

Sermon Brief

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December 18, 2022

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Title: “Lay Down”

Subject: Jesus is the worthy king of all.

Complement: Gentiles find Him while Jews miss Him.

Textual Idea: Jesus is the worthy king of all, yet His own people miss Him while foreigners find Him.

Sermon Idea: Lay down anything that might cause you to miss Jesus.

Interrogative: What do you need to lay down?

Key Points:

1. Lay down your prejudices.
2. Lay down your fears.
3. Lay down your selfish ambitions.

What do I want people to know? I want people to know that we are in a war concerning the lordship of Jesus on this earth. I want them to understand that our worship and witness is to be wholehearted, extravagant and unreserved.

What do I want people to do? I want people to (1) see God at work in unexpected places, (2) worship Jesus wholeheartedly, (3) live their lives for God’s purposes.

What need am I addressing? I am addressing the need to not miss what God is doing in and around us – live purposefully in light of the coming of Jesus.

“Lay Down”

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Matthew 2:1-12

Our theme for this Christmas season is **(LCD) Come Home**. We want to invite everyone whose been away from church, and more importantly, away from the Lord Jesus, to come home. Last week, we looked at the birth of Jesus in Luke 2 and asked the question, **(LCD) Have you made room for Jesus in your heart?** Is there a “no vacancy” sign on your heart? Well, in order to make room for Jesus in your heart, there are some things that first need to be laid down. Some things you can’t bring with you if you want to draw near to Jesus and accept his invitation. I think we see some of these barriers in another Christmas passage found in Matthew chapter 2. Turn there now and, as you do, the question I’d like each of us to be asking ourselves is this, **(LCD) What do I need to lay down before God?** It’ll make more sense as we look at our passage this morning.

Matthew chapter 2, verse 1, *“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.”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.¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”*

Matthew picks up a few years after the birth passage we looked at last week in Luke 2. “After Jesus was born...” How long? We don’t know but verse 7 says that Herod asked when the Magi had seen the star and then, down in verse 16, after our passage, we read that it appears they’d seen it two years earlier. Putting this together, Jesus is mostly likely a little toddler of 1-2 years old. If that’s true, then after all the commotion of Jesus’ birth with the shepherds and the heavenly, angelic choir, there was just dirty diapers and teething! Not much miraculous there! But don’t miss it! In the midst of the ordinary, God’s doing incredible things in the little town of Bethlehem.

We talked about Bethlehem last week. Take a look at this **(LCD) map of Israel**. You can see Bethlehem is right here about five miles south of Jerusalem. Jerusalem of course is the great capital city of Israel. It is huge and important. It is where the king mentioned in verse 1, Herod the Great, lives in His fantastic palace. A great city for a great king. But Bethlehem? Nothing but a two-bit, backwater town.

Yet Bethlehem did have one claim to fame. It was the hometown of King David – the greatest king in Israel’s history. Definitely greater than the current “king” of Israel – **(LCD) Herod**. Let me tell you about him. First of all, through accommodation to the hated Romans, Caesar ended up appointing him as “King of the Jews” even though he was only a half-Jew himself – never accepted by the people. He ruled for 33 years and was known for great building projects – which is why he was called “the Great.” One of his projects was **(LCD) the seaport of Caesarea Maritima** – named in honor of Caesar, including a pagan temple for Caesar worship. It had things like an amphitheater, a gorgeous palace, and a hippodrome for “Ben Hur” like racing. We visited there on our Israel trip and **(LCD) here is what it looks like now** – all decimated and abandoned. The vanity of the glory of man. His greatest building was **(LCD) the Jerusalem Temple** which was the largest building in the world upon its completion – one of the wonders of the world. All that’s left of it now is **(LCD) the Western Wall**, also known as the Wailing Wall. Again, just vanity.

