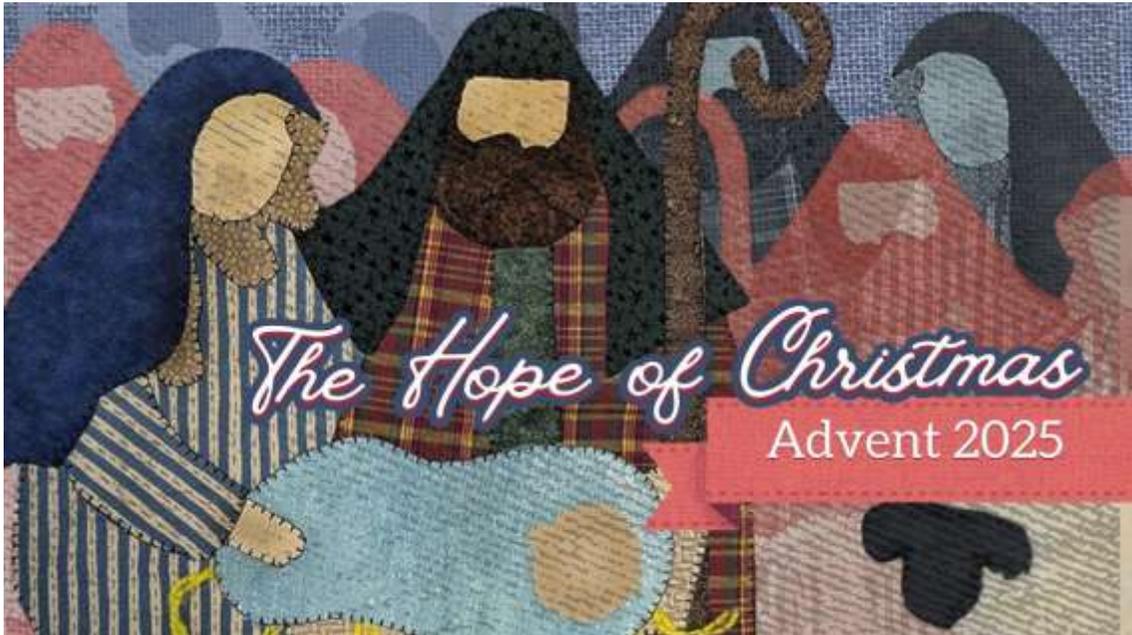


The Love of Christmas
Kenwood Baptist Church Sermon Series
Advent 2024
Pastor David Palmer
December 21, 2025

TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12



Merry Christmas, Beloved. This is the fourth Sunday of Advent, the Sunday where we turn our attention to the love of God reflected in the face of Christ.

When we hear the word "love," we tend to think of something specific like the love seen in the face of a child. Many of us can remember our adolescent first love. Some of us define love or think of love primarily as an emotion. You may recall the line:

"Love is a temporary madness. It erupts like an earthquake and then subsides. And when it subsides, you have to make a decision."

This definition of love as a temporary madness is sometimes attributed to St. Augustine; but that's not true. It's actually written by the British novelist Louie Bernier in his novel *Captain Carelli's Mandolin*.

There's another quote about love that is also often attributed to Augustine, but it's not actually said by Augustine. It's a little better. It says this:

"To fall in love with God is the greatest romance. To seek Him is the greatest adventure. To find Him the greatest human achievement."

I like that a little better, but it is also wrongly attributed to Augustine. It first appeared in print in a 1984 devotional book by Mary Lewis Coakley called *How to Live Life to Its Fullest: A Handbook for Seasoned Citizens*. It's a devotional book and its definition is close. This morning, I want to follow the trajectory of love that we see in this passage before us. In this passage, love will be moving in very different directions. Let's follow these trajectories together.

The first trajectory is the love that we see in the magi. It is the love of God that leads us to seek Jesus. Sometimes we have a vague idea that God is out there. It is deep in the human heart to worship our Creator. The magi represent in this passage a love for God, as they know Him to that point, that leads to a search for Jesus.

