

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Hope – Christmas Eve

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I wish we were together right now. COVID feels a little bit like the Grinch that Stole Christmas to some of us. But you know what we made a decision at the beginning of this Advent series that we choose hope. It's been a hard year in so many different ways. But that is when and where and why we celebrate the reason for this season, Emmanuel, God with us the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

So Merry Christmas Eve to each and every one of you. I'm going to keep it short and sweet. I know you have dinner in the oven, you have stockings to open, you might even have a few gifts yet to wrap and so three simple thoughts on this Christmas Eve - One, worship God like the wise men. Two, seek God like the shepherds. Three, trust God, like Mary, and Joseph.

In Matthew's Gospel, we read the story about the Magi who followed the star all the way to Bethlehem best guess they traveled about 1,000 miles one way. Pretty impressive given the fact that the average person didn't travel outside a 30 mile radius of their birthplace and their GPS was a star. They didn't know where they would end up but that didn't keep them from starting out. That sounds a lot like faith. Faith is taking the first step before God reveals the second step. And they don't come empty handed, Wise men come bearing gifts. Matthew chapter two verses 11, says they entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary. They bowed down and worshiped him. Now, this is not normal, right? They bow down and worship Him. They open their treasure chest and give him a baby Yoda. Not exactly. They give him an ancient action Jewish action figure. No. What do they give him? It says they open their treasure chest and give him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

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

I think the Christmas story reads wrong in so many different ways. Right? I mean, a virgin gets pregnant, a baby born in a manger because there's no room in the inn. The angel appears to shepherds instead of religious leaders and it sure seems like the wise men bring the wrong gifts. But what happens next? Well, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt because King Herod is about to go on a rampage. And so here's the \$64,000 question. How does a minimum wage carpenter who broke open his piggy bank to pay his back taxes fund a trip to a foreign country? Well, gold is the gift that keeps on giving, right. Gold is a currency in any country. Simply put, the Wisemen's gift is Joseph and Mary's miracle.

At the end of 2020 I want to say a heartfelt thank you for your generosity in giving during this COVID crisis you've given more than \$600,000 to this Relief Fund so that we could bless and help hundreds and hundreds of people. I just heard this week about an NCC small group packed 1000 shoe boxes for Samaritan's Purse for Christmas. You know DC Dream Center served more than 55,000 meals. Listen, those aren't just gifts those are miracles for those who are on the receiving side. Your gift is someone else's miracle.

And so, we worship God, like these Wiseman and we seek God like the shepherds. Luke's Gospel says that there were shepherds out in the fields by night, an angel of the Lord, with or without sunglasses, appears to them, and it says they were sore, afraid. I kind of like the Christmas story in the original King James. *"And the angel says, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."*

Well, what do the shepherds do? Luke 2:17 says they hurried to Bethlehem. I love the way that Max Lucado captures this moment. He said, "Had the angels gone to theologians, they would have first consulted their commentaries." Now, listen, nothing wrong with commentaries. *"Study to show yourself approved,"* II Timothy 2:15. But birds don't need ornithologist to fly and fish don't need ichthyologists to swim. Are you picking up with throwing down? God doesn't need theologians to do miracles? "Had he gone to the elite," says Max, "they would have looked around to see if anybody was watching. Had he gone to the successful they would have first looked at their calendar. So he went to shepherds - Men who didn't have a reputation to protect didn't have an ax to grind didn't have a ladder to climb. Men who didn't know enough to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep that messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags and sleeping in a feed trough."

This, I believe, is the season for us to seek God and I don't mean second, or third, or 10th. *"Seek first His kingdom and his righteousness,"* Matthew 6:33, *"and all these other things will be added unto you."* Now we want God to add all these other things to us first, right then and only then we'll see God. But that isn't the way it works that sequence is backwards. And so here's my advice going into a new year. Don't seek opportunity, seek God and opportunity will seek you. And so we worship God, like the wise men, we seek God like the shepherds, and we trust God like Mary and Joseph.

When the angel tells Mary that she is going to conceive and give birth to a son. Mary asked the obvious question. How can this be since I am a virgin? Now we know the rest of the story but Mary does not. Luke 1:29 says that Mary was troubled and disturbed and confused. Sounds an awful lot like 2020, doesn't it? The Christmas story is not neat and clean but Mary makes a choice she chooses to trust.

Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrists and Holocaust survivors said that everything can be taken from a man but one thing. What is that one thing? The last of human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. I'm talking to you today. This Christmas we choose joy. We choose grace and

peace. We choose faith, hope and love. And we choose to trust, we trust God's will, we trust God's way. And you know what maybe the hardest thing of all we trust God's timing.

Just a little reminder, the virgin birth is an oxymoron. This is biologically impossible. Faith is not logical, but it isn't illogical. Faith is theological. In other words, it adds God to the equation of every situation we find ourselves in, that's what Mary does. I think part of what makes this impressive is the fact that best guess Mary is a teenager. Okay, that means her prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain responsible for consequential thinking for complex decision making, isn't even fully developed. Well what does she do? It says that she pondered these things in her heart. It reminds me of the kaleidoscope that Pastor Joel looked through last weekend. Scripture says she kept revolving in her mind what the angel might mean. In other words, she kept turning that kaleidoscope.

If you're in a situation, you're having a hard time figuring some things out. Listen, 2020 - hard to make sense of it. You know what; there are some situations you can't reason your way out of them. You need a revelation from God and Mary gets a revelation. In fact, a couple of revelations - you are blessed, you are highly favored, and God is with you. All of us want a miracle. None of us want to be in a situation that necessitates one, but you cannot have one without the other. And this is when we choose to trust not when everything makes sense. No, we choose to trust when nothing makes sense.

I have a Deuteronomy 29:29. File, you've heard me talk about it. It says that the revealed things belong to us, but the secret things belong to God. There are some things that won't make sense on this side of the space time continuum. Why? Because we're not omniscient. There are lots of things that are past our pay grade. So guess what, my file got a little thicker this year, but I am exercising my trust muscle and I am exercising faith and hope and love as we celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior. And as we look to a New Year one or two things will happen over time. Either your theology will conform to your reality, or your reality will conform to your theology. Trust is the difference between those two things.

I want to invite our worship team to come back we're going to continue to worship God with a couple of Christmas carols. Let me say this trust is not naive. We confront the brutal facts, but we do it with on wavering faith. And so when you cannot see the hand of God, you have to trust his heart. I remain confident of this Psalm 27:13 "I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living." And so this Christmas, we worship God like those Wisemen, we seek God like those shepherds, and we trust God like Mary and Joseph. Merry Christmas.