

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Sermon Title: Heart Warming**

**Scott Dudley**

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### **Scripture:**

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#### **Matthew 2:1-12**

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> and asked, "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."

<sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

<sup>6</sup> "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for out of you will come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

<sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

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### **Transcript:**

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The scripture comes from Matthew Chapter Two. "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the one who's been born king of the Jews? We saw a star when it rose and have come to worship him.' When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them, 'Where's the Messiah to be born?' 'In Bethlehem in Judea?' they replied. Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and worship him.' After they'd heard the king, they went on their way and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.

"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they return to their country by another route." So Holy Spirit, help us to learn from these words and know you better. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen. So in last week's sermon, I quoted from Taylor Swift's new song, Anti-Hero, which I think is a really smart song because she's a really good lyricist. That's from her brand new album, Midnight. So that was a brand new song of Taylor Swift. So this Sunday, let me do the opposite and quote from a very old song from 70 years ago by a guy named Hank Williams, and it goes this way.

"You'll never know how much it hurts to see you sit and cry. You know you need and want my love yet you are afraid to try. Why do you run and hide from life? To try it just ain't smart. Why can't I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart?" It's a country song, can't you tell, about a jilted lover. But in some ways it could be what God says to us. "How can I free your doubtful mind and melt your cold, cold heart, hard done by you? Some things look better baby just passing." That's a song by Elton John called Cold Heart, most recently remixed by a singer named Dua Lipa. So, in less than a minute, I just gave you a music history lesson from Hank Williams to Taylor Swift. You're welcome. It is amazing what is in my brain. It's stunning. Latin, calculus, forgotten. Useless music trivia, locked in there forever. What does it take to melt cold hearts? And by cold heart, I mean being emotionally shut down, feeling no warmth or love for others or for God, indifferent to other people's pain.

We're doing a sermon series called Invited about how in the Christmas story in the Bible God invites all kinds of people into relationship with him. And normally, at Christmastime, preachers talk about Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the three wise men or Magi that we just read about. But I'm going to focus on a different character in this story. Today I want to focus on King Herod. Nobody preaches about King Herod. I bet you have never heard a Christmas sermon on King Herod before. So you came on a good day. This is going to be the best sermon on King Herod that you have ever heard in your life. And we don't talk about him because he's not a likable guy. He was a ruthless king who killed anyone who threatened his power. He even had his own sons killed. And right after the text that we just read, he has all the baby boys in

Bethlehem killed because he's afraid that this new baby is going to grow up and take away his power. He has a cold, cold heart.

But he's invited too. God invites him too. The fact that the Magi told him that Jesus had been born is God reaching out to even Herod. And he has a sense of this because it says, the text says, "He called together all the people's chief priests and he asked them where the Messiah was to be born." The Messiah is the savior that God had promised, been promising for 500 years. At some level, Herod knows that this is no ordinary baby. And that's true, Jesus is God coming to us in human form, and he knows it and yet his heart is hard and cold toward it. So, for the next few minutes, you can just enjoy a sermon about how God invites cold hearted people into relationship with him. This isn't about you or me. This is about other people, cold hearted people. You can enjoy a sermon about those people. That dog don't hunt, right? Because if I'm honest and look in my own heart, I know that sometimes I have a cold heart.

Some of us have a cold heart all of the time, but all of us have a cold heart at least some of the time, at least towards some things. Some people recently told me a memory about when I first came here, when my wife and I first came here, and they had this memory and they told me last week and said it was this one Sunday. And my son, who was about two at the time, was running around in the lobby and he just fell down on his face and they were really concerned, and my response was, "Oh, he'll be fine." And they're like, "This is our new pastor?" Sorry. I can have a cold heart, sometimes at least, and I can be super warm towards some things and super cold toward others. All of us at some point have a cold heart. Not all of the time, but maybe some of the time. And often our cold heartedness is just pure sin. It's just pure sin. But other times we have a cold heart because we've been hurt over and over again.