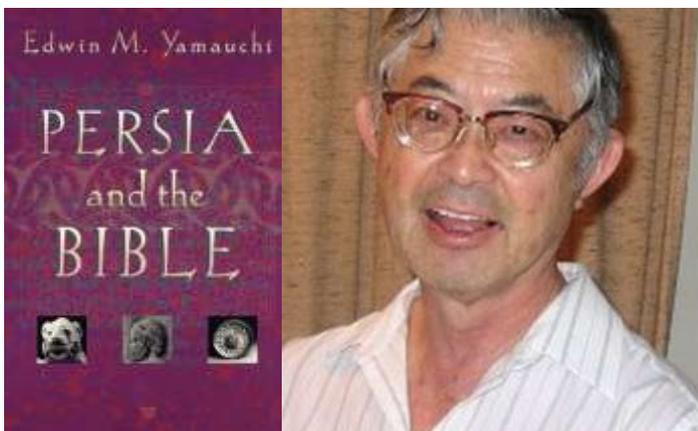
Matthew tells us in Matthew 2:1, in the *ESV*:

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem ..."

You see this term in other English translations, as well: The *CSB* and the *King James* also identify this group as "wise men." If you look at a translation or a paraphrase like *The Message, The Message*, you will read that during Herod's kingship, a "band of scholars" arrived in Jerusalem from the east.

So, who are these people and why are they coming? If you look at the *New American Standard Bible*, it says that in the days of Herod the king, "magi" from the east arrived. The *New American Standard* translators have seen this word in Matthew's Greek text of the magi and they have transliterated it over. They are not completely sure who these people are. If you look at the *NIV* translation, the magi get a slight upgrade: *It* says that during the time of King Herod, "Magi," capital M, came.

So, who were the magi? I turned this week to a dear friend, an expert on this part of the Bible,



Dr. Edwin Yamauchi. He's retired, having taught for decades at Miami University. He's one of the leading Japanese Bible scholars of all time. He had written an article on the magi and I was trying to find it. So I sent him an email at 10:30 at night, and I said, "Dr. Yamauchi, can you send me the article you wrote on the magi?" He replied within fifteen minutes. That is standing at your post,

even in a state of retirement. He said, "You know, I published a more expanded version of my

insights on who the magi were in a book called *Persia in the Bible*, so if you consult that, you'll have more of what I understood." I found that I had a copy of *Persia in the Bible* in my library. In it, Dr. Yamauchi says, "The magi were astrologers from Mesopotamia." They were a priestly class of scholars who made regular observations of the stars and planets, comets and other phenomenon. They were from Persia, the main center of astronomy in the ancient Near East.

Matthew includes these priestly scholars from the distant lands as part of the Christmas story. Matthew includes the nations in the bloodline of Jesus in Matthew 1. Matthew's Gospel finishes in chapter 28 with Jesus commissioning the disciples to make disciples of all nations, and Matthew alone includes at the scene of Christmas the arrival of the nations. In Matthew 2:2, the magi arrive, announcing in Jerusalem:

"Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him."

What did they see in the sky?



Some have supposed that they saw Halley's comet, but Haley's comet appeared a little too soon for the Christmas story. It was last seen in 12 or 11 BC, so it was about five years early.

Chinese astronomical records record the appearance of a supernova in 5 BC. A

supernova is a powerful and luminous explosion of a star. It could have been that.



More probably, I think, is that the magi saw a conjunction of



Jupiter and Saturn. A planetary conjunction is when two planets move close to each other in the sky. Johannes Kepler, the famous astronomer, calculated that a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn occurred in 7 or 6 BC. A triple conjunction is when two planets are seen in the sky in close proximity to each other three different times in the year. Jupiter and Saturn were seen close to each other in May, in September,

and in December. What would that have meant to professional interpreters of the stars?

Jupiter is the Latin for the Greek Zeus, the king of the gods. Saturn is the seventh planet. It is associated with Jews and Judaism. The Hebrew word for Saturn, *Shabtai*, sounds like *Shabbat*, the Sabbath. Saturn, as the seventh planet, corresponded to the seventh day of the week. Several early Roman writers in the first century, Tacitus and Cassius Dio, acknowledged Saturn as the planet that is related to Jews and Judaism.

