

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Hope – Celebration of Hope

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I feel like the last two or three times that I've had the opportunity to preach, I have some sort of announcement that I need to make or some information that I need to share with you. So I just thought this weekend, I would try to keep the streak alive. And so as I was thinking, what is it that I should share that you might need to know? It came to me, I thought about my wife, my wife, Erica. And some of you know that she started a sustainable fashion company, I'm very proud of what she's doing. And she was previously a high school fashion marketing teacher. And people know about her and this fashion and how fashionable she is. And because of all these things, I commonly get either one assumption or one question that I want to just put to rest this weekend. So I want to tell you that no, my wife does not dress me. Thank you for thinking of me so highly. But she does give her opinion. She is an unpaid consultant so I do get feedback from her. But I take full credit for the things that I wear. I feel like I'm fully capable. And I'm grateful for her. And if there's something that I've worn that maybe you didn't like, I won't pass the blame. I'll just leave that there. But yeah, this has nothing to do with my message I just thought I would share that with you this weekend. Something that maybe you should know.

Now to the task at hand. This weekend, we continue our Advent series, Hope. And if you have a Bible, you can meet me in Matthew chapter number two, we'll get there in just a moment.

I love that we're talking about hope during this season. And I feel like it's applicable to my own personal life right now. I was reflecting on when my family moved to Baltimore last year to plant a church. I was thinking about my friend John, when I told John, who was actually now on my board for the nonprofit we started as a forerunner to our church plant. I was in Miss Shirley's restaurant in Baltimore, if you've never been, you got to go. And I was sitting across from John and he said, "Joshua, what we need in Baltimore, is more hope dealers. We've got a lot of stuff going on in the city. We've had a lot of things going on but what we need more of is hope dealers." And as I think about 2020, and all that we've experienced, I mean, man, do we need some hope dealers?

This weekend, I take the baton from my brother, Pastor Joel, who talked last week about the proclamation of hope. And I was reflecting upon what it was that I would say, and just the thoughts that I had and I remembered a story that I have read. I remember a book that I had read in this whole writing journey that I've been on that I'll tell you about someday, but I was reading this book for a particular reason. And it was written by or is written by African American female named Nic Stone. And there's a 17 or 18 year old male protagonists, named Justice. This is a young adult fiction book. And Justice, he lives in the hood. Well, he's from the hood, I should say, and but goes to high school at a predominantly white, private school. And so he's not really accepted in his hood, because it's no longer one of them. And then he's at this private school with an audience that is that is not like him, so he really doesn't fit in there. So Justice is not really fitting in anywhere. So justice decides that he is going to try this little

experiment where he is going to write letters to Dr. Martin Luther King, kind of like a journal or a diary called 'Dear Martin', which is the title of the book. And Justice is hopeful with this experiment. He's trying to take his cue from Dr. King and try to live out his life the way that Dr. King did. So he's inspired as he begins but as he is on this journey, things begin to happen to Justice, he begins to experience different things. And his hope is going up and down or it's yo-yoing. And then all of a sudden, Justice experiences a personal tragedy in his life, a tragedy that is very close, or similar to the types of tragedies that we've seen and experienced in 2020. With this pandemic, and with Coronavirus, and we've seen people lose their lives, we've seen people lose their jobs, people lose their careers. There's just been loss upon loss, in addition to the cultural tension, the political tension, the tension between blacks and whites and other groups and the police and all of these different things. So Justice at the apex of this tragedy, he experiences this drama, he pens a three sentence letter to Dr. King in his journal. And the third sentence really got to me and it stood out. He said, "I can't do this anymore."

And I just wonder as we come to the close of 2020, if that's not an appropriate statement, for many of us, or if it's not a reflection of how many of us are feeling right now. Coming to the end of the year, where at the end of the year, we know that there's a traditional cycle where many go through depression like scenarios, and they struggle in a mighty way. And maybe that's amplified as a matter of fact, I'm sure is amplified in the year like 2020, when we can't be with our loved ones like we want to. We can't do life like we want to. We can't be with others in the way that we want to be with them.

