

## Love for Us All • Matthew 2:1-14

The traditional Advent wreath has four candles on the outer ring that are lighted week by week leading up to Christmas. The first candle is for hope, the second for peace, the third for joy and the fourth for love. All four flicker around a central candle that is for Jesus who is the Light of the World. Love is fourth only on the list of the weeks leading up to Christmas. Actually, in the chronology of Christmas love comes first because love predates Christmas by forever.

The love of Christmas is explained in perhaps the most familiar verse in the Bible, John 3:16: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

The very idea that God should love the world is itself amazing. God doesn’t need our world, nor does he need any of us. In fact, the Bible is quite clear that our human race has collectively and individually sinned against God and pretty much told him we can do just fine without him. But, God loved our world and us anyway. And that God *“so loved”* the world is amazing beyond comprehension. He loved our world so much that he gave his only Son to come to earth, become human and be prepared to die.

John 3:16 is a quote from Jesus that was heard and recorded by St. John. Years later this same John wrote these words in a personal letter to Christians to further explain what Jesus meant. In I John 4:10, 19 he wrote:

*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

*We love because he first loved us.*

We did not love God first. God first loved us. We didn’t choose God first; God first chose us. We didn’t seek God first; God first sought us.

The only way we can fully understand the Christmas story is to know about the love of God. And the only way to understand the love of God is to know that God loved first before we ever considered the possibility of loving him.

That the Magi made it into the Christmas story is itself an amazing expression of the love of God. Magi were neither Jews nor Christians. They were pagans who did not believe in the Bible or the God of the Bible. Their name is connected to “magic” and there is a sense in which that is who they were—magicians. They believed that you could discern the will of the gods and your personal destiny by studying the signs of the Zodiac. They were astrologers. Horoscopes were among their specialties. They were respected and wealthy.

One historic night some of these Magi were studying the stars when they saw something new. Checking their records and calculations they realized that the star they saw was unlike anything that was recorded. It was completely unprecedented. It

was so fascinating that a group of the Magi decided to leave their homes and their jobs and risk their lives in a caravan journey to follow the star. When they started they had no idea it would take them a thousand miles, more than two years

and all the way from Persian to Palestine (from modern Iran to modern Israel).

The star that they followed was a maverick star. They found themselves fascinated by it, although curiosity and superstition would not seem to be enough to leave their families and upset their lives and risk everything they had. There had to be something more going on here. The love of God was pulling them like a magnet toward Jesus. It was unexplainable, irresistible and undeniable. The pull of God’s supernatural love was drawing their hearts to him.

It is like that today as well. The love of God touches us where we are. Sometimes it’s a star. It may be standing on the sand. Sometimes it is success. Sometimes it is in the midst of tragedy that this magnetic pull of God’s love moves us from where we are to a destination that we cannot foresee.

I’ve heard the stories thousands of times. People distant from God, unbelievers, pagans, who years later say something was happening in their lives that

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they didn't fully understand at the time. They read a book or saw something on television. A friend invited them to church or they heard a radio broadcast. And even from a great distance they were drawn to the love of Jesus without knowing who he was or where they were going. They didn't realize at the start that the journey would take years, cross thousands of miles and lead them to the Son of God. These are those who were first loved by God and then came to love God in response. It is the love of Christmas that goes the distance to Jesus.

That love has unanswered questions in Matthew 2:1-3:

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."*

It seems incredulous to me that somebody would travel a thousand miles and still have no idea where they were going or whom they were trying to see. How did they persevere? How did they keep on going? By then the journey had taken them nearly two years. This expedition had cost them a fortune. All they knew was that they had come to worship a king, somebody else's king. They didn't know where they were going or exactly who they were looking for.

But that's what love is like. Love is willing to move ahead with unanswered questions. We know that from our own everyday experiences of love. Charleen and I were engaged in December and married the following June. Like many young couples we faced the array of questions: Where are you going to live? What are you going to do? How are you going to pay the bills? As I think back I am surprised that I really wasn't worried about any of those things. I didn't have a job. We didn't have a home. We had no money. Shortly after we were married we drove our oil-burning Chevy halfway across America and moved into a mobile home that had no water and no heat. Why did we do it? How did we do it? We were in love and that's all that mattered at the time.

Somehow during their journey those Magi fell in love with a child they had not met and whose name they didn't know. The love that drew them was enough to satisfy and motivate them without all the answers to the obvious questions. Love

doesn't demand an answer to every question. Love trusts the person more than the reasons. Those Magi were drawn by the love of God. They were willing to wait as long as they had to in order to have their questions answered.

