

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH
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Every Thing I Need To Know I Learned From The Wise Men
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Merry Christmas! Well, a lot of our church family is traveling, but I know that we probably have some people visiting and so just a warm welcome to Washington DC and, thrilled that you're here this weekend as we continue our series, Let There Be Light. If you have a Bible, you can turn to Matthew the second chapter. We'll get there in just a moment.

A quarter century ago, Robert Fulghum wrote a little book with a long title 'Everything I Need To Know I Learned In Kindergarten'. He shared some simple truisms like, don't hit people, put things back where you found them, don't take things that aren't yours, say you're sorry when you hurt somebody, wash your hands before you eat and flush. A pretty basic but pretty important stuff. I want to borrow Fulghum's title and adapt it just a little bit 'Everything I Need To Know I Learned From The Wise Men'. I want to share some thoughts about the Christmas story this weekend, simple thoughts, but in my experience, game changers.

Matthew chapter two, verse one.

¹ Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

² Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

It says they came from the east, and if you aren't careful, you read right passed that I bet some of you came from the east and the west and the north and the south. But in the first century, the average person never traveled outside a 30 mile radius of their birthplace. We aren't sure exactly what east refers to. Some would say southern Arabia because frankincense and myrrh were native to that part of the world. Others would argue that the wise men may have been a part of the Jewish remnant that remained in Babylon after the Babylonian captivity. Either way, best guess is that they travel about a thousand miles round trip to Bethlehem, which is pretty amazing for the first century and of course they did so on camel back. Here's my point and if you're taking notes, you can jot this down; wise, men, wise women go out of their way to seek God and serve others. Here's what's amazing to me; Bethlehem is only about six miles from Jerusalem and that's a two hour walk tops. The Jewish religious leaders knew based on Micah's prophecy that the Messiah would be born in the city of David, but they aren't willing to take two hours out of their schedule to check this out. They aren't willing to walk six miles out of their way to see if the prophecy has been fulfilled. And then you flip the script, and here are these wise men from the east who are willing to follow a star to Timbuktu, and because they're willing to go out of their way, they make the greatest discovery of their lives, they are the first to worship the Messiah.

I think there are a lot of people who are willing to follow Christ to the point of inconvenience, but no further. We want God to serve our purposes. We want God to get on our timeline. We

want God to do it our way. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way. Now there is a promise in Hebrews 11:6 and it says, "*God is a rewarder of those who earnestly seek him*". Would you be honest this weekend? Are you seeking God? And if you are, are you seeking him first? Jesus said, seek first the Kingdom of Heaven and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you. I think we get this backwards. We want God to add all these things unto us and once we get married, once we have kids, once we get the promotion, once we reached the goal, then we'll seek God first. No, you won't. Not if you don't do it now. I live by this little maxim; "Don't seek opportunity, seek God, and then opportunity will seek you." I believe that. I've experienced that. Now I'm not saying that you should not send out your resume. Okay? And, I have no issue with you putting your best foot forward, but if you have to compromise your integrity for an opportunity, guess what? It's not an opportunity. The Bible would call that a temptation and it's actually something that you need to avoid.

The amazing thing to me about these wise men is that they literally had no idea how far they would have to travel or how long it would take. And that's impressive to someone like me who can tend to be a little impatient. We want God to do what God does ASAP, right? As soon as possible. But we operate a little differently here at NCC. We have a different acronym ALAT 'as long as it takes'. You've got to play the long game. It's about long obedience in the same direction. It's about investing your life in things that will outlive you. It's about storing up treasures in heaven.

As I look back on this past year, I think for me the best moments were not the days that I had nothing to do. It wasn't the easy days. It's the things that were the hardest to accomplish. In the fall Josiah and I rode our bikes, did a little metric century, and by the time we hit that finish line, the quads were cramping and I may have been sore for a few days or weeks and it was painful, but what a great experience. Why? Because it was so hard. I don't know how else to say this, do hard things. Like I just don't think if the Messiah had been right around the corner, I'm not sure that this story reads the same way. I mean, what makes it so remarkable is here are some people who are willing to go out of their way to seek God and to serve others. I think one test of a relationship is how much you're willing to inconvenience yourself for the other person. How far are you willing to go out of your way? One of the most memorable games of my college basketball career was as a freshman; I was playing for the University of Chicago. We had a game at Brandeis University in Boston and my parents drove 15 hours one way, a thousand miles to watch me play that game and then they had to turn around and drive through the night, another 15 hours and a thousand miles to get back home. I wish I could tell you that I scored a career high. The reality is I played five minutes. I was so ticked off at my coach, are you kidding me? My parents just drove a thousand miles and you're going to play me for five minutes. Unbelievable. I was starting by the end of the season, I want you to know. But I'll tell you this that'll make an impression on you. It was one of the least memorable and most meaningful games of my life. Why? Because they went out of their way to show me how much they love me.

