

December 10, 2023
The Second Sunday in Advent
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The Stories of Christmas-A Dark Story

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I imagine you've all heard this saying; "It's the most wonderful time of the year." I've heard it a couple times over the last week or two in my truck because I have the Andy Williams Christmas CD. And Andy Williams and many others have sung that song. "It's the most wonderful time of the year." Others speak of this time as a time of quote "Christmas magic." After all, we have things like "A miracle on 34th Street."

Yet this time of year, Advent, Christmas is a very dark season for many. Maybe the darkest of all. I would like you consider that it is during this time of the year that we have the highest rate of suicide. It is also at this time of year, that we have the highest rate of domestic abuse. Need I take you back in history to record some of the murders that also spike at this time of year? Last week we heard of two more mass shootings. But back in 2009, on Christmas Eve, maybe you remember that very dark story, the story that took place at a Salvation Army in North Little Rock, AR. There Major Philip Wise, age 40, was murdered at the door to the Salvation Army. He was murdered right in front of his three children. Three children who he and his wife had adopted because they came from an extremely abusive family. Why was he murdered? Simply, robbery. The person wanted his money. Or maybe you remember December 14th, 2012. Let me see just three little words: Sandy Hook Elementary. You know where that guy Adam Lanza, a 20-year-old, first shot his mother then went to the school and fatally shot 20 children and six adults. Then he committed suicide when the police arrived.

Murder, dark world, and Christmas; it's an ancient story. Matthew records the first time that it happened in the New Testament. We read it was quote "in the days of Herod the King." What happened? Well, we read: "Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem." They came to Jerusalem asking a question: 'Where is he who has been born the King of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When we take a look at those

simple verses, we find one of the most interesting and shall I say loaded accounts in Scripture.

The question is where to start. I would say, how about the wise men? You see, there's a big question here. How did the wise men know about this King of the Jews and the star in the East and all of that stuff? Modern theologians, and modern critics of the Bible would say, 'oh, these were guys into astrology. You know that the stars dictate what's going on in our life.' That is so, absolutely, false that it makes me, well I think of some words from the Book of Revelation where God wants to vomit the people out of his mouth because they're so bad. It actually is a most powerful verse.

How did these wise men who saw this star know that it represented the King of the Jews? I can answer that in one word. Daniel. These wise men were from the east, from what was known as, Persia. Remember that account of Daniel and the Lion's Den? The other prefects were against him because he's just too wise and too smart, and he made them all look bad. So, they conjured up this story, ended up getting Daniel thrown into the lion's den. Daniel survives the night because God sends an angel to close the mouths of the lions. When the king comes and he says, 'Oh, Daniel has your God been able to save you?' Oh yeah, sure, He sent an Angel shut the mouths of the lions and he was taken out. Those who had conspired against him were thrown into the lion's den and they became lion food. But the king made him chief over the wise men.

Now what is a wise man supposed to know? Wise things. And what does the Bible tell us about wisdom? The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And how can you learn of the fear, standing in awe, and yet absolutely terrified of the Lord? Well, it all starts by knowing His word. So, Daniel taught the wise men true wisdom. He taught them the word of God. And now, 600 years later, I have to say, 'wow, Daniel was a good teacher,' And so were the teachers that followed him. The wise men knew. Oh, that's the star that's talked about. That's the star we read about in our scriptures and introit this morning. It's a lesson in the power, the necessity, to teach and learn the word of God. They read. They were taught. They knew. They understood. Much different than Herod.

Herod the Great, Or maybe not so great. The reality is, Herod was just a figurehead, a pawn of Rome. His primary job was to keep the peace. And Rome felt like, well, if we let the Jews have a Jewish king who runs things our way, they'll accept him because he's a Jew. The thing is, Herod took himself more seriously than Rome. Consider what Caesar Augustus said about Herod. "It is safer to be Herod's pig than his son." What? Yeah, he wasn't kidding. Because Herod was paranoid, and he ruthlessly exercised his power and control all the way to the point of He had his wife and several of his sons murdered because he thought they might pose a threat to him someday.

Rome was happy. Everything was peaceful in Jerusalem, just not in Herod's house. He was unbelievably self-centered and he even on his deathbed made an edict that when he died, the Roman soldiers were to go to every village and arrest one of the leading citizens of that village and kill them on the spot so that there would be tears in every village at the news of his death. Even the Roman soldiers said. 'You've gone too far.' They didn't follow through when he died.

So, the wise men, truly wise, knowing God's Word, come to paranoid Herod and they ask, where is he who is to be born King of the Jews? (Well now right away. Herod is upset, he says, I'm their king.) For we have seen his star. Herod knows what to do. These guys are talking about some sign. The priests, their job is to preserve knowledge, bring the priest's in and ask, 'Hey, what's this business about a sign and the King of the Jews? The priests go off and they conferred together and they come back saying, 'It's what the prophet Micah spoke about, what we read about. Bethlehem. That's where the king is to be born. But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though least among the clans.'