And so I started processing these questions in my head. What do you do? When life blows up? What do you do when the ride that you're on is like a roller coaster that's making you sick? What do you do when the finish line of the race that you're in it seems to be moving further and further away? Or maybe the race is just indefinitely suspended? What do you do when you thought for some reason we were in a post racial society? If you even thought that or you were thinking that, hey, we're past gender discrimination or there's this idea of post segregation ideology. You thought that these things were not so but they have seemed to resurface and we're continuing with problems that maybe I thought we were past.

The real drama normally happens in the middle. It happens in the in between. And I want to just park here for a minute this weekend because I think that's right where we are. And I want to just put a few coins in the meter at Matthew chapter number two, because I think that there's a lot going on in this traditional Christmas story that some of us have heard before. But there's just one little highlight that I want to elevate for us this weekend that I think might be helpful. But before we dive into Matthew two, I think there are a couple of things to think about contextually. The end of the Old Testament is the book of Malachi. The beginning of the New Testament is the book of Matthew. You literally turn the page, and that's a 400 year span. So there's 400 years between these two books in the Bible. And it said that God did not speak during those four hundred years, dark in between time. Now we don't know that to be true or not. What we do know is that in the canon, in the Bible, we don't have anything written there. And so these prophecies of Jesus would have been just ages and ages and generations and generations

ago. Yes, I'm sure there's doubt there's dismissal, like is this really going to happen? Maybe there's some glimmers of hope, possibly massive doubt, maybe by now to some it's a mere tale or folklore. Or maybe it's just this traditional hope that we're kind of sort of holding on to.

Let's begin to take a look in Matthew number two, Matthew verse; I'm sorry, chapter two, verse number one. As we think about what has happened in the past these 400 years now that has been a gap of silence, this middle dark time to now we're at this precipice with these men called the magi.

Let's pick it up in verse number one in chapter two, I'll read you can follow along. It says, *"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² 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."*

Let's skip down to verse seven, it says, *"⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.⁸ 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 may go and worship him."⁹ 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.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.¹¹ 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."*

In response to these questions that I previously posed, what do we do when we're in the middle when we're in the in between this, this space of the proclamation of hope that we talked about last week, to the celebration of hope that we're supposed to be talking about this week? What do we do in that space? I think that the Magi these, these wise men show us a very simple, but yet foundational thing. And it's just simply this, the Magi still pursue. They continue to pursue Jesus. And the key thing that I want to highlight here it is in verse number two, using the Magi's own words, they said, *"We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship Him."*

Pursuit requires vision. It's what we see in our minds, and what we believe in our hearts. Its vision that stirs us and it creates this expectation in us. As a matter of fact, that's what hope is related to - expectation. Last week, Pastor Joel gave us the Hebrew definition of hope in the Old Testament. Well, in the New Testament, that Greek word is called *elpis*. From the root word *elpo*, it means to anticipate or expect with confidence. And so, as I was thinking about this, I just thought about how whatever is guiding us, in the in between the current reality to our anticipated reality, that's usually what our hope is anchored to. The thing that is guiding us and oftentimes, if we're really being honest, what our hope is anchored to in that in between space is our abilities, our resources, the things that we can do and make happen. We're here, we're trying to get to here, what is it that we can do and make happen in the in between?

But what happens when a pandemic shows up unexpected? What happens when there is a loss of resources? What happens when opportunities are cut off? What happens when we can't make anything happen? What happens when our world blows up? Typically, what happens to a lot of us is our *elpis*, our hope blows up as well. We lose our anchor. But I think the Magi give us a significant clue this weekend, because they tell us his star was guiding us. And you probably missed it like I did so I can be a little slow sometimes. So let me help you get it like I got it. His star is not just a star! But the star represents God's word.