So these professional readers of the stars saw something in the night sky that looked like a king of the Jews, and when they saw it in May, they started on a journey. We don't know their names. Later Christian tradition has given us their names. Matthew doesn't give us those names. We don't even know how many of them there were. We traditionally say there were three, but there could have been more. The God who makes the stars to mark the seasons in Genesis communicated to these magi in a language that they understood and set them on a trajectory that would seek Jesus. That is how Matthew starts.

There is a different love that emerges in Jerusalem after they arrive. It is the response of Herod. Herod manifests for us the love of self that would destroy Jesus. Some of us may think right away, "Well, that's not me." But, you know, it might be, because the love of self will in the end be forced to try to destroy Jesus.

When Herod the king heard the magi's announcement, he was deeply troubled. And Matthew tells us with great historical accuracy that all Jerusalem was troubled with him. When Herod is troubled, Jerusalem is troubled.

Visitors from the east arrive from Persia. The first century name of Persia is Parthia. Herod's reign had begun in 40 BC after fleeing for his life from Parthian armies. He was declared king of the Jews, not by his ancestry but by a decision of the Roman Senate. He was presented by Caesar to the Roman Senate; he was set forward as the best man to protect the Roman world from the eastern threat of the Parthians. So the Senate voted him to be king of the Jews. He walked out of the Senate having been declared king between Mark Anthony and Caesar Augustus. Anthony made a feast for him on the first day of his reign. So Herod's kingship is dependent on the decree of the Roman Senate to protect his realm and the Roman realm from the Parthians, and here arrive the Parthians, and they ask a deeply troubling question: "Where is the one who's been born king?" The one born king is legitimate; Herod wasn't born king.

Herod's love for self, we'll see, will spiral out of control in this passage. But first we meet another group. Herod, troubled, assembled the chief priests and the scribes of the people. I like Dale Bruner's paraphrase of this: that he assembled "all the senior pastors and the seminary professors." And he asked them, "Where is the Messiah to be born?" which is fascinating

because Herod asked almost the same question as the magi. They had asked, "Where is He?" Herod asked "Where?" but there's a subtle and profound difference here. Herod asked virtually the same question, but he used the present tense of the verb. "Where is the one who is about to be born?" The magi had used the past tense. The magi had said, "Where is He who has already been born?" They know from the conjunction of these planets that God is leading them on this journey. They know He's here. Herod is threatened even at the thought of His appearance.

But the senior pastors and the seminary professors know the Bible pretty well. They don't seem to hesitate. They tell Herod, in Matthew 2:5:

"In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet ..."

And in Matthew 2:6:

"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel."

Not only do they quote one passage, Micah 5:2, "You Bethlehem are not least among the rulers of Judah," but they quote a double citation, because the last part of this is from 2 Samuel 5:2, that one like David "will shepherd My people." Where? Bethlehem. A son of David will reign forever.

They could have quoted Isaiah 11:1:

"There shall come forth a Shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a Branch from his roots shall bear fruit."

Or Isaiah 11:10:

"... Who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of Him shall the nations inquire, and His resting place shall be glorious."

Even outside of the Bible, other first century writers say that there was One coming out of Judea who would be the Ruler of all the world. Josephus mentions this. The Roman writers Suetonius and Tacitus document the expectation that there was going to be One coming from this place who would be sovereign over all the world. The chief priests and scribes could have quoted Numbers 24:17, Balaam's oracle:

"I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near: a Star shall come out of Jacob and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel;"

They knew the Scriptures. They quoted them to the king. Yet, the chief priests and scribes did not take a single step towards Bethlehem. The chief priests and scribes manifest for us another

deadly version of love. It is the love of my own status and position in society.

Herod's love for self will lead him to try to destroy Christ. The chief priests' and scribes' love of their prominent position in society causes them to embrace the status quo and not take a single step toward the newborn King.

