

January 6, 2013

The Far Off, Near; The Near, Far Off

Matt 2:1-4

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, ² "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

³ King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. ⁴ He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

Welcome on this first Sunday of a New Year. I trust that one of your resolutions for this year is to be in worship every week. Good for you. That's one resolution you've kept for at least one week.

Some of us make resolutions that go in one year and out the other. Like one man, named George. He said to a friend: "There's nothing like getting up at six in the morning, going for a run around the park, and taking a brisk shower before breakfast." His friend Bob asked, "How long have you been doing this?" George: "I start tomorrow."

How many of you still have your Christmas tree up? The reason I asked is: Christmas, from the Christian perspective isn't truly over until today, January 6th or Epiphany, the day we traditionally celebrate the visit by the Wise Men.

Let me ask you another question. What did you have on the top of your Christmas tree, a star or an angel. How many of you had stars on top of your tree? How many of you have angels?

Biblically, the Angel represents those who had been waiting for the Messiah, for a sign from God, for a long time, like the Shepherds. They knew what the Angel meant when he told them about a Savior, a Messiah. They remembered the old prophecies. They remembered with anticipation.

And the Star was for those who were still searching, those still unsure, those still with questions, those on a quest to find out about this mystery and message from God wrapped up in human flesh.

God sent both the Angel and the Star because God always meets us where we are. (We had a bow on top of our tree, I have no idea what that means!).

(v1) Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem...

The presence of the wise men at our manger scenes is not accurate. Matthew 2 gives us some clues as to when the wise men came. Jesus (in v8) is referred to as a child, not a baby.

We also read in- Matt 2:11

They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary...

They entered, not a manger or stable, but a house. It seems that after Jesus was born Mary and Joseph stayed in Bethlehem for about 2 years; since we also read-Matt 2:16

Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance.

Although He had not spoken a word; he had not yet performed a miracle; he has not proclaimed a single doctrine; yet, when Jesus was born, and still just a defenseless child, he already was causing a stir, and His influence upon the world was already being seen.

There is infinite power even in an infant Savior. When Jesus is born in the heart, even when the person is a new believer Jesus makes a stir in that person whole nature and they know that something wonderful has happened. When Christ is formed in us, the hope of glory, a sacred revolution starts within us.

Someone or other is affected by the fact that Christ has come; He cannot be hid. Worshipers bring Him presents, and His enemies want His death.

Oh, that the Lord Jesus might be here today, even if as a new born, in someone's heart! No matter how poorly I preach today, there will be a great result from Christ's coming.

There were two results from Christ's coming, as there always will be, He is a Savior to some, but also a stumbling-block to others.

2 Cor 2:15-16

Our lives are a Christ-like fragrance rising up to God. But this fragrance is perceived differently by those who are being saved and by those who are perishing. To those who are perishing, we are a dreadful smell of death and doom. But to those who are being saved, we are a life-giving perfume.

Wise men from far off in the east come and worship Christ. Those far away come near. But those who were near are far off. Deeply disturbed about Christ's birth was Herod, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, leading priests, and the teachers of religious law.

They are as far from Christ as if he had been born in the distant east, while they who lived far away came near to Him as if they were the ones who lived in Bethlehem.

Eph 2:17 NIV

He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.

He came for both. So I have these two things to talk about today, first, that many far-off ones are brought near, and the sad fact that many who are apparently very near never really come near to Jesus.

1. The Far Off, Near

I have to say that there are those I have prayed for that I thought for sure would come to Christ and still have not (they are the near that are still far off) and there are others I would never have thought would come to Christ and have (they are the far off who were brought near).

First we have these Wise Men. They were students always seeking wisdom and knowledge. These sorts of people are frequently more difficult to reach for Christ. The wisdom of Christ seems foolish to them.

1 Cor 1:26-27

Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful.

We talked about this last week; God first called and used Mary, Joseph, and shepherds, but God also called these Wise Men.