We don't know historically or have any record from astronomy about this star. I can't tell you what it was about or what happened during that time. But what this implicates is that something supernatural happened. The Magi, they knew, they believe, and they understood the prophecy of the Messiah. They knew God's word and they had a revelation of God's word that is what caused them to continue to pursue. That's a significant example for us, especially those of us who follow Jesus. Because regardless of the circumstances, regardless of whether we have evidence or not, regardless of what is or isn't happening, we are not pursuing an outcome we are pursuing his word. We are not pursuing a goal we are pursuing his word, his promises. And the Magi were simply pursuing what had been promised. They had no evidence that it had actually happened. There isn't even any physical or historical evidence that this star that they say they saw actually was an event but we know something supernatural happened that they saw and they pursued.

This is not unlike anything that we have seen before in the biblical narrative, God revealing himself to those who pursue based upon His Word and His promises. Let me just hit the rewind button, just in case we need a refresher or some of us didn't know at all. Noah, God tells him to build a boat, there's gonna be rain, there's never been rain. Noah is out there looking crazy y'all building a boat and it ain't even rain yet. He's chopping wood. He's working hard day and... And I'm sure people will compare like look at that dude right there. Noah, looking cray, but it rained, and God's spared him and his family and blessed the earth through him.

Abraham is moving his family. He doesn't have a forwarding address. He doesn't have a moving company for this caravan. They walk it. "Abraham, where are we going, bro?" "I don't know we're going this way." And we all know when God tells us that we... Who does that? Nobody does that. And on top of that, God told Abraham listen, *"I'm gonna bless you and create a nation from you."* And he had no kids.

I'm gonna keep going, Moses. Moses comes back to the land that he's a fugitive from Egypt. And all he has, and this is what I heard one preacher say, is a stick and a stutter because he wasn't confident in his ability to speak. He was self conscious about that. But yet he goes to the most powerful person in the land because God told him to do it to say let my people go and the people were let go.

Rahab was a madam. But she put her life on the line to hire two spies because she heard God's word that he had promised the land to Israel. The word wasn't even given to her yet she heard it took it for herself and God spared her.

Samuel breaks protocol. He's going to anoint the next king. God has rejected Saul. And Samuel shows up and God says, "Oh, hold up. I'm not looking at the outward appearance. I'm looking at the heart." So Samuel goes person by person by person and the next king is not even in the room. Samuel said we will not sit down until the boy in the field comes in. And that was the next king Samuel, adheres to God's word.

I'm gonna keep going Nehemiah, because this is encouraging me. Nehemiah, listen, Nehemiah is a taste tester, y'all for foreign king. He's leaving his good government job to go back home to build a wall. And we don't see anywhere in Scripture that he is a licensed contractor that he has any skill set to do that. But he responded to what God put in his heart and he built a wall in record time.

Last but not least, Esther there's an edict against people and it's bad but she's the queen. And maybe she could have hid behind her position. But her nephew said, "Yo, listen, you can't hide behind your position. Maybe you're here for such a time as this." And so Esther put herself out there for her people. And God moved on her behalf because something was stirring in her.

The point I'm trying to make is our hope should be in his word and in his promises. And this is the reason why we see several times in Psalms it says, "My hope is in your word." David even said, God, please don't have me out here looking crazy. Don't embarrass me. My hope is in your word. David knew that we could count on his word. Isaiah 55:10, what is this word Pastor Joshua? This is this is just one example, Isaiah 55:10, 11, *"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, ¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."*

Pastor Joel said it last week, and I think I just need to repeat it. Too many times, our hope is a wish it's not his word. And the Magi I pursued based on the word spoken about the birth of Jesus. The challenge that many of us face is that our star, what is guiding us is not God's word. We're following a different star. Maybe our star is democratically aligned, maybe it's Republican, we're aligned Republican, or maybe it's capitalistic, or socialist. Or maybe it's aligned with this career path or these other boxes that we're trying to check for our own security. Listen, if our star or our hope is in these things, then our hope goes up and down with those things.

