

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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Advent: Everything I Need To Know, I Learned From The Wise Men

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Welcome to National Community Church! We are thrilled that you are here as we continue the 'Advent' series. Just a note, I am super excited about our Christmas Eve service at the Lincoln Theater. A live nativity! You never know what a live animal might do! Things it could leave behind on the stage. It could be a very exciting Christmas Eve service. So if you have kids or if you are a big kid, I encourage you to come and maybe even invite a friend to come with you to Christmas Eve at Lincoln Theater at 5:00.

Turn to Matthew Chapter 2 and we'll get there in just a moment.

A number of years ago, I read a book, a brilliant little book by Robert Fulghum entitled All I Really Need To Know, I Learned in Kindergarten. He shared a few of those simple lessons. I'll share a couple of them with you. Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Don't take things that aren't yours. Flush! Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. Take a nap every afternoon. When you go into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands and stick together. I love those! Those are so simple and so profound.

Now, in the same vein this weekend, everything I need to know, I learned from the wise men! So I want to share a couple of those lessons with you. Let's read Matthew 2

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² 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."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ 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. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*⁶ "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.'"*

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 too 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.

We are not entirely sure where the wise men came from or who they were. We don't know how many wise men there were. We tend to think there were three because there were three gifts and someone wrote a song, We Three Kings of Orient Are. In fact, our media team put three wise men in the little video they created for our 'Advent' series. But the truth is, we don't really know if there were three or a caravan and we don't know exactly where they were from. We are told that they were from the East but we don't know if it was near East or Far East. I know, none of you are losing sleep over these kinds of questions and we will get practical in a moment but I think it helps to know a little something about the story. I think Babylon is a good guess. And if they were from Babylon, it was about a 1,000 mile trek on camelback one way. What is remarkable about that is that the average person never traveled outside of a 35 mile radius of their birthplace in this day and age. So in my estimation, this would have to rank as one of the most remarkable expeditions in history. Again, we are not sure exactly who they were. The term 'magi' originally referred to the priestly cast in Persia but then it was more broadly applied throughout history to scholars and astrologers to magicians, but even magician is misleading because that tended to refer to someone who knew a little something about medicine. We don't call our doctors magicians, they did back then. So we also don't know whether they were Gentile or possibly even part of a remnant that after the captivity in Babylon perhaps stayed in Babylon and knew some of these ancient prophecies and traditions.

So what I'm saying is, there is so much about this story that we do not know. But everything I need to know, I learned from the wise men. So let me share a couple of these lessons learned. The first one we are going to touch on and the second one we are going to hit and the third one we will spend more time with.

First of all, wise men follow the star. Let's just make sure the ladies don't feel left out this weekend. Wise women follow the star as well! We are all on the same page. But just for the sake of this story, wise men follow the star. It says: We saw his star in the East and have come to worship Him. Now, we've heard this story many of us so many times that we don't even really stop to think about any dimension of this story whatsoever and it has almost become like white noise, if you will. But I think this is significant.

One of my most memorable moments from this year was a little retreat in the hills of Tennessee. I know someone who has a chateau perched high up on a hill in the middle of nowhere. It is picturesque. One night, we were out around the fire pit and what I noticed around midnight, I just looked up and there are more stars in Tennessee than there are in Washington DC! Actually there aren't but our city lights block out those stars so we can't see them. As I looked up, it was breathtaking. So Ryan Zemple took his phone and pointed it towards the sky. I was thinking to myself that picture is not going to turn out unless your camera is way better than mine. I was chuckling, silly Ryan. Come to find out, he has an app that when you point it at the sky, it connects the dots so that all of the constellations appear! So you are no longer just looking at random stars in the sky but at this map of galaxies and constellations. It was pretty cool! I am not star guy. I know the sun and maybe the North Star but the rest of them are just a bunch of dots in the sky. But he was pointing out the Big Dipper and then there is a bear up there! And

there is a lady up there, I forget her name. But it connected all the dots and all of a sudden, the night sky became more miraculous to me.

Just for the sake of simplicity, here is what I want to suggest, there are billions of miracles right above us but most of us never even take the time to look up or to appreciate what we are looking at or appreciate that the light that left those stars left them a long, long, long time ago! So I think what happens is it is so easy for us to miss the miracle.

Psalms 19 is one of my favorites because it was my grandfather's favorite. He quoted it to me when I was six years old during an unforgettable moment. We were looking for a Christmas tree to cut down in Minnesota on a cold, snowy night. I'll never forget it. And I love this song.