So what does that look like? Well, it's probably not a thousand mile pilgrimage on camelback. Here's my challenge for you as we look at a new year. Look for opportunities to inconvenience yourself for the cause of Christ. What does that look like? Well, it probably looks like or 25 mission trips. You're not going to find a trip that's convenient no matter what trip you choose, you will have to take time off of work and you're going to have to raise a budget to go on that

trip. And that's what's so great about it because it's going to get you about a thousand miles outside your comfort zone. And it's not just about being a blessing to the people we serve. It's about the way that God changes our perspective in those kinds of moments.

I think it looks like volunteering for a ministry. It takes about 400 people to pull off a weekend at National Community Church across our seven campuses. That's a pretty heavy lift and you know what it is? I think it's hundreds of people who have made a decision that they're going to get up early on Sunday morning, that they're going to set their alarm on Sunday morning, get up early to serve. That is absolutely inconvenient and so thank you to those of you who serve and I can't think of a better way to grow than to put myself in an uncomfortable, inconvenient situation.

I think it's mentoring at the Dream Center. I think something like 16,000 hours were donated to the DC Dream Center this year. How amazing is that? And that's making a difference in the lives of hundreds of kids.

I think it's those who mentor. We mentored 258 freshman of the city this year who were new to this city trying to adjust to life here in DC and you know what? You said, I'm going to inconvenience myself and I'm going to serve in a way that makes a difference.

I think it's setting your alarm and giving up a little bit earlier to spend time in God's word or to spend time in prayer. A few months ago I had breakfast with a member of the Senate and, you know, it has been a, it's been an intense year on Capitol Hill to say the least, but this Senator shared something that was so encouraging to me. There is a tradition that goes back to World War II of a bipartisan prayer group that meets on Wednesday mornings. And the Senator said it's much harder to stab someone in the back when you've prayed for them in the morning. But I think what I found impressive was I know how crazy that Senators schedule must be. He doesn't have time to go to a weekly prayer meeting, but you know what? He makes the time, does something that's a little bit inconvenient and I have a hunch that if we inconvenience ourselves in that way, that it will advance God's kingdom. The distance to which you're willing to travel, the lengths to which you're willing to go tells me how much you love someone or something.

Now, sometimes when I am a sermon prepping, I'll have funny flashbacks, things I haven't thought of in years. And then you usually get to hear them. So I'm thinking about going out of your way and the craziest memory comes to mind when I was in high school you know you get your driver's license and then it's fun to like drive places. And so we found this little Mexican restaurant El Farol and it was about 30 minute drive from Naperville kinda in towards the city of Chicago and Summit. And, oh man, they had these football size burritos that were amazing until about an hour after you ate them. And, I mean we would make this drive all the time. But one of my friends, after we all eventually went off to college, one of my friends became a sort of a folk hero amongst us. He went to the University of Illinois, it's in central Illinois, I think, Bloomington. And one night around midnight he got a craving for a football size burrito. And so he got in his car and he drove. I actually, Google mapped it; he drove a 142.6 miles one way. He ate and this is what even made it more epic ate two football size burritos. I mean, wow, if I had a hat on, I would take it off right now. And then drove 142 point six miles back to campus. So what I'm getting at is when I say that my friend loved El Farol burritos you can't argue with it, can you? You cannot, because of the distance he traveled.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them the second mile. But the context here is the key, the Jewish people were under Roman rule. That's why Mary and Joseph had to return to Bethlehem to pay taxes to the Roman government. Well, there was a law in the books that allowed a Roman soldier to commandeer a Jewish citizen and forced them to carry their gear for one mile, but only one mile. And so along comes Jesus, and you know, everybody wants to rid themselves of Roman rule. I mean, what he says is pretty counterintuitive and probably offensive to the people who heard it. But wow, he made a point, didn't he? When he said no, don't just carry it one mile, go with them the second mile. In other words, Jesus is telling them to go the extra mile, not for a friend, not for a family member, but for an enemy. I don't know, it just seems to me like we can talk about loving our enemies, but when the rubber hits the road, it probably looks like this. It probably looks like going the extra mile. And so wise men wise women go out of their way to seek God and to serve others. I think it's as simple as that.

Let me share one more thought. Wise men come bearing gifts. We'll pick up the story in verse nine, it says...

⁹ When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

I always like picking the King James around Christmas; it just reads a little differently, like we don't generally walk around, are you experiencing exceeding great joy? But I like it because there's kind of this double emphasis. Can I just ask the question? How's your joy meter? Joy is not getting what you want. It is appreciating what you have. And I pray that the joy of the Lord will be your strength.

Verse 11...

¹¹ And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

¹² And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way."