So then the question is what is your hope, anchored to? And I think the answer to that question, is where we were supposed to land this weekend? Because I think the answer to that question determines our celebration of hope. Let me just end it this way. The Magi are interrupted, in the middle of their journey.

King Herod, who is - he's not a fan at all of Jesus. Matter of fact, he's scared of what he's heard. He interrupts and inserts his agenda for what he wants the Magi to do.

And just as a side note, on your way to pursuing what God has put in your heart on your way to responding to his word, somebody is going to try to interrupt with their agenda. I heard a pastor in his area, say, especially in Washington, DC, if you're not on God's agenda, somebody else has one for you. But the Magi will focus on the star that was guiding them. And although they made it to Jesus, as we read, they brought their gifts, they worshipped him. The celebration of hope for the Jesus follower is not destination dependent. The Magi we're not worshipping and celebrating because it was the end, it was just another revelation. Because he was just a baby this kingdom that had been prophesied and this Messiah that would take this the small nation and lead them, none of that had happened yet, this was just another revelation. And so the celebration was about confirmation, not destination. Worship is about who God is not what God does. And because of that, we can rejoice in hope, like Paul was telling the Christians in Rome. He said, we can rejoice in hope, because our hope is in his word. That's where our hope is. Because sometimes the circumstances around us don't look like what we anticipate or what we will want but we have to stand on his word because circumstances change, things change, my God, people change but his word never changes. Ultimately, what God promised through Jesus was a new kingdom. And the Magi were celebrating a confirmation of what was to come.

I'm going to ask our band to come and lead us in a time of worship. And as they're coming, I just want to ask you, if you feel like you're good with the proclamation of hope, but you're on the struggle bus to get to the celebration of hope. Let me just tell you can celebrate right now. As a matter of fact, you can worship right now because it's not dependent upon some destination but how we live our lives in expectation is worship. The decisions that we make, and how we do what we do is a reflection of the hope in our lives that is worship and so are we standing on God's word? Are we responding to the revelations of God's word like the Magi were? Or are we responding to something else?

I think there are just two categories that I want to just engage right now this weekend. Maybe you just need prayer; you're a believer in Jesus. And, you know, it's just it's been a hard year I mean; it's been a hard year for me. It's been a hard year for my family. It's been a hard year for my brother, Pastor John Kelly in Chicago who said, 70 people he knows have experienced loss - 70 and it continues to grow. And maybe you just need prayer. God help me to be able to worship you in spite of what I'm feeling right now, in spite of what I'm seeing right now. Don't let me be guided by another star. Let the star be your word and help me to keep my eye on that. You can just click the prayer button. We have people waiting to pray with you.

And the second group is maybe you need to accept Jesus. This is the ultimate gift that God gave to us. The birth of Jesus that the Magi were pursuing and celebrating what was it? It was a gift to us. Won't you receive that gift this weekend? You can raise your hand there's a little button for you to do that on the screen. And if you're in either one of these groups, and maybe you're driving, or maybe you're in

your cubicle, or maybe you're folding clothes right now in your bedroom, or whatever it is you're doing it and you can't click anything I'm just going to pray for all of us right now and I'm going to include you in that prayer. Will you pray with me?

God, we thank you so much for who you are. And because of who you are and because of your word, because it doesn't change we can celebrate, even though it might be jacked up right now. It might be crazy right now. But God you said your word would accomplish what you said it would that it wouldn't return back to you void we are standing on that today. We are coming for you like David; please do not embarrass us because we're putting ourselves out here. To the person who is on the struggle bus from the proclamation of hope on the way to celebrate some hope they feel like they're in that middle space. God help them to realize it is not about a destination but we can celebrate what you have done what you are doing and what you will do right now because we can trust you. And to the person who needs to receive your Son, Jesus, I thank you for that brother and sister who's opened up their heart this weekend and say, you know what, I've tried everything else. I need to give my life to Jesus. God, we thank you for giving us that gift and we thank you for those who have received that gift this weekend. And these things we ask in your son Jesus' name. Amen.