I'm not suggesting that we should not ask questions of God. Nor do I believe that Christianity is a religion of blind faith. Quite the contrary! The truth of Jesus is powerful enough to persuade the greatest skeptic and the most educated intellectual. But, all our questions will never be answered. If we wait to love until we have all the facts we will miss out on God's best in our lives.

The Bible scholars in Jerusalem pointed the Magi to Bethlehem. They had only six more miles to go. According to Matthew 2:9-11:

*(The Magi) went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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 and of incense and of myrrh.*

By this time, Joseph and Mary were long gone from the stable where Jesus was born. The manger was little more than a distant memory in the baby book of Jesus. The shepherds had watched their flocks another seven hundred nights since the angels had appeared. Jesus was no longer a baby; he was almost two years old. By now he was walking and talking. When the Magi came to his house in all probability it was Jesus who answered the door.

It was a sight to remember. It was love at first sight. When those powerful, wealthy, educated, important men saw Jesus at the front door they immediately bowed down and worshiped him. The neighbors were looking out their windows. A crowd was starting to gather. It wasn't often that anybody like this ever came to Bethlehem. And why were these important, powerful people treating this little boy as if he were a king?

Love sees what others miss. They had fallen in love with Jesus during their long journey. They had imagined what he would be like and they were not disappointed, although you might expect they would have been disappointed. He was a child, not a man. He lived in a house not a palace. He didn't perform

a miracle for them or teach them some profound philosophy. They were attracted to him and who he would be. They saw him through the eyes of love.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, had loved them enough to step down from the glories of heaven, and they had responded to that love by coming the distance all the way from Persia. He loved them enough to give up the throne room of God, and they loved him in return enough to give him gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. Love always gives gifts.

The gifts they gave really weren't much for someone who owned the universe, but they were impressive by human standards. Gold was and is a most precious metal. When economies are uncertain and currencies are unstable the world has always turned to gold. Gold was difficult to mine in the first century and therefore rare and extremely valuable, a fitting gift for a king.

Incense was also expensive, a staple for the ancient caravans carrying spices across the empires. It was a resin taken from trees. Bitter to the taste it had a wonderful smell when burned and was an important part of the worship in the Jerusalem Temple. The Old Testament often speaks of the priest offering incense to God. It was a fitting gift for one who was to become the High Priest of history, the one mediator between God and man.

Myrrh was the third gift the Magi brought. It, too, was extremely expensive, but it was borderline inappropriate because its primary use in the first century was embalming. It was a strange love gift for a baby. Could it be that they supernaturally foresaw that this child was born to die. His destiny was first the cross of a Savior and later the crown of a conqueror. It was a fitting gift for a Savior of the world.

*The Passion of the Christ* produced by Mel Gibson vividly portrays the final hours of Jesus' life. The movie is in Aramaic, the language of Jesus and his contemporaries. It is no longer a spoken language. There are English subtitles. The movie is graphic beyond description in its bloody and agonizing portrayal of Jesus' beating and his crucifixion. If you see it you will never forget what you have seen. I saw the movie as a preview at

Christmastime, surrounded by decorations and Christmas music and the story of Jesus' birth. It was a powerful reminder that this child was born to suffer and die for our sin.

But, back to the Magi! They barely knew him but they loved him and gave him gifts because that's what love does. Love always gives. Those who love Jesus still bring him their best. (How ironic that we celebrate Jesus' birthday with gifts for everyone except Jesus!)

The candle of love burns on the Advent wreath. God's love goes the distance from heaven to earth, from deity to humanity. Will you go the distance to Jesus? God's love leaves unanswered questions. Will you love him enough to leave some of your questions unanswered until later? God's love gave his one and only Son. Will you give him your best because you love him in return?

Think of it! God loves you!

My mother is elderly and frail. Her memory is not very good. But sometimes she says some amazing things. On Thanksgiving Day we talked to her

on the phone. She is in a senior care home in south Florida and our family was gathered at our home in Minnesota. We all took turns speaking with her on the phone. I answered the phone so I spoke to her first and I took back the phone and heard from her last. She said to me, "I think I just talked to six hundred people and I told them I loved them all, but I want you to know that I really love you!"

The God of the universe calls us and he speaks first. He tells us that he has talked to six billion people and told them all that he loves them, and then he says, "But I really love you!"

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