Now as great a builder as Herod was, he was known **(LCD) for this cruelty** among the Jews. He inflicted heavy, oppressive taxes on behalf of himself and Rome. As he got older, an illness caused him to become paranoid about being overthrown. As a result, he had several close associates, three sons and his own wife executed. And on the day of his death, he had hundreds of Jewish leaders killed to ensure that the Jews would mourn on that day. This was a deeply troubled man. According to the first century historian Josephus, Emperor Caesar Augustus once famously said of him that he’d rather be Herod’s pig than his son

Additionally, his paranoia and building skills combined to create some amazing fortresses on his eastern front. Look at **(LCD) this map of Israel**. Here we see the map has been turned so that Jerusalem is down here and East would be up here. All the red dots are fortresses that Herod had built along key roads coming from the East. There had been several invasions of Israel from the East and so Herod had a severe fear of attack from there. Here are **(LCD) some pictures of one of those fortresses, Masada**. This is the view going up the gondola to the top of the rock outcrop Masada was built on. You can see for miles and miles from up there. They built an entire village up there was a cistern, army barracks, a synagogue, and **(LCD) Herod’s three-tiered palace**. It’s amazing...and it’s all the result of fear and paranoia.

The last historical detail we need to discuss in verse 1 are the Magi. We don’t know much about them, but we do know what is NOT true about them. The old carol says, “We Three Kings...” The text never says there are three. Tradition has assumed it because of the three gifts given Jesus. They weren’t kings either. Even “wise men” doesn’t really capture what they were. Magi were well respected in the pagan world for their knowledge in the arts; especially astrology, medicine, and dream interpretation. And they were from the East – we aren’t sure where exactly and there are **(LCD) many suggestions like Parthia, Persia, Arabia**, but most likely they came from here, Babylon. Why?

Well, Babylon was the center of astronomy and astrology in the ancient world. Also, notice what their questions are in verse 2: *“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.”* Why would pagan astrologers be asking about the king of the Jews? Why would they talk about “his star?” No one knows for sure, but we do know that there were still many Jews in Babylon

leftover from the Babylonian captivity. It is very likely that they would have heard the Jewish hope of a coming king from passages like this one, (LCD) **“I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel. He will crush the foreheads of Moab, the skulls of all the people of Sheth.”** Also, the ancients believed that great comets or stars were harbingers of the coming of a king.

However they figured it out, they had seen a special star rising and they knew it was the coming of an important ruler. As far as the star goes, there have been all kinds of efforts to explain it. The (LCD) **four most common** are that it was a natural, astronomical phenomenon like a comet or a supernova, a supernatural, astronomical phenomenon from God, the Shekinah Glory of God like the cloud in the desert when Israel came out of Egypt, and even an angel. In 2015, bible scholar Colin Nicholl released an interesting book on the subject. I haven't read the book, but I read an interview with him about it. Here's a bit of what he said, (LCD) **“The star appeared suddenly and was visible for over a year, something that makes sense only if it were a supernova or a great comet. That the star surprised the Magi with its impressive “rising” points strongly to it being a comet: Of all the celestial bodies, only comets behave in this manner...At the end of the Magi's journey, the star stands over the place of Jesus' birth, pinpointing a particular location. As New Testament scholar Craig Keener has pointed out, that's something only a comet can do.”** Interesting. Whether natural or supernatural, God used this comet or star or angel to reveal His Son to some unlikely seekers: pagan astrologers – cursed in the Old Testament law yet pursued by God!

So based on all I've said so far, it should come as no surprise how King Herod responds to this large Eastern entourage showing up looking for a newborn king. Verse 3: *“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him”*. The word here for 'disturbed' is very strong. It is (LCD) **tarasso** and here are different ways it is translated into English: terrified, disturbed, startled, turmoil, frightened... The verb here is in the passive voice meaning that this sense of foreboding comes over him like a cold, dark chill. Herod is out of his mind – literally overcome with fear! Remember his paranoia about his throne being taken from him. No wonder “all Jerusalem” was disturbed with him: because when Herod ain't happy, ain't nobody happy!

So in verse 4 he calls “all” the religious experts together, this is an emergency...all hands on deck! He calls them together and asks them where the Messiah was to be born. And they answer in verses 5 and 6: *“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “‘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.’”* A ruler! Red alert! This is not good! What's interesting to me here is that these religious ones who live in and around the temple of the God of Israel, these religious ones who know the scriptures so well that they can quote it on the spot like this, these religious ones only five miles away from Jesus MISS the birth of their true king. Listen, biblical faith is NOT about coming to church. Some of you only come on Easter or Christmas. That is your family tradition. You need to know that God is not interested in our church attendance. He is not interested in how much scripture you can quote. He is interested in our hearts. As one scholar put it, (LCD) **“Matthew may be suggesting that the line between taking Jesus for granted and crucifying Him is very thin.”**

