

Matthew 2:1-12

The Star of Bethlehem

Main idea: God orchestrates all the events in all the universe so that we would know Jesus and be saved by grace through faith in Him.

Our sermon today is about how God works all things together – whether joys, or pains, or sorrows, even death – He works all things together for the good of those who love Him, whom He calls according to His purpose.¹ And there are so many ways that I could introduce this sermon that it was difficult to pick just one. There are billions of illustrations about this just about everywhere we look: in nature, movies, music, art, sports, and of course even our own personal experiences. Over and over again, in everything, we see how something that looks like an absolute tragedy can eventually be the foundation of something beautiful.²

But since I probably don't have time this morning to give an illustration from each and every area of life, I'll just pick two. The first example I'll use is music. Some of the best songs ever written take you on a journey so that you experience pain and sorrow, but then ultimately redemption and joy. Some songs even have moments of chaos in them, but then come together in such a way so that you find the beauty even after the chaos.

As a member of the orchestra in high school, I remember one piece that we played in which the song literally started out with chaos.

¹ Romans 8:28

² John 16:20

Our band director, Mr. Rauscher, told us to play as if we were warming up, each one of us doing our own thing, and together it all sounded like random noise, until gradually all of the instruments came together in perfect harmony. And I think that's a great example of how God works all things for good.

But I think an even better example comes from Corrie Ten Boom. She experienced the horrors of the concentration camps during World War II. She lost her dad, and her sister, and so many others that she knew in those camps. Years later, after she spoke about those things at a conference, a man approached her and asked for her forgiveness, because he was one of the Nazi guards at one of those camps. It took everything in her, but she forgave him and even embraced him as a brother in Christ.

Such pain, and yet out of that, such beauty.

So much of life today may seem painful, and random. But God has a plan, and His plan is beautiful, and one day, we will all praise God for the beauty of His perfect plan.³

Matthew 2:1-12

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. So he assembled all the chief priests and

³ Job 42:2, Psalm 67:5, Psalm 138:8, Proverbs 19:21, Philippians 1:6

scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born. “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah: Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the star appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him.” After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy. Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12)

Father, as we reflect on Christmas and all the events that surrounded Jesus being born, we're in awe of Your plan. We praise for all the details that You brought together to perfectly fulfill Your plan so that we might know Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Help us to truly rejoice in the hope that we have in Jesus. In Jesus's name, Amen.

There are a lot of seemingly random things that happen in life – things that don't seem to serve any purpose whatsoever.⁴ Some of them are painful, but many are just merely mild inconveniences. This past Wednesday, for example, Kevin, the Director of the Nokomis Christian Missions, texted me to set up an appointment to help someone with their water bill since their water was about to be shut off, so we set up the appointment for the following day, Thursday, at 11 am. But the next morning didn't go the way I expected. Instead of helping someone with a bill, I showed up a little before 11 am, waited for about 30 minutes, and then went home. They never showed up. So I just thought, "Well, that was random. What was the point of that?"

And there are a lot of things like that in life. You expect life to go one way, but then something happens, or maybe something doesn't happen, and that changes the course of your life, and it all seems pretty random, or worse, painful.

Many of us have suddenly and tragically lost close family or friends, and those kinds of experiences can leave us in shock and pain for months if not years, crying out to God, "Why?"⁵

Well, the thing about our passage of Scripture today that struck me at first is why it's even in the Bible at all. It focuses on the actions of these wise men, but it doesn't tell us much about them at all. Some theorize that they were astrologers from Persia,⁶ others say that they were descendants of Daniel's group when they were exiles in

⁴ And yet, God has a purpose for each of them. Proverbs 16:33

⁵ Psalm 13:1

⁶ <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/controversy/common-misconceptions/we-three-kings-who-were-the-magi.html>

Babylon,⁷ and some even say they may have come all the way from China.⁸ The truth is, we don't know. The text simply says that they were wise men from the east.

And what's up with this star? Matthew doesn't mention any prophecies in the Old Testament about following a star to Jesus, so how did the wise men know to follow it?⁹ It just seems kind of random.

And the text also doesn't tell us when they arrived. Technically, today's sermon should be sometime after Christmas because the events that we read about today in Matthew actually took place after the birth of Jesus.¹⁰ It could have been a few months, or even up to possibly two years later. But I'm preaching it out of order just for the sake of this sermon series as we seek to answer the question: when was Jesus actually born?