Bethlehem, and what does he say? Wisemen, Go and find this king for me. And then tell me so that I may come and worship him too. And the wise men left. They continued on to Bethlehem, where when they found the baby, along with Mary and Joseph, in a house-no longer in the stable. They fell down and worshipped. I'd like you to consider that word worship. It means to give worth to. How did they give worth to him? Well, they fell down and worshipped. They bowed, which is a sign of admiration, of humility, and I have no doubt that they did true worship. They praised Him, they honored Him. They probably went through a litany. Who He is, and who God the Father is, going

through the biblical events of 'You are the honest Messiah from the God who created the world, the God who flooded the world, the God who mixed the languages up at the Tower of Babel. You are the promised Messiah, that this God of creation, this God spoke through the prophets like Micah; spoke through the prophets and told that the lineage would be from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Judah, Jesse to David. You are the One from the One and only God. Then,(and that's the word Matthew uses) then, after worshipping, they gave Him offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh. By the way, that's why before COVID, we always took the offering after the liturgy of worship and the sermon and everything, we were following in the steps of the wise men.

But after this, the wise men are warned in the dream by an angel, 'Don't go back to Herod, he seeks to kill the child.' Meanwhile, Joseph also has a dream where an angel comes and warns him 'flee to Egypt Herod wants to kill the child.' And another prophecy is fulfilled. Out of Egypt have I called my son. Herod was enraged when the Wisemen didn't come back and he then talked with his advisors and he ascertained, you know, when this star must have appeared and how long it would take, which it's about a three-month journey, maybe a little longer if you have family along and then Herod uses the nuclear option. He probably came up with, you know, this this baby's probably somewhere between three months and a year old. Let's kill every child, male child, two years old and younger, in Bethlehem and the region around it.

When we take a look at historical notes, and what the size of Bethlehem and the region around Bethlehem was, historians say it was probably between 30 and 60 little boys were ruthlessly snatched from their mother's arms and killed. But I have to ask, how many mothers and fathers were also killed? We don't know. I know if I had a baby and someone came into my house to kill my baby, they'd have to kill me first. How many, how many tears were there of mothers holding the lifeless body of a child? But I wonder how many modern-day questions were asked. Where is God? Why would he let this happen? How could this happen if there is a God?

And yet in all of this, another prophecy is fulfilled. Jeremiah. It's a very dark prophecy. Very, very dark indeed because he speaks about the wailing and the crying in this region. But it's also a common commentary on man. It explains the why of Christmas. We live in a dark sin marred world. A dark

world full of lies, corruption, and deceit. A dark world full of violence and lacking justice. A devil serving, sin loving, war mongering, baby killing, dark world. A self, might I say 666, a self-centered world where we worship ourselves.

Into this dark world, God sent His Son, who is the light of the world. He came into a stable. He was laid in a Manger, a simple human entry. He came without a sword; He didn't need one. Unlike man, He didn't come to destroy, He came to redeem. So, there was no sword in the future for Jesus? No, Instead there was a cross. Unlike man who takes the sword and pierces, Jesus came to be pierced by the nails of that cross. Like Herod, the authorities in charge at the time fulfilled what Herod had not been able to do. They killed their Messiah. Why? Because it was worldly expedient and approved. Because, well, He would have been bad for business. They lacked the wisdom and the understanding of the wise men. They had the same scripture. They honored this same scripture. They just didn't know it. Didn't understand it. Didn't want to understand it. Or they would have known. And they also would have known their plan wouldn't work. Because the prophets also were clear about the Messiah. He would be stricken, smitten, afflicted, killed. But we're equally clear, death would have no hold over Him. He would rise.

The Christmas message begins in a dark way, in a dark world, in the Gospel of Matthew. But the Christmas message, the message of the Wiseman is: "Evil doesn't win. Evil doesn't get the last word." Christmas is the beginning of the gospel. It is the beginning of good news, good words. The Herod's of this world lose. Justice will prevail. The light will conquer the darkness. God wins. And because He wins, we win.

That's why we have Christmas lights. Jesus, the light of the world, was born into this dark world and has overcome the darkness. And when we see a Christmas light, or we see the lights on the Christmas tree, or the lights on the wreaths behind me, remember that! Jesus was born into a dark world. But He, Himself said that He is the light of the world. And the light cuts through the darkness and peels it away. That reveals to us that wonderful Christmas message, God wins and therefore we win.

And what is our response to that? I dare say we should learn from the wise men; fall down and worship Him. Give Him thanks. Give Him praise. Give Him honor. Give Him glory. And yes, give Him offerings. But most importantly, give Him the offering He has asked for; you, yourself. Offer yourself to Him as a living sacrifice. In His Name, Amen.