Isn't it remarked that the shepherds did not get lost, they came to Christ at once, while the wise men, even with a star to guide them, missed their way, and went to Jerusalem instead of to Bethlehem? However, they did come to Christ, even if they did come in a roundabout way.

I respectfully ask the intellectual, the wise to consider the wisdom of God coming to the earth in Christ to be sacrificed for sin to give us eternal life. God in the past has called the wise, like Saul of Tarsus, who is better known as Paul, and like these wise men from the east; and still calls the wise to come and worship the Savior.

These wise men lived far away, yet traveled to find the Christ.

Eph 2:12-13

In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to him through the blood of Christ.

And what about this star? Many years ago I went to the planetarium. The presenter said that at the time of Christ Birth some planets lined up in such a way as to form that star. Maybe that's true, or maybe the star was a miracle of God. I don't know, but I do know this, if you can't be reached for Christ in an ordinary way, God may need to reach you in an extraordinary way. I am only trying to show you the sovereign and amazing grace of God. May the Lord in His mercy speak to some here today of what He is willing to do to bring you to Christ.

2. The Near, Far Off

First, we read that many were troubled about Christ. He was a child, and yet He troubled them. Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem was troubled with him. It is an unusual thing to hear of a king troubled by a baby. Herod was troubled, because he feared that he would lose his throne to this baby; that Jesus would take possession of his throne; so he was troubled.

Many think that today too, and they are right! They must give up control to Christ. Yet, they are wrong to think that they will lose by coming to faith in Christ.

But the fact is that many are troubled because the gospel interferes with their sin. Many do not want to stop living the way they have become accustomed to living. I have heard someone warn that, "The great argument against the Bible is an ungodly life."

Some will not repent because they will not give up on their pet sin. So it is troublesome when Christ comes near. It is a terrible thing to cling to sin.

I heard of a Spartan boy, who caught a young fox, and carried it close to his chest. Then, not wanting his schoolmaster to see it, and reprimand him, allowed the fox to go on eating into his flesh till it ate into his heart.

That's a gross story isn't it? But is it like you? Are you hugging this fox? What encouragement and comfort can I give you? Quit your sin. You can't have all of Christ if He can't have all of you. You can't have Christ and sin; the two are completely opposed to each other. I will not mention what your sin may be; let your own conscience tell you that. You cannot continue in the practice of any known sin, willfully and deliberately, and yet find any comfort from the Word of God. There must be, in your heart's intent and resolve, the quitting of sin, or you will be deeply troubled by the Savior.

I heard of two guys trying to row a boat. They rowed and rowed, and they kept on rowing, but they made no progress. They could not understand how with all their rowing, they kept in the same position until one said, did you pull the anchor up?" No, he had never pulled the anchor up. It's foolish to pretend to row when you know that the anchor is still stuck in the mud.

Many think, "Why does God want to take my pleasures away from me? God never takes real pleasures away, only things that will hurt you and others. He may change your tastes, and give you better things. It's sad that coming to Christ should trouble you. That a relationship with a loving God should trouble you; that heaven open to you should trouble you; that the grace of God should trouble you; that obeying God should trouble you.

Isn't it amazing that the religious heard about the birth of the Messiah and didn't go with the Wise Men to worship Him? Their scripture told them there would be a star:

Num 24:17

I see him, but not here and now. I perceive him, but far in the distant future.

A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel.

Yet, not one of them said, "If this is true, if this is the Messiah who was born in Bethlehem, if this was His star, let's go with these wise men and worship Him." Instead they were content to have the scriptures, and read the scriptures, and know about the truth, and leave it there.

The saddest point is that none of these people sought Christ; not Herod who did not want to give control over to Christ; not Jerusalem with its troubles; not the religious; none of them sought Christ. May God grant that no hearer of mine today would be in that list!

May we all seek Jesus! May we all find Him! And we will when we seek Him with all our heart.

Pray: Lord, bring those far away, near, and those near, nearer. Amen!