Heavens declare the glory of God and the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech. Night after night, they reveal knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

But if we aren't careful, we stop staring at the stars. We stop star-gazing. We stop following the stars.

Now, just for juxtaposition, let me try this on for size. Please don't let this come across as me pointing a finger at you because as the old saying goes, then there are three pointing back at me. This is not me coming down on anybody but let me take a little survey. This year, was there ever a moment when you bumped into somebody because you were walking while texting or tweeting or angry birding? I need to see your hands, to know that I'm not alone. That has happened to me. Now just to see if we can include a few more people, how many of you were at a meal this year with friends or family and at some point in the meal, you just happened to notice that everybody was on their phone simultaneously? Ok that gets just about everybody. This is going to sound cliché but I'm making a point. I think at some point we stop staring at the stars and we start staring at our phones. And our world gets smaller and smaller and we lose the sense of wonder that when Jesus said you must become like little children, I think much of that is recapturing a wonder for our Creator and his creation.

So all I know is this, we've got some wise guys who are looking at the stars and there has to be this holy curiosity, this sense of wonder as they look into the night and it tells me a lot about them. I wonder if we stop doing that. How many moments have you had where you've just been lost in the awe? Life is not measured in minutes, it is measured in moments. Those moments are when we look up and come alive. But of course, the wise men didn't just star at those stars, they followed the stars and this is where the story gets so interesting. We assume it because it is all we've ever known. It is the way the story goes. I wonder, were there some not wise men who saw the star and didn't follow it? I bet there were some not wise men who had the same opportunity to follow a star but did not do it.

I've hiked the Grand Canyon from rim to rim, it was awesome! It was hard. But here's the thing, there was a trail and markers on that trail so that it would be almost impossible to get lost. I have hiked the Inca Trail and that was four of the greatest days of my life. But we had a guide and we had porters who carried our stuff, including my inflatable mattress. Yea, that's exactly what

everybody else on the trip did when I pulled out the motor and they hear this noise as I filled it up but I slept great! I believe in adventure, comfortable adventure with a good night's sleep! Those are some of the greatest adventures of my life but part of what I'm putting out here is following this star is an adventure that is in a category all by itself. There was no trail. There was no map. There was no guide. All they had was a star to guide them. They didn't know where they were going or how long it would take to get there or who it was they were trying to find.

Here's what I'm saying, this is one of the greatest leaps of faith in all of Scripture. You had Abraham who left his family and his country to go to the Promised Land and we just say, oh yeah, Abraham, that's awesome. But in my estimation, the wise men upped the ante. To me, this is even a bigger leap of faith. We don't even know that they heard the voice of God. At least Abraham did. But something in them enables them to take this step of faith. I think if I could zoom way out and get us to look in the mirror for a moment, I would ask the question, are you following the star? The dream that God has put in your heart, just going after God, I love that old Christmas card that says wise men still seek Him. I think it is the greatest card ever.

Here's what I'm getting at and this is the point we sometimes miss. Who should have found the Messiah? It should have been the religious leaders who were in Jerusalem five miles from Bethlehem. But they wouldn't even go five miles out of their way to see if the Messiah was in fact born. But you have these ancient wise men who go way out of their way, at least 1,000 miles out of their way to discover Him. And they discovered Him and it changed their lives. It changed the course of history because that one divine appointment helped save Mary and Joseph and Jesus.

Ok, let's talk about number two. I think wise men jump for joy. This will make more sense in a moment. Verse 10 says

When they saw the star, they were filled with joy.

And that's the phrase I want to come back with because the New Living Translation doesn't quite capture it but we'll get there in a second. I want to be careful how I share this because it is so easy to make overstatements depending on whatever topic you are preaching on and I don't want to do that, but I do think this is something we need to here. So let me say it this way, I'm not sure what our biggest short-coming is, that we sin too much or celebrate too little. Another way of saying it would be I don't know if our biggest short-coming would be not feeling bad enough in terms of true genuine repentance for what we've done wrong or celebrating what God has done right, his righteousness, his goodness, his greatness. I just don't think we celebrate the goodness or greatness of God as much as we could or should. I don't think we celebrate life or celebrate love like we could or should. I don't think we celebrate the little blessings or the big blessings as much as we could or should. I don't think that we enjoy life, enjoy the journey or enjoy God nearly as much as we could or should. The shorter Westminster Catechism says that the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. It is the second half that I think we forget. We leave it off. We don't realize that God wants us to enjoy Him.