We've been talking about this question for the last couple weeks now. Because of tradition, we celebrate Jesus's birth on December 25, but can we, from Scripture, actually determine if that's the correct date, or if it's a different date altogether? And while, in some ways, this question doesn't matter a whole lot,¹¹ I think we're actually doing something similar to the wise men by digging into these things.¹²

⁷ <https://chapeldulcinea.org/why-did-wise-men-come-from-the-east/>

⁸ <http://blog.angryasianman.com/2010/12/were-three-wise-men-from-china.html>

⁹ Interestingly, if these wise men were descendants of Daniel's group, they would have been familiar with Balaam's prophecy about the star in Numbers 24:17, but not about Micah's prophecy concerning Bethlehem (because they would have been too far away to know about these Scriptures), which would explain why they inquired about where the Messiah would be born.

¹⁰ We know this for at least a couple reasons. For one, they were now in a house as opposed to the stable. Two, Herod ordered that boys 2 and under be killed based on when the wise men said the star appeared.

¹¹ Akin to arguing about genealogies. Titus 3:9

¹² And the Bereans. Acts 17:10-15

Verse 1.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of King Herod, wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star at its rising and have come to worship him.”
(Matthew 2:1-2)

So the wise men weren't content to worship Jesus from afar. They wanted to see Jesus. They inquired about where He was, and they traveled hundreds if not thousands of miles in order to worship Him.

And it wasn't an easy road trip. I probably shouldn't have to remind us that they didn't have air conditioned vehicles those days. It was no small thing to devote yourself to a long journey that took months or even years. It was likely full of dangers. In fact, even when they were almost there, they had an encounter with someone who sought to get in the way of what God was doing.

Verse 3.

When King Herod heard this, he was deeply disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. So he assembled all the chief priests and scribes of the people and asked them where the Messiah would be born. “In Bethlehem of Judea,” they told him, “because this is what was written by the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah: Because out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Then Herod secretly summoned the wise men and asked them the exact time the

star appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you find him, report back to me so that I too can go and worship him.” (Matthew 2:3-8)

So here, we actually start to see that this story isn't random at all, but rather to direct us to worship Jesus. We see that the chief priests and scribes actually knew where the Messiah would be born because of the prophecy in the book of Micah!¹³ And yet, as close as they were to Jesus, they weren't aware of His birth, and they didn't go to worship Him. They didn't seek out the Savior like the wise men were doing. So the question for us is simply this: will we be like the chief priests and scribes who were comfortable where they were, and comfortable with their faith, and didn't want things to change, or will we be like the wise men, who followed the star?

Following Jesus takes us out of our comfort zone. It requires us to face the painful reality of our sin, and even accept that there may be a painful path forward as we deny ourselves and take up our cross in order to be Christ's disciples. The Christian life isn't the easy path, but the hard one.¹⁴ So don't be like the chief priests, who knew the right answer, but failed to go to worship Jesus. Be like the wise men, who followed the star.

But there's a third example that we might be tempted to follow in this text as well. We could be like Herod. Herod said that he wanted to worship Jesus along with wise men, but it wasn't true. As the ruler of Judea, Herod actually called himself the king of the Jews, and he was afraid that this Messiah would rise up and lead the

¹³ Micah 5:2

¹⁴ Matthew 7:13-14

Jews to rebel against him. So he didn't want to worship Jesus, he wanted to kill him! If you continue reading Matthew 2, you read this in verse 16:

Then Herod, when he realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, flew into a rage. He gave orders to massacre all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, in keeping with the time he had learned from the wise men. (Matthew 2:16)

In fact, if you just read the Bible, you find that over and over again, there's so much pain and death throughout history, and often God even brought about a lot of this pain and death.¹⁵ And yet, it was always because sinners rebelled against God's goodness.¹⁶ God desires to bless us with good gifts,¹⁷ but we've turned away from Him time and time again, choosing sin instead, which leads to death.¹⁸

That's what Herod was doing. Instead of choosing Jesus, he chose sin. So the wise men, of course, were wise, and they also saw through Herod's lies. Verse 9.

After hearing the king, they went on their way. And there it was—the star they had seen at its rising. It led them until it came and stopped above the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy. Entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling

¹⁵ 1 Samuel 15:2-3

¹⁶ Leviticus 18:25

¹⁷ James 1:17

¹⁸ Romans 6:23

to their knees, they worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their own country by another route. (Matthew 2:9-12)

Some say that since there were three gifts, there were likely three wise men. But the text doesn't tell us how many there were, only that they gave these costly gifts. William Barclay wrote this in his Daily Study Bible:

Gold, the king of metals, is the fit gift for a king of men...We do well to remember that Jesus Christ is King...Frankincense is the gift for a priest. It was in the Temple worship and at the Temple sacrifices that the sweet perfume of frankincense was used...That is what Jesus did. He opened the way to God; he made it possible for men to enter into the very presence of God...Myrrh is the gift for one who is to die. Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus came into the world to live for men, and, in the end, to die for men. He came to give for men his life and his death. - William Barclay

Now, we're not told whether the wise men knew the symbolism of these gifts when they gave them, but it's certainly true that God orchestrates all the events in all the universe so that we would know Jesus and be saved by grace through faith in Him.¹⁹

Including this mysterious star. So what exactly was this star?

