

## **“What’s Essential? The Givers”**

Asbury United Methodist Church

December 26, 2021

By Pastor John Vick

- Church, it’s great to be with you on this morning after Christmas Day. Also, this is a lot of fun – just doing something different and having one combined service.

- I figured a good way to begin this sermon would be to share a few celebrations. I have two to share.

- First, we had 6 WONDERFUL Christmas Eve services this week. We had one on the 23<sup>rd</sup> (Christmas Eve) and five on the 24<sup>th</sup> (Christmas Eve).

- It was such a sweet and holy time of worshipping Christ, the newborn king, with so many people.

- Thank you to everyone who served during those services. To those who greeted and opened doors and drove golf carts and handed out candles and stood at the guest services desks. Thank YOU!

- The second celebration is this: Today is the LAST Sunday of 2021. Honestly, that kind of blows my mind. The next Sunday we gather here for worship, it will be 2022.

- So, we celebrate and thank God for the great ministry that took place this past year. And, with eagerness and anticipation, we look forward to all that God is going to do in the next year.

- But, on this last Sunday of 2021, I figured we would talk about some firsts. In fact, in our passage of Scripture this morning, we are going to look at a special group of firsts.

-Now, I just think that we as human beings are fascinated by  
“firsts.”

-Whenever we are kids, no matter what we are doing, the goal is to always “get there first.” In studying different fields, the question is always, “Who was the first person to do this or that?”

-Let me just test you all for a second: Who was the first president of the United States? (George Washington) Who was the first person to walk on the moon? (Neil Armstrong)

-I read a funny quote this week where a person said: “The first person to see a sunset was probably like well this ain't good.”

- We just love firsts! One of my favorite things to do as a pastor is officiate weddings, because I get to meet with these engaged couples to talk about the ceremony, and hear their love stories.

-And I always love hearing about the first date, or the first kiss, or the first “I love you.”

-We're fascinated by firsts and treasure them! Think back to your first car, or your first ticket (maybe those two weren't that far apart), or your first job, or first child. Firsts are special.

- Well today, in Matthew 2, we are going to look at a very important first. We are looking at the “wise men” in Scripture.

-And, here is what they are first in: The wise men were the first Gentiles (non-Jewish people) to worship Jesus Christ.

-So later on in the New Testament, once Gentiles start getting saved and joining the church, they aren't the first ones. The wise men in Matthew 2 are the first ones.

-And here we are, 2,000 years later, as a congregation of mostly Gentiles (there may be a few people who are Jewish here), worshipping Jesus Christ and celebrating his coming into the world.

-So yes, this is a very important “first” that we see in the Bible.

- With that being said, we’ll dive on into the text. Our Scripture passage is Matthew 2:1-12.

-I invite you to flip there in your Bibles. There are also pew Bibles beneath you, and this passage is on page 960 in them.

-Let’s stand together. I’ll read verses 1 through 6, and then we’ll all come together and read out loud verses 7 through 12.

-(Read Matthew 2:1-12)

- Alright, now that is a full passage of Scripture! There is a lot going on in those verses. And, notice how Jesus and Mary really aren’t the main characters in this passage. Instead, it is Herod and the wise men who get most of the attention in this text.

-And what’s really interesting, is that there is a strong contrast between Herod, and the wise men in this passage.

-In just about every way imaginable, the wise men differ from Herod. I think there’s a lot that we can learn from the wise men.

-But, before we look at some of the major differences between Herod and the wise men, let’s first look at these questions: Who was Herod? Who were the wise men?

- Let’s look at Herod first. He was actually called Herod the Great. And, in some respects, he was quite great.

-He did a good job keeping the peace in Palestine, something that no one before him was able to do. He could also be generous at times and tried to lessen the burdens of people occasionally.

-Perhaps, his “greatness” is evident most through his buildings. He built many architecturally advanced buildings and structures.

-Here's a picture of the ruins of his fortress at Masada... (built upon a plateau and stacked to protect him from enemy attacks)

- Yet, one of his greatest character flaws, was that he was extremely suspicious. If he felt threatened by any person, even if this person was a family member, that person would be murdered.

-Emperor Augustus once joked, "It is better to be Herod's pig than his son."

-And Herod's suspicion is clearly seen in our passage today. As soon as he hears of the news of Jesus' birth, what happens? He is frightened! And, he tries to find out where Jesus is at in order to eliminate him.

-So, that's who Herod the Great is. He could be a good ruler, and built some nice buildings, but was suspicious and dangerous.

- Now, let's talk about the wise men. Who are they? What is their story?

-Well, as we already noted at the beginning of this sermon, they were Gentiles. They were not from Israel and were not Jewish.

-In fact, it is most likely from Persia that these men came from. And in Persia, they were revered as people who were skilled in philosophy and medicine and science.

-But, they were perhaps most known for their love of and skill in astrology. They were people who looked to the stars and tried to find signs.

- Alright, so we've looked a little at who the major characters are in this story: We've got Herod, and we've got the wise men.

-Now, let's look at how they differ, with the hope of learning how to better live fully into the Kingdom of God.

