

BELPRES CHURCH

Surprises

Matthew 2:1-12

Speaker: Becky Bastien

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Hey, good morning and thank you for joining us for worship today. My name is Becky, and I work with our elementary kids here at BelPres. For the last few months as a church, we've been working through our Bible reading plan. Every Sunday, I ask the kids about what they've been reading and what they've learned. I've been so impressed with how much they know and how many good questions they have been asking.

Now, if you're like me and the holidays have been busy, don't feel bad if you've fallen behind on your reading plan. Maybe today and tomorrow are days when you can cozy up on your couch with a warm blanket and a cup of hot cocoa and read some of the good things God has for us. I'll kick us off because today I want to read for you our scripture out of the Jesus Storybook Bible. This is the Bible our kids have been using for their Bible reading plan. It's a beautiful story with great pictures that tells the story with great language for kids. But honestly, it's great for adults too. It really invites us in and helps us to think about what the Bible is teaching us. Now, today's story takes place after Jesus' birth when some visitors came to see him. And if you have your own Jesus Storybook Bible, you can open it up as we read today's scripture.

Today's story is called the King of all Kings. "Far away in the East, three clever men saw the very same star, the star that God had put in the sky when Jesus was born. They knew it was a sign, a baby king had been born. They had been waiting for the star. They knew it would come. 'He's here!', they shouted. 'He's here!' And I'm sure if you'd been there, you would've heard them laughing and dancing and singing until the sun came up. At dawn, they packed up their camels and wrapped gifts for the baby. They brought their most precious treasures of all frankincense, gold, and myrrh. Special, sparkly, lovely smelling, gleaming things just straight for a king."

"The three Wise Men, actually, if you'd met them, you'd have thought that they were kings because they were so rich and clever and important looking set off. They rode their camels across endless deserts, up steep, steep mountains, down into deep, deep valleys, through raging rivers over grassy plains night and day and day and night for hours that turned into days, that turned into weeks, that turned into months and months until at last they reached Jerusalem."

"Jerusalem was by far the most important city for miles and miles around. And as anyone can tell you, that's where a palace would be. And kings are born in palaces, so that's where they went. But they were in for a surprise. They went to see King Herod. Surely he'd know where this baby was, but he didn't. In fact, he didn't like the sound of a new king at all. It made him cross. He didn't want anyone to be king except him."

"But Herod's advisors told the three Wise Men what was written in their books, what God had said about the baby king. 'Go to Bethlehem, that's where you'll find him.' Suddenly, the star they had seen in the east started moving again, showing them the way. So the three Wise Men followed the star out of the big city along the road into the little town of Bethlehem. They followed the star through the streets of Bethlehem, out of the nice part of town, through the not so nice part of town into the really not nice at all part of town, down a little dirt track until it stopped right over a little house."

"But wait, this wasn't a palace and there weren't any guards or servants or flags or red carpets or trumpets or anything. Did they get it wrong? Or was this what God meant? Sure enough, in that little house, their sitting on his mother's knee, they found him the baby king. The three men knelt before their little king. They took off their rich royal turbans and gleaming golden crowns. They bowed their noble heads to the ground and gave him their sparkling treasures. The journey that had begun so many centuries before had led three Wise Men here to a little town, to a little house, to a little child, to the king God had promised David all those years before. But this child was a new kind of king. Though he was the prince of heaven, he had become poor. Though he was the mighty God, he had become a helpless baby. This king hadn't come to be the boss. He had come to be a servant."

I love this story for a lot of reasons, but one of them is that it really shows us how God can work in surprising ways. And God chose to do a lot of unexpected things here. Now, to you and I this may be a familiar story, but to the people living it at the time, it was brand new. And just take the Wise Men. These were people who were outsiders. They were from a different land, from a different religion, and yet God chose for them to be some of the first people to come and greet Jesus.

And then you have Jesus's hometown. Jerusalem maybe is like New York to us, it was full of fancy people. All the movers and shakers lived there. Wouldn't you think that's where

God would want to send his son? But no, he chose a small little town of Bethlehem that's maybe like Forks, Washington. When people heard it, they probably said, "Seriously? That's where he was born? Really?" And then of course, it's not even to mention that Mary and Joseph were a young couple with an unexpected pregnancy and a society where people notice things like that. All of these things were unexpected.