That's one of the ways our hearts get cold. If we get hurt over and over and over again in relationships, we just start to shut down emotionally. Some of you have gone through terrible trauma and you had to get a hard heart just to survive. It was a survival strategy for you. But still it's not good. It's understandable, but it's not good, and it robs us of meaningful relationships and robs us of joy. And Jesus sets us free from that. And our cold hearts show up in lots of different ways. Cold hearts show up when we refuse to extend forgiveness to someone or the reverse when we can't admit that we are the ones that need forgiveness because we've hurt somebody. One of the symptoms of a cold heart God talks about hundreds of times in the Bible is if we don't care about the needs of the poor, the orphan, the widow, the immigrant, or if we see them in stereotypical ways and don't get to know them as people and all that they have to offer.

Our cold hearts can show up in church sometimes when new people, no one greets them or says hello to them. In the story that I just read, the cold hearts show up in the religious leaders. Herod calls them together and says, "Hey, where's the Messiah? I think the Messiah's just born." They're the religious leaders and they just found out that the Messiah might have been born, and what do they do about it? Nothing. Nothing. They don't even bother to walk the five miles from

Jerusalem to Bethlehem to see if it's true because they have a cold and an indifferent heart. Our cold hearts hurt other people, our cold hearts hurt ourselves, rob us of joy, rob us of meaningful relationships. So how does Jesus free our doubtful minds and melt our cold, cold hearts? Couple ways. First, Jesus invites us to surrender what we're holding onto to him that might be holding us back from experiencing him.

Herod has the chance to be one of the first people to see Jesus, but he doesn't do it because he's afraid that Jesus is eventually going to take over his throne. And all he can think about is his power, his status, his stuff, his position, his title, stuff that he's hanging onto so tightly he's not open to what Jesus wants to do in his life. What might you care about more than Jesus? Money, grades, popularity, success, career, sex, power. All of those are good things, good things if used appropriately, but if they become more important to us than Jesus, our hearts start to get cold. And in Herod's case, it's really sad because what Jesus offers is so much better than the stuff he's hanging onto. I mean, he's not really even a king. He's a puppet that was installed by the Roman Empire. The Romans were the real bosses. He's just a puppet king.

And Jesus probably would never have asked him to give up his throne because that wasn't usually Jesus' jam. What he would've done was said, "Hey, why don't you use your power and your position for good instead of for yourself, Herod?" Which would've given Herod a bigger life, a freer life, a better life. I mean, look at him. He's pathetic, this little puppet terrified of losing his stuff. He's always afraid, doesn't have any meaningful relationships. He's filled with bitterness and all kinds of resentments. Jesus offers us so much more if we'll let go of the stuff we're hanging onto that keeps us from experiencing him more deeply. What might you need to surrender to Jesus? Maybe it's one of the things I just mentioned. Maybe it's the need to control. I have lots of high control issues, control other people, control outcomes. Maybe it's even controlling your emotions, whether it's in worship or in other ways because you're uncomfortable with emotions, which a lot of us are uncomfortable with emotions.

The text says that when the Magi discovered Jesus, they were overjoyed and bowed down and worshiped him. They did not have a moderate response to Jesus. So maybe what we have to surrender is our moderate responses. They had a passionate emotional response. If we hang on, we get cold hearts. If we surrender, Jesus warms our heart. Second way to a warmer heart is to draw close to the pain in the world by getting to know people who are experiencing the pain. And that has a way of turning the pain from an abstract concept or a social problem that we can pontificate or post about into something that is personal because you someone. I've known so many older people in this congregation, people who I deeply love, whose health is failing them as they age, and these are people I care about deeply. And having gone through that with my own parents, that melts my heart because it becomes personal because I get close to it.

As I talk with young families and see the pressures they're under and the rising rates, the exploding rates of anxiety and depression in kids as young as seven, eight, nine years old, it gives me empathy. I got an email from a man who helps with the Grocery Project at Jubilee

Reach and he told me about a man that had been laid off, couldn't afford groceries for his family. And this man who emailed me gave him just some basic food and said the guy just lit up. And he said, "But what really lit him up was when I gave him toilet paper because they were down to their last roll." And this man who emailed me said this "that this simple item, which so many take for granted, could cause such joy grabbed my heart. Heart. Not head, heart. "He's a dad caring for his family and needed just basic toilet paper to do that. My heart just filled with love for this guy." In other words, his heart melted because the pain in the world became personal. It had a name, it had a face, and it melted his heart.