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:1-9

One thing we should remember when talking about this is that the Bible is always written from the perspective of people. It's not a science textbook. It's written by people describing what they saw and what things looked like to them.²⁰

One of the most common explanations for the Star of Bethlehem is that it was actually two planets that aligned from the perspective of the earth, causing it to appear as a very bright star in the sky. And this actually happened several times leading up to the year 1 AD as we name it. In 7 BC, Jupiter and Saturn were aligned three times, and three years later, Jupiter and Venus were aligned for almost an entire year from the perspective of earth. So from their perspective, it may have looked like a star suddenly appeared, and then moved, and then stayed in place.²¹

Now, this is all just conjecture. No one knows any of these things for certain. And even if we were to determine which celestial event was the cause of the Star of Bethlehem, at most, that would help us to determine the year Jesus was born, but not the exact day of the year.

²⁰ The Bible says that this star appeared when Jesus was born. And, it seems to say that the star moved over the course of up to two years, and then stopped to remain above where Jesus was living. The Bible doesn't give us any more information than that. So there have been many attempts to understand what this star was. Some suggest that it was a supernova, which is the explosive death of a star, which could have been a bright event in the sky for days, weeks, or months. And I kind of like that idea, because once again, it shows how even something painful and chaotic can be used by God to bring about something beautiful. But such an event would most likely have been recorded by other astronomers around the world at the time, and it was not. The closest supernova to the birth of Jesus wasn't recorded by other cultures until 185 AD. Some say that it was a meteor, but I've never heard of a meteor that would have been visible for that long, unless you're using an extremely powerful telescope, which they didn't have at the time as far as we know. But there was a comet that passed close enough to the earth to be visible for several months, which was recorded by astronomers in 5 BC. So it is at least possible.

²¹ It's actually this theory that's probably the most accepted throughout church history. A note in the Annals of the Abbey of Worcester from 1285 A.D. points out an alignment of Jupiter and Saturn that happened at the time of Jesus' birth. However, and this is a big wrench in the works, the wise men would have known that planets aren't stars. Even if they weren't astronomers, they seem to have been extremely familiar with the planets, stars, and constellations. That's why they noticed the Star of Bethlehem in the first place! And, if they were of Jewish descent, they would have been aware of this prophecy in Numbers 24. And because they may have been familiar with this text, that could have been the reason they started following the star in the first place!

But even if we were to determine what that star was, the fact is, we don't know how long the wise men followed it, and we don't know how long after the birth of Jesus these things happened. If it mattered, Matthew could have recorded these details in the text. But that's not the point of our passage this morning! Instead, Scripture is simply teaching us that God orchestrates all the events in all the universe so that we would know Jesus and be saved by grace through faith in Him.²²

You see, the Bible describes the birth of Jesus and the events after the birth of Jesus in such detail to show us that Jesus's appearing wasn't random. It happened just as the Old Testament prophecies said it would. Even the star appearing may have been to fulfill Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:17:

I see him, but not now; I perceive him, but not near. A star will come from Jacob, and a scepter will arise from Israel.
(Numbers 24:17a)

And Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures time and time again, from His birth, throughout His ministry, and even to His death and resurrection.

In fact, the greatest example of beauty out of pain comes from Jesus Himself. For the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, scorning its shame. On the cross, He experienced the weight of all our sin. He felt the agony not just of the physical torture He went through, but of the spiritual separation that our sin causes us to feel with God the Father. Such pain!

²² Ephesians 2:1-9

And yet, such beauty. Because it was through Jesus's death on the cross that we're forgiven and made right with God. It's through His sacrifice that we're accepted. It's by His stripes that we're healed. And God demonstrated His love for us in that even while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

So no matter what pains you've experienced in life, and even if you've blamed God for those pains, God knows them, and He cares for you, and He invites you to rest in His love.

Even after experiencing the horrors of the concentrations camps, Corrie Ten Boom wrote:

There is no pit so deep, that God's love is not deeper still. -
Corrie Ten Boom

You see, God works all things together – whether joys, or pains, or sorrows, even the death of His Son – He works all things together for the good of those who love Him, whom He calls according to His purpose. And this morning, perhaps He's calling you to know Him for the very first time.

God continues to promise hope and eternal life for those who will put their trust in Him, so that even in the midst of our pain, we can be full of hope.