Earlier this year, and you can tell I'm in reflection mode because I'm sharing a few things I've shared before but I think sometimes some things are worth sharing twice. I think this was a

critical insight for us as a church, that we get in trouble when we interpret literal passages of Scripture figuratively and figurative passages of Scripture literally. One leads to legalism and the other one leads to whew, I don't know, but it doesn't get you anywhere. Let me give you a few examples. *Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. This is the day the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstance, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.* Figurative or literal? I think many of us take those figuratively, that what they really apply to are good days. I would push back and say they probably apply more to our bad days. These are commands that are meant to be taken literally. That doesn't mean that you party like it's 1999, which is the same thing as saying party like Pastor Allen. I'm just sharing the love and speaking the truth. He knows how to shut it down if you know what I mean. But it does mean that you have the joy of the Lord no matter what, no matter when, no matter where. The joy of the Lord is this emotional baseline for you.

Stop and think about this angelic announcement of the birth of Christ. They could have announced it any way they wanted to, right? But what did they say? We bring good news of great joy. We bring good news of great joy! This is the announcement of the gospel. So if you reverse engineer this whole thing, I think what you get back to is that one differentiating factor for those of us who follow Christ ought to be great joy. There ought to be great joy! We ought to be the most joyful people on the planet! It doesn't mean have to smile like you're a televangelist. But you ought to smile more. You ought to smile more in keeping with your personality and character. You ought to laugh more. We ought to be a little better at having fun because we take God seriously but we don't take ourselves seriously. I think the happiest, healthiest, holiest people on the planet are the people who laugh at themselves the most.

Again, just step back and I want to paint a picture here because I want to make sure we get this. Look at the Old Testament and you'll find that God has instituted seven feasts. Feasts are just religious parties, celebrations if you will, and they are the rhyme and reason of the Jewish calendar, the rhythm of life. The Feast of Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and each one of these has a very different point of emphasis or purpose. The Feast of First Fruits, the Feast of Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Feast of Yom Kippur and the Feast of Tabernacles. Why would God ordain seven feasts? I don't want to just throw this out there to prove a point. I think part of it certainly is that the Jewish people were good at remembering what they should forget and forgetting what they should remember. But so are we. A feast is a good way to keep the main thing the main thing. We know, because of the holidays we celebrate, and not every Christmas song is about the birth of Jesus, is it? We've got Jingle Bells. And it is easy to get off focus and I think it is ok to watch a 30-minute documentary about Frosty the Snowman. Don't get me wrong, but that has nothing to do with what Christmas is about. So, the same thing happened in Jewish culture that happens in our culture. It is easy to lose the reason for the season. But what I am saying is this, I think God wanted to teach his people how to celebrate. So He gave them seven feasts so that I weave joy into your lives and the ability to celebrate into your lives.

I believe that when we worship God, we are most closely reflecting what is happening in heaven because Revelation 4 lets us look through the floorboards of heaven and what we see are those who are worshipping God nonstop, the elders, the angels, those who have gone before us. But I think the second best reflection is celebration. The reason I say that is because Luke 15 says that

all of heaven rejoices when one sinner is saved. So if you looked at all the people all around the world that got saved every day, there wouldn't be a second that goes by that someone isn't putting their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. So what that tells me in a very literal way, the celebration never stops in heaven. But I think then we also have to personalize it and realize that the moment you turn from sin to Christ, in that moment, you set off a celebration in all of heaven. How awesome is that? So when we celebrate, we are doing what they are so good at in heaven. And I think that is part of what it means to be a wise man.

Here's what I love about this. These were ancient intellectuals, so forgive me for saying this because I know a lot of intellectuals who are very in touch with their emotions, but sometimes intellectuals can be a little bit more cerebral and less emotional. They don't laugh out loud as easily. They don't spontaneously celebrate without research and analysis. So the wise men, I'm just playing with you a little bit, these are ancient PhD guys but they haven't forgotten how to laugh. They haven't forgotten how to have fun and how to celebrate. Why do I say that? It says they were filled with joy. The NIV says they were overjoyed, so they were overdosed on joy. The ESV says rejoiced exceedingly with great joy, and the MAB says jumped for joy like little children. (Those are my initials!) I might start incorporating my translation a little bit more over the next year and I will try to make sure it is not heretical! It is a combination of four words in the Greek language. It takes four words in the Greek language to describe what is happening within. It is like spontaneous combustion of joy that just comes out. Part of it is if you've been traveling for 1,000 miles, you are going to be happy you are here! We have finally arrived! I'm sick and tired of my camel! We have found what we are looking for!