When my first child was born, Holly, I'd already been a pastor a little over about two years at that point in my former church. And at that point, when she was born, I'd already done dozens and dozens of weddings. But the first wedding I did after she was born, I didn't even know the couple, I'd just been assigned to do their wedding. As the dad was walking the bride down the aisle, I started to cry. I had done dozens of weddings and I'm watching him walk, I didn't even know them, and I'm watching the dad walk the bride down the aisle and I'm all crying. I'm like, "Oh, my baby girl. Someday I'm going to have to hand her off to some guy and he's going to be a loser." I had done dozens of weddings without so much as a quivering lip, but the first one I did after she was born, Niagara Falls. And it has been that way every stinking wedding I've done since.

Suddenly it's personal. My heart melted because it wasn't just a wedding. Now it's personal. If we don't touch the pain in the world, we will have cold hearts. But if we let it get personal, it melts our hearts. Surrender what we're holding onto, draw close to the pain in the world, and then, finally, and most importantly, draw close to the warmth of God's love. The difference between Herod's cold heart and the Magi's warm hearts is that Herod is focused on himself and the Magi are focused on God. And the most transforming power in the universe is the warmth of God's love. And that melts our hearts. Now, we play a part by surrendering what we're holding onto, drawing close to the pain in the world, but ultimately it's supernatural. Ultimately, God's love is what changes us.

This week, a woman who grew up with parents who deeply wounded her, told me that it took her 10 years, but as she got closer to Jesus, learned to let him be her pain bearer, experience his love and prayer, worship, scripture, the more she experienced his love, it melted her heart and eventually she was able to forgive her parents and be free of the anger, the resentment, the bitterness, the unforgiveness that can just poison our lives. It's the warmth of God's love that melts our hearts. And I'll say more about that in a minute. But, for now, for this week, two action steps for this week. First, what step is God asking you to take toward a warmer heart? Maybe it's to let go of something you're holding onto. Maybe it's to get closer to the pain in the world. Maybe it's to draw closer to him through prayer, worship, scripture, to experience his love more. What is it? And then take that step.

And then, second, be a heart warmer. Who do you know who has been hurt and as a result has a cold heart? Jesus tells us you are the salt of the earth. One of the things salt does is it melts ice. So how can you melt people's hearts by how you love them, by how you serve them, by how you listen to them in pain? Maybe it's to invite them to join you here next week for worship through music or on Christmas Eve. And there's some invite cards on your seat that can help you do this. And people are way more likely to come to church at Christmas time or on Christmas Eve than any other time of the year. And so invite them so they can hear about Jesus, they can experience Jesus' love, and then stick with them in relationship and keep talking to them and listening to them. And then, in January, when there are a bunch of new people here because of how you all have invited people to experience Jesus, then let's welcome those people warmly into our community.

The title of this sermon series is Invited because Jesus invites us to have warmer hearts so that we can invite others to experience him as well. I know a woman whose dentist made a serious mistake that resulted in her having to have her jaw wired shut for a while and she could only eat through a straw and all of that. And she and her husband were understandably very angry about this so they initiated a lawsuit. But the longer it dragged on, the lawsuit, before it even got to court, the angrier they got, not just at the dentist but at everyone as the need to be proven right and to win started to take over their lives. But they kept praying about it and submitting it to God, and sometimes when they prayed there was this thought in the back of their mind, is this lawsuit necessary? Because some lawsuits are necessary. It's a matter of justice. But they kept thinking, is this one necessary? And for the woman especially, the closer she got to God, the more her perspective shifted.

And this culminated the night before the first court date. They prayed about it together as a couple and then they talked about it afterwards. And the woman said, "Every time I've been praying about this over the last couple of months, I just see how much pain this is causing us and I can't help but think how much pain it's causing our dentist and his family." And she said, "He didn't do this on purpose. He's human. He made a mistake." And she said, "When I pray about this, I am reminded of all the mistakes I have made, let alone the outright sins. I have sinned and in prayer I frequently experience God's love and forgiveness for me." And she said, "And this is just making us miserable. So for our own sakes, I think we need to drop this." And her husband said, "I've been feeling similar things." So they went to court the next day and they dropped the lawsuit.