① **Herod's actions were fear-based; The wise men's actions were worship-based.**

-All that is done by Herod in this story, is motivated by fear and scarcity. Herod most certainly had a "scarcity" mindset.

-We read, "When Herod heard this, he was troubled/frightened, and all Jerusalem with him..."

-In his mind, he thought, "If there's another king in town, that means I can't be king anymore."

-And so, because that was his mindset, because he operated out of fear and scarcity, he did the things that he did.

- And so, let me just make this very clear: God doesn't desire us to operate out of fear. In no case, should fear be the motivating factor to do something. That's just not who we are.

- We are people of faith, not people of fear.

- Actually, in different places throughout the Bible, we read stories about how living in fear hurts us.

- The first one that came to my mind is the story of Adam and Eve. Do you remember what happened after they had sinned? When God was coming towards them, and asked them where they were? Adam said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."

- Adam, acting out of fear, tried to hide from the Lord.

- Another example I think of is in Jesus' parable of the talents. In that parable, Jesus tells of three servants being given talents (or money, at the time) in order to do something with them.

-The first two go out and double the number of talents they were given. However, the third one does nothing with the talent that was given to him. Instead, he buries it.

-Here is what that servant later says to his master, the person who gave him the talent: “Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.”

-That servant was chastised for not doing anything with his talent.

- So, are you seeing a theme here in Scripture? Friends, it’s not good to act out of fear. It wasn’t good for Adam and Eve, it wasn’t good for that servant in this parable, and it wasn’t good for Herod.

-Acting out of fear keeps us from living the lives God has called us to live. It keeps us from doing the works God has called us to do.

- So, let me just ask you, is there an area in your life, where you are living in fear? I invite each of us to think about that for a minute. And, I’ll share a way that I’ve been tempted to give in to fear. Maybe you’ll relate.

-There are times and situations that I sometimes find myself in, when I know I need to say something, but my fear of what others will think about me keeps me from doing so. That’s a way that I have acted out of fear in my own life.

-Here’s a story that, although it’s a little silly, I think illustrates that.

- Story of the Spider and the Woman Speaking

- How about yourself? Are there actions that you are doing – or not doing – because of fear. I invite you to pray about those and give them to God.

- We are not to be like King Herod, whose actions were fear-based. Instead, we are to be more like the wise men.

- The wise men’s actions were worship-based.

- In fact, the wise men speak only one sentence in this entire passage. They say to Herod, “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.**”

- You know, that was one of the biggest revelations I had in reading this text. The wise men came *to worship*.

- They didn’t come because they wanted something in it for themselves. They didn’t come because they were curious and wanted to see what this star was all about. They didn’t come because they wanted a weekend getaway in Bethlehem.

- No, they came, they traveled, in order to worship. That was their purpose. That was their “why.” Worship is what motivated them to do what they did.

- And worship is exactly what they did once they found Jesus. They, these brilliant men, knelt down and worshipped a child less than 2 years old. And they gave him special and meaningful gifts.

- You know, I believe God is calling us to be more like the wise men, motivated by worship, and less like Herod, motivated by fear and scarcity.

- I’m sure you’ve seen the bumper sticker that goes something like this: “Wise men and women, still worship Him.”

- Even when the world around us shakes and trembles, even when fear abounds, we will be people who worship.
- Herod's actions were fear-based; the wise men's actions were worship-based.

② **Herod was filled with deception; the wise men were filled with joy.**

- We see that in all of his actions in this passage. He's having these secret meetings. He's using people. He lying to the wise men. He's plotting something evil. He's being very deceptive and false.
  - And that really goes to show the slippery slope one can go down, when they are living in fear.
- Instead of truly loving people, instead of being filled with good things, people who act out of fear often do these harmful actions. It's hard to be joyful, it's hard to have peace, when fear motivates our actions.
  - Let's compare that with the wise men. The wise men were not filled with deception or lies or trickery. Instead, what were they filled with? Joy! They were filled with joy!
    - This is what we read in verse 10: "When [the wise men] saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy."
    - I love how there's almost a double emphasis on joy here. *They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.*
    - That's almost like saying, "They were very happy with great happiness." Or, "They laughed a lot with much laughter."
    - They were joyful! They experienced joy in the journey. Joy in worshipping Christ. Joy in giving gifts to Him.



- And church, I've got a little secret for ya. That joy, that same joy that the wise men experienced 2,000 years ago, that joy is still available to each of us today!

-In worship, in giving, in serving, we too can "rejoice exceedingly with great joy."

- In fact, I think Jesus really knew what he was talking about, when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

-Because, there is great joy in giving. There is great joy in sharing gifts.

- Maybe some of you experienced that yesterday on Christmas.

-Sure, you enjoyed getting some gifts yourself, but what was most exciting and filling for you, was giving gifts to others.

-You couldn't wait to see their faces when they opened up the gifts that you gave them!

-For again, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

- So this was my fiancé and I's first and only engaged Christmas, and we had such a sweet time yesterday exchanging gifts.

-It was fun for both of us to receive these gifts, but I think we enjoyed even more giving these special and thoughtful gifts to each other. It is truly more blessed to give than receive.