You can be surrounded with holy things. You could have been raised in church your whole life. You could be in a position to quote Bible verse after Bible verse. Yet inside your heart, you can seem deeply indifferent to the person of Christ. That is a dangerous love.

Herod then summons the magi secretly. He doesn't want to have a public press conference about this. He wants to know, can you clarify for me exactly what time this had appeared? And they told him. So he sends them to Bethlehem on false pretext. He says in Matthew 2:8:

“Go and search diligently for the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship Him.”

That is a lie. But he sends them on this mission.

The magi hear the king and they depart. They depart now toward Bethlehem. God, in His kindness, who showed them this conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the night sky, showed them enough to get them on the road to seeking Jesus. Praise God for that. You can't find Jesus without passing through the Scriptures. The stars will tell you that there's a King that's been born, of all the world, but it's the Scriptures that the magi need to find Jesus. Even though the Scriptures are cited by men who refuse to follow them, the magi follow the instruction of the Scriptures. It is the Scriptures that take them to Bethlehem.

That is why one of the most dangerous things for self-love is to start reading the Bible. One of the most dangerous things for spiritual apathy or indifference to Jesus is to start reading the Bible. One of my mentors famously told me, interpreting the act of pastoring and preaching, "All you have to do is con people into reading the text. That's all you have to do." Then he said, "And over time the text will take them to the living center, who is Christ."

That is why we just preach the Bible here. That is why we don't just give an inspirational message or tips on successful living. That is why we just preach the Bible, because we are trusting that the Bible, God's Word, will capture your heart week after week and lead you to the person of Christ. That is what is happening to the magi, so they go. It's a two-hour walk. It's not overwhelming. It's six miles. When you're in Bethlehem, you can look over and see Jerusalem. It's not that far away, and they depart.

Matthew tells us that the star that they had seen had risen again. This is the third of the conjunctions of Jupiter and Saturn, December. They saw it again, and they knew they were on the right track. They came, and Matthew 2:10 tells us:

“When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.”

That is big time joy. There's joy, then there's great joy, and then there's something beyond that: *“rejoicing exceedingly with great joy.”* That is Christmas joy.

Then they go into the house, and when they see the Child, when they see the Infant King with Mary, they do something more than seek Him. After seeking Him, they find Him, and they fall down and worship Him. Deep in the human heart there is in us the capacity to love, to give love, and to receive love. And we long for it. That capacity is in us so that we can receive the love of God and reciprocate it.

The magi's search leads them to Jerusalem, to the Scriptures, to Bethlehem, and at last to the Child, to Jesus. And they worship Him. They give Him their lavish gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. Gold, of obvious worth; frankincense, a costly aromatic made from spices from Arabia; and myrrh—very costly substances fit to honor the King. Their search for God leads them to Jesus. After finding Jesus, God, the living God, speaks to them again. This time, not in the stars. Instead, God gives them a dream. God says, "Go home a different way." The God that they meet in the face of Christ speaks to them in a dream. They depart, and they do not return to Herod.

Matthew, beyond the verses read this morning, tells us what happens to Herod's self-love. As the magi leave Bethlehem and do not return to Herod, they do not make known that they have found the King of the world. Herod becomes furious. He issues a decree to slaughter all of the male children of Bethlehem two years old and under.

Herod's actions, his murderous assault against the infants of Bethlehem, match his final days. Herod's increasing paranoia caused him to execute his own sons whom he feared were plotting against him. He murdered his own wife, Mariamne, a Hasmonean queen. Five days before Herod's death, he executed his own son, Antipater. He knew that people would not grieve over his passing, so he issued a proclamation that the leading citizens of Judea and Jerusalem should be held in the Hippodrome of Jericho, and that the moment he died all of those people would be executed. He did that to ensure there would be mourning when he died. His sister Salome slipped out right before his death and spoke to the commander in charge of the Hippodrome of Jericho. She told him Herod had changed his mind right before he died, and saved the lives of all those people. Amazing!