Now, again, in some cases the lawsuit might be the right thing to do, but in their case, for their sake, because it was giving them cold hearts, making their hearts hard, they let go of their need to be right, connected with the pain that was causing even their dentist, connected even with the dentist's pain. But mostly for the woman especially, she kept experiencing God's forgiveness and love for her and that started to melt her heart and that set them both free, because having a cold heart does not feel nearly as good as having a warm heart, which takes me back to that third point. It's the warmth of God's love that melts our hearts. Because of my educational background, I have read just about everything there is to read in history and literature and

philosophy and I am convinced that the smartest thing ever written, the wisest thing ever said, the most beautiful story ever told, begins with "a man had two sons and the younger one said to his father, 'Give me my inheritance now because you're not dying fast enough for me.'"

The Prodigal Son story that we find in the Bible. And then he went to a far country where the text says "he squandered it in wild living." We don't know what that means. That's just all it says. But when the money ran out and he was hungry, he went back to his father who saw him coming down the road and ran to him and embraced him and kissed him and then threw a party to celebrate his return. It is such a beautiful picture of the warmth of God's love that is extended to us no matter what we have done. And when we draw close to that, it can do nothing else but melt our hearts. But, to me, the even more moving part of that story is the older brother, the brother who didn't run away, the brother who followed all the rules. And when the father gives a party to celebrate the younger son's return, the older brother doesn't go into the house, into the feast. Instead, he stays outside the house and pouts.

And he's got a point, don't you think? It's not fair. He's the one that kept all the rules, he didn't run away, and the younger son gets the party? But his refusal to join the party in that culture would've publicly humiliated his father. And in that culture, the father would've been expected to beat him within an inch of his life. But see how deep the father's love? Just as the father rendered the younger son, he goes out of the house to the older brother and the older brother says to him, "All this time, I have slaved away for you," which shows how he thinks about his dad as a slave driver, not a loving father, "you never gave me a party. But when this son of yours," not my brother, "son of yours who has squandered your money with prostitutes," excuse me, text never said anything about prostitutes, guess what's on the older brother's mind, "you give him the party?"

And then the father says, "My son." And the Greek word used there in the text, in the original text, is different than the word for son in the rest of the story. The word the Father uses is much more personal and tender and intimate. It means my boy. "My boy, you are always with me and everything I have is yours. I don't love your younger brother more than you. I love you both. And everything I have is for both of you." The older brother has a cold, cold heart toward his own brother, a cold heart toward his father. But in spite of how cold his heart is, the father goes to him just as he ran to the younger son and invites him and invites him and keeps inviting him into a deeper relationship with the father, no matter how cold his heart is. The first half of the story shows the warmth of God's love toward law breaking sinners and the second half of the story shows the warmth of God's love to law keeping sinners.

And the father says, "Thank you. Thank you for wanting to be holy. Thank you for your obedience. That's a good thing. But you're not in my house because you try to be holy. You're in my house because I love you. And you're right, I have wasted my love on sinners like your younger brother. Now, please, please, please, won't you let me waste my love on you?" And the story ends there. We don't find out if the older brother goes into the party or not on purpose.

Because, see, Jesus told this story to religious leaders who had has obeyed all the rules and gotten a cold heart in the process. And the story ends without knowing what the older brother does as a way of saying to you and to me, the ball's in your court, reader. The ball's in your court, listener. Your move. What are you going to do?

The father's love is not fair and that's good news because it's extended to us over and over and over again no matter how cold our hearts get. And when we draw close to that radical love of God that comes to us in the person of Jesus at Christmas time, he frees our doubtful minds and he melts our cold, cold hearts. So, Jesus, I surrender, we surrender. The hurts, the pain, the things that got us to a hard heart, the things we're hanging onto, Lord, we give them to you and ask that you help us experience your love deeper and deeper. The warmth of your love, help us to draw close to that. Melt our hearts. Make us like you. We'll be grateful. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Where do you think you have a cold heart and what steps could you take to melt it?
- To whom can you be a "heart warmer" and how?
- Who will you invite to church this Christmas?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.