Here's my question, did you rejoice as much as you could have or should have this past year? Is that perhaps one of your great short-comings? Did you count your blessings enough times? Did you enjoy the journey? Did you hit your laugh quota? Did you smile as much as you could have and should have?

Let me tell you where joy is found and then we will go to the last point. It is found in the exact same place where the wise men found it. Not Bethlehem, not following a star, it is found in the person of Jesus Christ. True joy is only found in the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross. You haven't experienced joy until your sin has been forgiven and forgotten and until you have come to the realization that you are the apple of God's eye. That's what the Bible calls you. You can't change all of your circumstances but you can change your focus. Hebrews 12 says fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.

Let me tell you something right here, if you fix your eyes on sin, you are doing exactly what the enemy wants you to do. You will feel depressed and defeated. So my advice is don't focus on your sin. Your sin has been confessed. Focus on your Savior! You've got to flip that coin and it will flip your life! Christmas is not just a celebration of the birth of Christ, it is a celebration of his sinless life and his substitutionary death on the cross.

John 3:16 says *For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

You might not get what you want under the tree. I'm sorry about that. But if you kneel at the foot of the cross, you will get a gift unlike any gift ever offered. It is the gift of salvation. It is the gift of your sin forgiven in one fell swoop. It is the gift of being in right relationship with the One who created you, the One who has plans and purposes for your life. It is the gift of abundant life and eternal life.

I love the story about the little girl who was asked if she got what she wanted for Christmas and she thought about it for a second and she said, 'No, but then again, it is not my birthday!' I love that little girl! I don't know if she is real or not but whether it is made up or not, it is true! It is not our birthday! It is the birth of Christ.

Here's what I love about this. It is the birthday of Jesus but He brings the gift, the gift of salvation. All we have to do is receive it. John 1 says to as many as have received Him, to them He gave the power to become children of God.

Let me talk about this third lesson. Wise men follow the star. Wise men jump for joy like little children. And wise men come bearing gifts. Verse 11 says they entered the house and saw the child with his mother Mary and they bowed down and worshipped Him and then they opened their treasure chest and gave Him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Ok dial in. I'm going to tell you about one of the defining moments of my year and you will think I'm kidding. But it changed my life.

I had a meeting with someone. I had never met them before. They came into my office on a Wednesday afternoon and sat down and I had no idea what the purpose of the meeting was but before we did anything, he pulled out a gift and gave it to me. I was thinking to myself it is not my birthday or Christmas, why was he bringing me a gift. He said something that has become a way of life for me. He said, 'Wise men come bearing gifts.' What did I just hear? So do you know what I did this year? I stole the idea! I love going places and bringing a gift and saying, 'Wise men come bearing gifts!' It doesn't matter whether it is at Ebenezers occasionally paying for the person behind me. This week, it was cool, Lora was at Potomac Yard shopping and her minivan got a flat tire so I went out and changed it and then drove it into the repair shop and while I was at it, I got an oil change and tune up because I had to go for inspection. The next day, I went to pick it up and I paid for it and printed out the credit card receipt and signed on the dotted line and he gave me the key. One little problem, it was not my key. The craziest thing though, the woman whose car it was was right behind me and she said, 'That's mine.' So I was thinking, this is no accident. So I turned and said, 'Merry Christmas, your car repair is paid for, here's your key.' She started bawling! We had a little moment, me, the mechanic, the gas station owner and this lady. She couldn't stop crying and she kept saying thank you over and over and I kept saying Merry Christmas. I didn't pull this out but I should have, 'Wise men come bearing gifts!'

Here's the thing. I'm just going to put it out there because I don't want you to think it was too great. It was \$41 bucks, probably an oil change or something minor but evidently it was \$41 she didn't have, or maybe it had been a long time since anyone had given her a gift for no reason at all. I just wonder if we were truly wise men and wise women if we would just look for opportunities to come bearing gifts. How can we be a blessing to the people that are all around us

all the time? It doesn't have to be something financial. Some of the greatest gifts I've gotten are words of encouragement just spoken right when I needed to hear it. Or even something small, or the gift of time or a batch of cookies, it doesn't take a ton of effort or a ton of money. I just think wise men come bearing gifts. It is how I'm trying to live my life. I'm trying to figure out how to live this out.