If I knew nothing about the Bible and you asked me how would God send his son into the world, I don't think that any of these details would be what I chose. And yet as we look at it, we can see that God had a plan even if it was unexpected to the people in the Bible. Much in the same way, if you had asked me in high school who would be a fantastic pastor out of my group of friends, I would've chosen somebody who was extroverted, who liked public speaking, who liked to be the center of attention. I was none of those things. In fact, I'm still none of those things today. When I was in high school, if I was assigned a presentation, I would be filled with dread from that moment until I did the presentation. And when the day came, I would get up and be sweating profusely. I would mumble my way through my presentation, and then I would be so relieved when I finally got to sit down and relax afterwards.

I laugh thinking about telling my 17-year-old self that one day I would willingly and even joyfully choose a job in which I regularly talk to big groups of people. Was it expected? No, not at all. And would anyone else have chosen it for me at that time? No, definitely not. But was God able to get me the training and mentorship I needed in order to grow in the skills that I would need to do this job? Yeah, absolutely. Even if it was a total surprise. As we read our Bible though, we see that this is common. God works in ways that surprise people. And when we talk to other Christians, it's often that we hear that people who have walked with God have had God surprise them by the plans God had for their life.

And so this poses the question for you and I, how do we respond when God surprises us? We see two big responses in our texts today that are options to choose from. The first is Herod's response. Now, Herod is unamused at finding the Wise Men on his door front asking about a newborn king. He doesn't want a new king. He doesn't want to share power. He doesn't need anything to change. He likes his life the way it is. In fact, he has no flexibility. He has no ability to see that God is calling him and the people into something new and better than the world that they know. And so he reacts out of fear and tries to say no to God's plan.

Now, I think it's easy to dismiss Herod as someone who we have no similarities to whatsoever. But the truth is, when I really think about it, and I think about myself, at times, I can have reactions like Herod. I don't really like change. I like things to be predictable and logical and for me to understand what is coming next. I thrive when I understand what is expected of me. So when God is nudging me to do something that's in his plan

but wasn't in my plan, often I can react in a way that is resistant to change and stubborn as I try to make my plan happen instead of his.

It reminds me of the character Scrooge in a Christmas Carol. Ebenezer Scrooge is all about thinking about himself and no one else. He has no interest in thinking about the welfare of others or having compassion on them or celebrating Christmas when people seem to do all of the above. Through an incredible unexpected series of events though, Scrooge is visited by three ghosts who show him the impact of his actions in the past, the present, and the future. And it takes all three before he starts to loosen his grip on his approach to life and starts to see that living a different way could be better.

And so it poses the question for us, in what ways are we being Scrooge in our life? In what ways are we being Herod? Where are we holding on tightly to our plans when God might be calling us into his plan?

Now, the three Wise Men on the other hand, they have a different reaction to God moving in their lives. They don't come with all the answers. We believe they're from a different culture and religion, but they were watching the stars and they saw something incredible happen and they decided to respond. Now, they didn't even know about the prophecy of Jesus's birth until they got to Jerusalem. However, they saw that God was doing something that they wanted to be a part of it. They responded, they followed, and they went on a journey to draw closer to God. They were responsive to God's movements, and I want to cultivate that kind of faith in my own life.

When I think about being quick to respond to God, I often think about our dog. Now, as all of our kids can tell you, I have a pug. And if you don't know pugs, they're small dogs and they aren't very athletic, but they're all about taking naps on the couch next to you and eating food, whatever food is available to them. Every night we give my dog some medicine and we wrap it up in a peanut butter treat so that she'll take it, and it is her favorite part of the day by far.

Now, she knows that it's time for her treat of peanut butter medicine when she hears our TV turn off. And so if she's in another room, she will come running. If she's asleep on the couch, she will wake up. She's ready. She's jumping up and down. She's running over to her bowl. She's so excited. And so it makes me think, "Am I that ready to respond to hearing God's movement in my own life? Have I trained my ear to listen to God and know it as well as my dog knows the sound of our TV?"