Self-love will not only cause us not to love Jesus, not only to be indifferent toward Him, but self-love unchecked will ultimately lead us to hate Jesus. I know that's strong language on Christmas Sunday, but it's true. Self-love knows no bounds and it must eliminate all rivals. And Herod is threatened by Jesus. Why? Because Jesus' arrival as the One born King exposes his own illegitimacy.

The right response to the sin of the world brought into light by Jesus is not to cling to our sin, but to repent of it and turn toward Him. The magi, finding Jesus, returned to their country by another way. They become the first missionaries. They are the first missionaries with joyful good news that the love of God has been revealed in the world. God is the Creator who communicates to them in a language that they understand. They set their face to Jerusalem. But then it was the Scriptures that took them to Bethlehem. And finally, it was standing face to face with Jesus Christ that opened their hearts and caused them to fall in worship.

This morning, you can be seeking God in a general kind of way, and that is a great place to start. But the seeking of God in a general way will take you—if you're open to it—it will launch a more focused search, a focused search that will take you to the Scriptures. The search in the Scriptures will take you to Christ. Ultimately, Christmas is about finding in Jesus Christ the love of God for the world.

I started this morning with two quotes wrongly attributed to Augustine. Do you remember them? “Love is a temporary madness.” No, that was *Captain Carelli*. Then, the sentimental Christmas: “Fall in love with God: The greatest romance, greatest adventure, greatest human achievement” Catchy. Good, but insufficient. The reason I knew those quotes were not from Augustine is because when I saw them I thought, “I don't remember reading anything quite like that in Augustine.” So, I searched and searched and searched and searched, and I found what Augustine actually said which is so much better, so much more moving. It is a call to for us this morning to:

- ♦ Reject the love of self that would seek to destroy Jesus.
- ♦ Reject the love of status that would make us indifferent to Jesus.
- ♦ Embrace the love of God that would lead us to worship Jesus.

The reason I, in the end, don't love the sentimental statement is that it's too human-centered: *our* romance, *our* adventure, *our* achievement. The love of Christmas means seeing in Jesus the love of God that God is initiating toward us. Christmas is not the result of our achievement, our adventure, our romance. Christmas is the response of the human heart to the living God who has reached out toward us in His love.

Augustine's spiritual autobiography *The Confessions* tells this whole story. That whole story is really a story of God's love pursuing *him*, and the climax of the work is in Book 10. This is how he expresses the response of the human heart of love for God. He says:

“Late have I loved You, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. You were within and I was in the external world and sought You there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all.

“You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.”

That is what Augustine actually said.

God takes the initiative. God is pursuing us. God is calling. God is shining. God is allowing the fragrance of His beauty to be seen. We take it in and we respond to the love of God with love back to Him. That is what the love of Christmas is about. It is not about our accomplishments, our achievements. It is about a search for God finding its end in the face of Jesus Christ.

This love is not a temporary madness. Love is the expression of the very nature of almighty God, who is love, and in His great love sends His beloved Son into the world that we might see Him and respond to Him with the love of our own. That is why Christmas is so, so wonderful. And that good news of great joy of the love of God is for *all* the world.

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we want to worship You this Christmas Sunday. We thank You, Lord, for the search for God that rightly finds its goal in You, Lord Jesus. We thank You for the scenes of worship surrounding that first Christmas. And Lord, as we come now, we desire to respond to Your love with the love that we can give, the love that is within us, of worship and adoration.

Lord, we ask Your forgiveness where we have been indifferent to You, unmoved. We confess that and reject it. Lord, we confess and reject the love of self, that twisted inversion of love that would seek our own self-protection and cause us ultimately to despise You, seek to destroy You. Lord, we reject that.

This morning we affirm that You, Lord God, are the great Lover, the initiator. We, together, affirm that You have called, that You have opened our ears. You have been radiant, and opened our eyes. Lord God, we pray this morning that You would touch each and every one of us and that You might grant us the peace which is in You and You alone. We praise You, Lord Jesus. We gather around You this morning to sing and to worship in love and adoration of You. Hallelujah.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.