Alarmed at this news, Herod puts a plan into action. Verse 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.”* Herod asks the magi when the star appeared. As I said earlier, it had been two years prior. He then tells them that the prophecy points to Bethlehem and sends them on their way with a command to report back to him so that he can go worship the child too. This part always reminds me of the Grinch! Remember the scene when the **(LCD) Grinch is caught red handed** by Cindy Loo Who, *“Who...me?!”* And then he gets an idea and explains, **(LCD) “There, there...”**

Same as King Herod...deception. King Herod has NO intention of worshiping the child. In fact, go down for a moment to verse 12, *“And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”* Now go down to verse 16, *“When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.”*¹⁷ Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: *“A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.”* This is horrifying and it’s what fear will do...the unthinkable, inhumane, Satanic destruction of the innocent. Such is the fruit of unbridled, selfish ambition.

Finally, the magi conclude their long journey; verse 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.” Awesome scene! When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. Most likely, they hadn’t seen the star in a while. All we read earlier was that they’d seen it in the East, not that it guided them to Jerusalem. They went there because it was the capital city. Now God gave them the next step in their journey, and they were overjoyed. Actually, the Greek there is way over the top. It is literally, *“...they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.”* That’s what the presence of God brings when you accept Him...nutty joy!

Then they saw the child, as I said before, probably one or two by now, with Mary in a house. So much for **(LCD) scenes like this one** we see so often. The magi, however many there were, met him as a small child in a house, not in a lonely stable. Can you imagine for a moment what it must have been like for Mary to see this huge entourage of important people bowing down and worshiping her toddler? After some ordinary months, she’s reminded of the supernatural destiny of her little boy. Then they open their treasures, the word in Greek there is “thesaurus” by the way, and they give extravagant gifts that are fit for a king: gold to signify his worth and frankincense and myrrh to fill the house with the sweet fragrance of deep reverence. The magi, pagan astrologers, bow down and worship the Jewish toddler king!

And that brings me to my original question, **(LCD) What do I need to lay down before God?** As I said before, our theme is come home but we can’t do that until we bow down

before Jesus like the magi did. And to do that, we need to lay down some things like **(LCD) prejudices – God woos the most unlikely people.** We often miss Jesus because of our prejudices. God revealed Himself to pagan, Babylonian astrologers? Can't be! Yet while the scribes and priests in Jerusalem were only five miles away from Jesus, it's these unlikely ones who seek Him out and find him. Are we missing Jesus because of latent prejudices? An example of this is the LGBTQ+ community. I was talking to someone recently who told me that they've been struck by how some of their supposed "Christian" friends are not living for Jesus while their gay and lesbian friends are wanting to learn about Jesus. Will we let our prejudice stop us from joining God in what He's doing?

Another thing we need to lay down is **(LCD) our fears** – we need to release them to God and walk by faith. Look at Herod – fear had completely paralyzed him to the point that he murdered the people he loved and wiped out an entire generation of little ones! Fear and faith just do not go together. Fear will cause you to grab control and, I guarantee you, you will miss the presence of Jesus. You might want to memorize God's promise in Isaiah 41:10, **(LCD) "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."** What are you fearful of? Divorce? Your future? Money issues? God says, "I am with You. The God of the universe." Don't be like Herod and try to control your life and the lives of those around you. Lay down your fear and hold on to Jesus.

Along with prejudices and fears, we need to **(LCD) lay down our selfish ambitions – pursue God's glory, not our own.** Herod's great buildings were incredible...but they're rubble today. What a waste! He spent his life seeking to glorify himself, not God. Meanwhile, these magi travelled over 900 miles over many months in order to lay down their prized possessions at the feet of a tiny, impoverished boy. Legend has it that they ended up becoming Christ-followers for the rest of their lives! Let me ask you: what are you living for? What purpose? Yours or God's? Let's not miss Jesus this Christmas. Let's lay down prejudices, fears, selfish ambition - anything that would keep us from knowing His incredible presence. Along those lines, let me leave you with a wonderful testimony of one who missed Jesus for a long time. **(Jonathan Cain "I Am Second" video)**

What are you holding on to? What do you need to lay down? God's right here...right here...waiting to fill our hands with good things if we'll just lay down what we're obsessed with. "Don't stop believing." God's real, His kingdom reigns, He's worth giving up everything for. Come home to Jesus.