For the past ten years, I've served as a trustee for a charitable trust. It is so joyful. We give grants to ministries that are just getting started. But there is a certain qualification. We are not looking to pad anybody's pocket or to pay for programs. There was a stipulation in the original trust document that this would be miracle money. In other words, that those who were the recipients of it would perceive it to be a miracle to help whatever dream God had given them become reality. So it is our litmus test and every year, we remind ourselves of this as trustees. And time and time again, we have heard back from people who have gotten the grant that it was a miracle. It was just a gift, but it was a miracle. It was a gift, it was a miracle. They are the same thing. Your gift is someone else's miracle. It might be a \$41 miracle or it might be something else.

But I'm looking at this story and thinking to myself that these gifts were not just gifts for Mary and Joseph. I mean they seem like the wrong gifts. Has any child in the history of the world had myrrh on their Christmas list? Give the kid an ancient action figure or something like David with a sling shot! These are the wrong gifts? No, they are the perfect gifts! Joseph is warned in a dream that he has to flee to Egypt. How does a minimum wage carpenter have the money to pay for a trip to a foreign country, especially when he has gone to Bethlehem to pay taxes? See, we ignore the financial reality in this story. Mary and Joseph needed a miracle and that miracle was provided by someone that God sent 1,000 miles. I'm not saying they ran to the closest pawn shop and turned it in for cash, but I know gold will get you a long way towards Egypt! So their gift was a miracle for Mary and Joseph. I don't think anything has changed. Your gift is someone else's miracle.

So I hope you hear this from the bottom of my heart, I am so overwhelmed by the faithfulness and the generosity and the giving spirit of this church. I want to say thank you because I really do believe that it translates into miracles. This year, I think it is going to be somewhere around 1.3 million dollars that we've given to missions. I promise you this, it is a miracle for those who are on the other side receiving it. Summer went on the Zambia trip and the orphanage there and the kids we are helping to support that ministry, it is a miracle. Our gifts are a miracle for that ministry! This year, I believe it was 96 people went public with baptism and hundreds more crossed the line of faith and so many hundreds more have found a church home where they found a spiritual family, a place where they belong, a place where they can grow spiritually. None of that would be possible if it wasn't for all of us giving the way God has led us to give. And it has led to all these different miracles God is doing.

One of them is the Dream Center. A year ago, you gave 3 million dollars in about 3 months. Why? Because we are bound and determined, not on our watch, we are not going to let some of the things that are happening in our city happen without us rolling up our sleeves and doing something about it. We are going to be the hands and feet of Christ. We are going to bless our

city and we are going to do it from places that are more difficult than others. So I thank you for that.

Secondly as a way of checking back in as we've tried to do over the last couple of months. The wise men, it was 1,000 miles straight line, but there were deserts and bodies of water and mountains. It wasn't a simple straight shot and the Dream Center has not been a straight shot. And we wanted to let you in when the vote didn't go our way in that first meeting. We asked you to pray. Sometimes we share the miracle that happens afterwards instead of some of the challenges we go through during it and we weren't sure how this one would turn out. The second meeting was more favorable but the meeting ended in chaos and we were still up in the air. Thursday night, at the dinner table, I got a text from Pastor Joel that said unanimous favor! We thank God for those commissioners who gave us their favor. More than that, we thank God for his favor. If his favor is upon us, we are going to find favor in the things we put our hands to. So this has been the longest journey and we have a January 14th meeting with the zoning commission, which is the next step. So we need to continue to pray for favor. But what I'm saying is, your giving has set us up to experience a miracle and once we get this thing built, it is going to be a miracle for every kid who walks through that door. Every kid who walks through that door is a miracle waiting to happen and your giving made it possible. So thank you.

Lord, I pray that You would help us today to hear your Word and to respond to it. Lord, I pray for those who maybe are staring at their phone instead of staring at the stars. God maybe this last year, they know they should have gone on a mission trip, they know they should have taken a leap of faith and stepped out but they played it safe or played it comfortable and looking back on this year, playing it close to the vest is one of their greatest regrets. I pray that You would give us to faith to know how and when and where we can step out in this coming year to be obedient to the vision You have given us. God I pray that You would help us to celebrate more and to celebrate better, to rejoice always. God teach us what it means to have the joy of the Lord even on our worst day. God I pray that You would help us to come bearing gifts. Help us follow in the footsteps of those who traveled a long way to bless Mary and Joseph and to give a gift that was a miracle. God I thank You for the miracles that You have done in us and through us this past year. Lord, we step into this season of Christmas and then into a new year. God help us come bearing gifts so that we can see the miracles that will follow from it. These things I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

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