the visit of the Magi I read about as I began this message. We see them described as three kings in Christmas carols, and as three wise men in the KJV. But they were Magi according to the original Greek, and in case you ever wondered, Magi were a priestly class in Persia. These men, may have been three in number, and maybe they were more than that. But they brought three gifts that are recorded – Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh – and that, plain and simply, is where the number of three Magi comes from.

The Magi traveled some 1,500 – 2,000 miles to see the King of the Jews. When they finally found him, perhaps as much as two years after the birth of Jesus, they responded with joy, worship and gifts. This is much different from the approach people often take today. Some expect God to come looking for *them* and to explain himself and fill them in on what he's up to. Some want God to prove he exists at all, or if they have that issue ironed out, for him to give **THEM** gifts, rather than the other way around. Things like riches, smooth sailing, long life, and anything else good that they can come up with.

The words that many churches have on their marquees this season is “Wise Men Still Seek Him” and that's very true. And truly wise people still come together to seek and worship Jesus for who he is and not what they can get. We are to love Christ because he first loved us, not because he owes us something. The fact is, we owe him everything because of that love. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son. That love was the . . .

Love that changed Herod's world

- That is because it changes culture. While several Herods are mentioned in the Bible, The Herod here in our text is Herod the Great. He was named king over all of Palestine by the Roman Senate in about 37 B.C. and he ruled until his death in 4 B.C. At that time the “kingdom” was divided into three districts and his three sons each ruled one and we see them come up from time to time in the Gospels. Herod and his sons, who were also named Herod, were a picture of dysfunctionality. Theirs was a story of lies, murder, adultery, and every other

treachery you can think of. Being family didn't make you safe – if a Herod found you threatening, family or not, your life was in danger.

- Although Herod the Great was a ruthless and evil man, he also supervised the renovation of the temple, making it much larger and more beautiful, as well as overseeing other building projects in Jerusalem and in the districts that made up Palestine. This made him popular with many Jews – even though he was not, himself, a Jew by ancestry. In actuality he was an Idumaeon, descended from the Edomites, who were the descendants of Esau. He was given the title “King of the Jews” when the Romans placed him in power – so he was very threatened by these traveling Magi who came looking for the King of the Jews, and they didn't mean him.
- As I already pointed out, evil of every kind prevailed in Herod's reign and with the godlessness of the Roman and Greek culture the rot spread into society. It was into this chaos that Jesus came to transform the culture and demonstrate his love for a sin-sick human race.
- This love was also the . . .

Love that changed the Magi

- Because it changes people who are truly seeking God.
- Not much is known about these “wise men.” They were sometimes seen as sorcerers. They were ones called upon to interpret dreams, like the ones who stumped by Nebuchadnezzar's dream that only Daniel was able to decipher. They were seen to have special knowledge and abilities and often that came from their study of the stars in both astronomy AND astrology.
- As I already pointed out, the Magi came a very long way – seeking an earthly king – and in preparation they no-doubt came with a large entourage and expensive gifts. It seems clear that they knew this king was different; after all, you don't take a journey like this, with such costly things as precious metal and costly spices for just anyone. In the end they found he was more than an earthly sovereign, he was the King of kings and Lord of lords and worthy of more than homage – he was to be worshipped. He was God.
- Besides being transformed by the presence of the Christ Child, the Magi were also convinced by an angel to change their route home and not report to Herod as he had deviously required them to do. Instead, they skipped town and skipped returning to Herod.
- The Magi give a good pattern to be followed as they responded to the Love of God:
 - They sought after the King
 - They entered his presence
 - They bowed before him
 - They gave to him
 - They worshipped him
 - They responded with obedience.

This is the essence of worship – responding to the love of God.

Let's respond to that love now by celebrating communion.

Transition into communion STOP FOR COMMUNION

Resume with . . .

Communion reminds of the love that cause his body to be broken and his blood to be shed for us. It's a . . .

Love that changes us

- Am I like Herod? Do I love Jesus or hate him – or worse, fear him?
- Am I like the Magi? Do I truly worship him or merely go through the motions?
- Am I like the self-centered person of the world? Does he lead my life, or am I the one who allegedly in control?
- When Jesus was born into our world, people immediately began to react. His presence didn't soothe and comfort people. We've seen over these weeks that the arrival of God the son brought heart-ache and even condemnation. Theirs was not an easy road. For the shepherds their peaceful watching over the flocks by night was shattered by a choir of heavenly hosts. For the Magi it meant a tremendously long and arduous journey. For Herod it startled and disturbed him.

- The arrival of Jesus changed things. For some it awakened spiritual longings. For others, like Herod it brought fear and insecurity.
- If it is true that God entered our world when Jesus was born – and that is exactly what happened – we’d best not sit idly by, ignoring and rationalizing our inaction. We need to acknowledge Jesus as the rightful King of our lives.
- You see, he didn’t stay in the obscurity the manger symbolizes – his love wouldn’t allow that. That love would take him to the Cross where he would change eternity, by dying a criminal’s death, being laid in a borrowed tomb and defeating death by rising three days later.
- And that love is custom designed for each and every one of us. F. B. Meyer writes, “*God comes to us in the spheres with which they are most familiar. To Zacharias in the Temple, to the shepherds in the fields, to the wise men by the portent in the heavens. He knows just where to find us.*” When we go in search of the One born in the manger he reveals himself to us in exactly the way we need.

Conclusion: The wise men were overjoyed at finding the Christ Child. That’s because finding Jesus brings real joy – much deeper than anything the world offers. It’s a joy that comes from knowing the reality and the depth of God’s love. As we come to that realization, it changes us – individually and corporately. Have you been on a journey to find yourself, to find love, satisfaction, or some sense of what this life is all about? There’s joy at the end of that journey when you find Christ – it’s a result of the love that changes the world. Amen.