

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Christmas Around the World
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Isaiah 35:1-4; Matthew 2:1-7

It is just about everywhere...Christmas that is. In virtually every nation on earth, whether in public or in private, people will be celebrating Christmas. They will do it in many different ways, in many different languages. They will follow traditions dating from the second and third centuries to those only recently created. It will be a world-wide celebration. But have you ever asked yourselves, how and why? How and why did the birth of a child in a tiny town in rural Palestine become the focus of so much joy and celebration? How did, not just the story of Jesus, but the faith in Jesus move from a tiny band of Jewish followers to encompass more than a billion people of virtually every nationality and language on the face of the earth? I suppose that there are many different reasons, but what I want to offer you this morning is that there are three that were and continue to be crucial to people deciding to follow this Jesus and to celebrate his birth. And these three reasons can be found in this strange story about the astrologers who came looking for the one whose birth was foretold in the heavens and the story that is told to them about a Jewish messianic prediction.

We begin with the fact that Jesus is one of us. Jesus, this one of whom angels will sing, to whom billions will pray, is one of us because he is born in a small town, Bethlehem, just like most of us. The wisemen have come to Herod's court because that is the likely place one would find a new king...especially in Judea. Herod the Great was the brutal dictator who would not hesitate to kill his own children to hold on to power, so a new king must be born in the palace. But Jesus is not born there. He is not born even in the capitol city of Jerusalem. He is born in a small, out of the way, barely known and pretty much ignored town. And because of this he is not born as the gods of Olympus, or the Caesars of Rome, but as an ordinary child. He will be one of us because he grows up like us. He will nurse at his mother's breast. He will fight with his brothers and sisters. He will skin his knees and get into arguments. He will learn a trade. He will be one of us and because he is one of us, he will understand what it is like to be ordinary; to be poor; to be thirsty; to be hungry and to die. People will follow him and celebrate his birth because he is the one who understands them completely; because he is one of us.

People will follow him and celebrate his birth because he is the ruler who sets people free and doesn't oppress. For Jesus is the ruler, the prince, the king who will come from among us ordinary people. Across the centuries people have understood the golden rule. Those with the gold make the rules. It has been true in every society and in every time and place. And because of that the majority of the world's population now, and across time, have found themselves oppressed by rulers and ruling classes, that use and abuse the powerless. But here in Jesus

comes the one who will be our ruler, our champion, our liberator. He will be the one who will work to level the playing field by giving worth and value not only to those who have the gold, but to those who do not have it. He will be the ruler who sets free, through his life, death and resurrection. He will be the ruler who gives every human being worth and value. He will be the ruler who judges not based on a bribe or status, but on the quality of one's character and the totality of one's life. He will be the ruler who forgives rather than condemns. People will follow him and celebrate his birth because he is the people's ruler bringing forth a kingdom of love, peace and justice.

Finally, people will follow him because he is the one who cares deeply about them. Jesus is the one who will shepherd his people. The image of the shepherd is one that has almost universal appeal, because it reminds human beings of the one who cares not just about the flock, but about each sheep within it. In rural Judea where this story was first told, the people would have known that a shepherd knew the name of every sheep. The shepherd knew the quirks of every sheep. The shepherd cared for each of the sheep. And this is what people discovered about Jesus. Jesus was not about holding rallies so as to gather the largest crowd. Jesus was about caring for each person. He cared about the blind man calling to him from the side of the road. He cared about the woman whom no one else could heal. He cared about his friend Lazarus. He cared about the dying daughter of a Centurion. He cared about the children and invited them to come and be blessed. He cared about those who betrayed and killed him. Everyone matters to him and so people will follow him and celebrate his birth.

The appeal of Jesus is universal. It is an appeal that transcends race, culture and language. It is world-wide because every human being wants to know that somewhere, there is one with power, who values them for who they are, and desires the best in life for them, even in the most difficult of circumstances. This is why in places such as Iran, China and other nations where being a Christian can lead to imprisonment or even death, people still follow Jesus and will celebrate his birth; because they find in him one who understands them, works for them and cares for them. And so this is our challenge, the challenge I offer that we do the same for all that we meet during the week; that we try to understand them, work for them and care for them in the name of Christ, so that they too might want to know this one who came to change lives and to change the world.