### ③ Herod was self-centered. The wise men were humble and generous.

-And let's just look at how self-centered Herod was. Think about it. The Savior of the World, the Son of God, the long-expected Messiah, he had come! Immanuel, "God With Us,"

was here. Jesus, the One who was to save his people from their sins, had arrived.

- Yet, after hearing the greatest news of Christ's birth, after hearing that the true king had come, what did Herod do? -He thought only of himself. Something cosmic was happening, yet he was only concerned about himself. The kingdom of God was literally breaking in, but he could only think about his own kingdom.

-Maybe you know people like that. Something significant or amazing is happening, but they can't get past themselves.

- The wise men, however, embody maturity by being humble and generous.

-As noted earlier, these brilliant astrologers bow down and worship a child. They exhibit great humility there.

-And, they also exhibit generosity in their gifts. They give these lavish gifts to Jesus Christ.

- Specifically, they bring the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

-So, a friend sent me this funny picture this week. Maybe you'll appreciate it, too.

-(Show Picture)

- But really, what kinds of gifts were these? I doubt any of us received gold or frankincense yesterday morning on Christmas.

Anyone get myrrh as a stocking stuffer?

-You know, on our wedding registry, you aren't going to find any gold or frankincense or myrrh. They're just gifts that we don't think of or use much today!

-BUT, they were very significant in the story of Jesus' birth.

- And I figured, I could come up here, and just “yap yap yap,” about what these three gifts meant.

-But, I think it would be more fun to sing about them. Over the past several weeks, at the 9:30am service, Michael Kemp (our Director of Traditional Worship) has been teaching this song:

“Joy Has Dawned.”

-And, in the third stanza, we sing about the significance and meaning of each gift. So, I'm going to invite Michael to lead us in the third stanza of “Joy Has Dawned,” and you can sing along if you'd like. The words will be up on the screen.

-(Michael leads stanza 3 of “Joy Has Dawned”)

- I love those lyrics: “Gold, a king is born today. Incense (or frankincense), God is with us. Myrrh, His death will make a way, And by His blood He'll win us.”

-Gold was the gift for kings, and Jesus Christ is the King of Kings.

-Frankincense was the gift for priests, and frankincense was used in the Temple at the time during services. And, Jesus Himself is our great High Priest, according to Hebrews, and has reconciled us to the Father.

-And myrrh. That was a gift for one who is to die. By his death on a cross, Jesus has saved us and made a way for us.

-That's why these three gifts, although not super familiar with us today, were so significant and meaningful at Jesus' birth.

///

- The story of Jesus' birth, and Herod the Great, and the wise men, it's a rich story. There's so much we can learn from it,

especially when we look at how different the response of the wise men was from the response of Herod.

-And, if I were to sum up this entire sermon in one sentence, it would be this: “Herod was living in the Kingdom of Self, while the Wise Men were living in the Kingdom of God.”

- You know, this is the last sermon in our series titled, “What’s Essential?”. Throughout this series, we’ve talked about how the Kingdom of God is what’s essential.

- The Kingdom of God was Jesus’ essential, and it is still our essential as the church today.

- And from the wise men, we see that giving is an essential in the Kingdom of God.

- And that shouldn’t surprise us, that giving is an essential in the Kingdom of God. Because giving is part of God’s very nature.

- We remember that especially well this time of the year at Christmas, when we celebrate God’s giving of Himself to us, in the person of Jesus Christ.

- My prayer is that each of us would follow the example of the wise men, and embrace these lives of worship and giving in the Kingdom of God.

- There’s a church here in Oklahoma that challenges their congregation to do something radical each year. They encourage each member of the church to give \$1 more to Jesus at Christmas, than all of their other gifts combined.

- Imagine that! Adding up the cost of all your Christmas shopping this year, then adding \$1 to it, and giving it to Jesus.

- I think that church gets it, and truly realizes that Jesus is the reason for all of this. I also thought that was such a great example of giving, an essential in the Kingdom of God.
- And let me just say, I am so encouraged by the deep love and generosity of this church.
  - Literally, every day I see God working through the gifts of Asbury. There are so many people here like the wise men, humble and generous. Always willing to give and serve.
    - In fact, just the other day... (haircut story)
  - So, where do we go from here? I have a couple of thoughts.
    - In a few minutes, we are going to come forward for communion. This is our way of responding to the proclamation of God's word.
    - And as you come forward, I invite you to pray about these two things and give them to God:
      - 1) God, is there any area in my life that I am living out of fear, not out of faith and worship? If so, please reveal it.
      - 2) God, how can I best be a giver of my time, energy, and resources for Your Kingdom in this next year?
    - I think that's a great way to be Kingdom-minded in 2022. Understanding what is essential, and what is not essential.
- Alright, we'll end this sermon today by going back to where we started: with firsts. We are fascinated by firsts!
  - However, the thought for us now, isn't "What can I be first in?" But rather, the thought is, "What can I put first?"
  - My hope, is that we would all seek first the Kingdom of God, and God's righteousness. May that be our essential this day, and

every day. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.