And how do we do that? How do we train ourselves to be ready? And how do we respond to God's movements? Well, we learn a few pointers from the Wise Men here that we can take into our own lives. First, we accept that God knows more than us. Now, this is hard, but this is something that I continually return to and is so important in our faith

journey with God. I think it's why God's plans always seem so surprising to us because we forget that God knows more than us. And the Bible talks about this. It says this in 1 Corinthians 13:12. "For now, we see only a reflection as in a mirror. Then we shall see face-to-face. Now I know in part, then I will know fully."

We can't see or understand everything. Sometimes it takes years and years to see what God was doing in our lives a decade before. And I think some things we won't fully understand until we get to heaven and we are talking with God and he can explain them to us. And that's why it's so important to hold on to this reality that God knows more than us and we should follow his lead.

Now, some people look at the story of the Wise Men and how they brought gifts to Jesus and think that this might've been part of God's plan to prepare Mary, Joseph, and Jesus because after this story, they had to flee to Egypt to get away from Herod. Now, what did they bring Jesus? Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Not your normal baby shower gifts, right? But these things were worth a lot of money and could have helped them financially to get out of the country and get to safety. Now, we don't know with certainty that that's what they did with these gifts, but I can imagine a world in which God was providing for them through these gifts, through the Wise Men. And I want to be ready to give a gift or follow God's lead, even if it doesn't make sense to me in the moment. When we remember God's wisdom, we can follow his lead even when we don't understand.

The second thing that the Wise Men teach us is that in our journey to respond to God, sometimes we have to ignore others who are not following God's plan. Doesn't that sound easy but it's difficult when we put it into practice? It's especially hard when we're going against what our culture says we should value. For instance, God calls us to give money to the church, but culture often tells us that we should hold onto our possessions. Or, God tells us to love those who the world sees as least important. And so often, when we are going to follow God's plan, we have to ignore the critics and ignore the culture around us.

The Wise Men did this. Herod wanted them to return to him and tell him the location of the newborn king. Can you imagine how dangerous this would've been for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus? Instead, God warned the Wise Men in a dream to go home another way and not return to Herod. Now, I imagine a world in which they might have wondered if they should listen to that dream or if they should have listened to the powerful, rich, influential ruler who they had met in Jerusalem. But the Wise Men show us that sometimes we have to ignore and even say no to the world in pursuit of following God's plan.

Third, the Wise Men teach us what it means to be up for a long journey with God. They were willing to travel a long, long way just to follow God's leading, even if they didn't

know what that meant at the time. Have you ever been on a long trip? What about a long trip with camels and on foot? I'm sure it wasn't a 5-star experience. This trip took time, resources, and a willingness to be uncomfortable along the way. I imagine that at some point on the journey, they started to wonder, "Where are we going? Why are we doing this? Is it even going to be worth it?" But even if they had doubt, they continued on. And in the end, it was worth it to be able to see what God was doing in the world and be a part of Jesus's story.

I mentioned earlier that I would've never guessed that God was going to call me into ministry in my youth. The moment I felt called into ministry, I didn't step into a pulpit. This road has been long for me. The journey has taken me nearly 10 years. The road of going to grad school, learning new things, doing internships, getting over my fear of public speaking, passing exams has been lengthy. And if I'm honest with you, at times I've thought about giving up. But God has been faithful and the journey has been worth it. God has been with me on this journey, and as I look back now, I can see how God has been shaping me and forming me to be the person that he is calling me to be. Was it a journey that I expected to go on? No, but it was a journey that as I look back, I would do a hundred times over because God has been faithful on it.

So as we go into this new year, I encourage you to be open to God's surprises and ready to hear his call. God so loved his world that he sent Jesus because he wants to be friends with us. Let's say yes to that offer. Let's pray. Dear God, thank you for the story of the Wise Men that teaches us to respond to your calling. Help us to remember that your plans are greater than our plans and that we can trust in you. Teach us how to hear your voice above everything else and be up for a journey with you. In Jesus' name, amen.

Discussion Questions:

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

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following (note: we use the same scripture reflection questions each week so that we can practice using the same tools over time as we examine different scriptures):

- What do you feel when you read this scripture (excited, angry, worried, etc....)? Why do you think that is? (Explain in your group and then take that response to Jesus in prayer this week.)
- As you read this scripture, where does it challenge your current cultural context?

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.