A few years ago got an email titled the three wise women. It said, do you know what would have happened if it had been three wise women instead of three wise men? They would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts.

I mean, these gifts are interesting, right? Like not exactly what kids ask for it. I mean, get the kid a ancient Jewish action figure, right? But let me ask a question. After the wise men leave, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee the country because Herod goes on a rampage and kills all the male children in this region under the age of two. So here's the question. How does a minimum wage

carpenter who just broke open his piggy bank to pay his taxes to the Roman government, flee the country and fund a trip to a foreign land? How does that happen? Well, gold is a currency that works in any country, and it was the gift that these wise men brought that enabled Joseph and Mary and Jesus to seek asylum in Egypt. I want you to hear what I'm about to say. Your generosity is someone else's miracle. This weekend we're showing 'It's A Wonderful Life' at the miracle theater, one of my favorites. Lora and I usually watch it Christmas Eve and I love the ending. The angel Clarence shows George Bailey played by Jimmy Stewart, how his life altered the course of other people's lives. He visits the grave of his younger brother, Harry, who instead of winning the Medal of Honor during World War II for saving a transport ship would have died at the age of eight because George wasn't there to save him when he fell through the ice. I think what I love about it is that we're not always great at connecting the dots between our obedience and the way God leverages it for his purposes.

So let me try to bring it a little bit closer to home. I want to say thank you at the end of the year for the time, talent and treasure that you have invested in National Community Church. Listen, we would not be who we are without you and your giving, your serving is advancing God's kingdom. We support about 150 missionaries and ministries around the world, and we do that because of your faithfulness in giving. You know that we planted a Bridges Church in Nashville, Tennessee, our first network church. God is doing some wonderful things there. I don't think you do know that we helped plant a church in Chicago, New City Church, seven weeks old, 58 people have put their faith in Christ. How cool is that? And, I want you to know that you're a shareholder in those things that we're investing in.

A few weeks ago, got a voicemail from Josh Mayo who pastors a church down in Atlanta and it was a few years ago that it wasn't the biggest investment we've made, but, I think we invested \$5,000 in that church plant. And he wanted to call me up and let me know that they had just passed the half a million dollar mark in their giving to missions. And he said on the voicemail, I just wanted you to know that you've made a hundred fold return. You see, I think we need to connect the dots that are generosity when we invest in others; listen, there's a domino effect and God's kingdom advances through it.

Let me say one more thing. It says that the wise men brought treasures and that's true, but I think part of the gift was the time and energy that it took to get there. Right? And I think in the same sense when, when we give, when we bring our treasure to God, it's not just money that we're putting in the offering, you traded time and talent for that treasure. And so I've never seen anybody put themselves in one of those popcorn buckets, wouldn't fit too well, but that's what we're doing. We're putting a piece of ourselves because we're investing ourselves in what God is doing.

Let me close with this. A few years ago someone set up a meeting with me wasn't my birthday, was not Christmas, you've heard me share this story. But they presented me with the gift and honestly I was a little confused, I wasn't accustomed to someone just giving me a gift for no reason at all. And, I think I had a little bewildered look on my face. And so the person I was meeting with said wise men come bearing gifts and it's become a way of life for me. It's so fun. Wherever I go, I try to put a bewildered look on people's faces by giving gifts for really no reason at all other than I think wise men, wise women come bearing gifts.

You know, Proverbs 11:24 says...

"²⁴ The world of the generous gets larger and larger; the world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller."

In his book 'Give and Take' Adam Grant talks about givers and takers and matchers. Takers, well, they're the hero of their own story. They think it's all about them, it's all for them. Adam Grant says, takers have a distinctive signature. They liked to get more than they give. They tilt reciprocity in their own favor, putting their interests ahead of others needs. Listen, for a taker life as a zero sum game. The person with the most toys at the end of the game wins.

For giver a love, a giver, loves to add value. Their goal is to out give a because they know that it's all from God and it's all for God's so life is this win, win proposition because they know that at the end of the game all the toys go back in the box.

Listen, as we approach Christmas and a New Year, a couple of simple reminders. Wise men, wise women they go out of their way to seek God and serve others. And so how are you going to inconvenience yourself for the cause of Christ in this coming year? And wise men and wise women come bearing gifts. Let's be the people who give more than we get. Let's be the people who add value wherever we go.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for the joy this Christmas season of celebrating the birth of our Savior. God, I prayed that the reality of what Christ accomplished through his life, and through his death on the cross and through the resurrection would be the reality that we revolve our lives around. God, I pray that you would encourage those who maybe are discouraged, God, that you would restore joy to those who maybe have had a tough year. God, I pray that your love and grace and goodness would flood our hearts during this season and that it would overflow to everybody that we come into contact with. God, we love you and thank you. In Jesus' name. Amen.