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What do you want for Christmas, Magi?
The Christ!
Matthew 2: 1-12

I majored in Math in college, and I love movies with math as part of the plot line. One of my favorites is *Good Will Hunting*. Now, I do have a disclaimer, if you haven't seen it, the language is coarse at times, so before you check it out, please be aware. However, it is a fascinating story about a young man called Will Hunting, played by Matt Damon, who lives in an impoverished South Boston neighborhood and works as a janitor at MIT. Despite having a terrible upbringing, Will is a total genius. A Math professor at MIT finds this out after Will solves a difficult graduate-level math problem he had left for his students on a chalkboard.

Will not only has knowledge of math, but through reading books he has an extensive knowledge of economics, literature, art and history. But Will has a problem. He is unwilling to let someone love him, and so despite this vast knowledge, he doesn't really know anything because he never lets anyone into his life. Will has vast knowledge, but doesn't really know anything. Will is confronted with this by his court assigned psychologist, played by Robin Williams.

There is a difference between knowledge of someone or something, and knowing someone or something. But yet, it can be so easy to confuse the two. We think we know celebrities because we follow them on Twitter and know what they ate for lunch and what they're reading... but we don't know what their deepest struggles are. We think we know our friends because we know their favorite TV show or where they grew up... but we don't know their source of greatest pain or their hopes and dreams. And we think we know Jesus because we can quote Scripture and explain doctrine... but we don't know how he is weeping for this broken world, or how deep and wide his love for us really is.

This morning, we are going to read about two groups of people, the people of Jerusalem, and the Magi—the wise men of the East. Each of them has knowledge of Jesus, they know about the Christ, but what they do with this knowledge sets them apart. Read Matthew 2: 1-12

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and 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."

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ 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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.'"

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹After they had heard the king, they 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. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Throughout Advent and Christmas we have been asking: What do you want for Christmas? This morning we ask this question of the wise men, or magi. These guys, we're not sure how many, but there were 3 gifts so maybe there were 3 men, were pagan astrologers from a land East of Israel, probably in modern day Iraq. They believed everyone's destiny was in the stars and they had just seen some new star appear in the sky. They consulted their scrolls of prophecy, and they believed this star foretold the birth of a new King of the Jews... a fascinating piece of knowledge to have, right? There is going to be a new King born some 800 miles away to the Jewish people. So what? Well apparently, they packed up their bags and travelled for something like 40 days to Jerusalem, the city where the King of the Jews lived, to go and pay homage to this new king.

Now this was not uncommon for rich and noble men such as these to do when a new King was born. But what is surprising is what happens when they arrive in Jerusalem. They start wandering around the city going, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" And no one knows. Now think about this... if a king had been born, people would know. Prince George the future king of England was born 18 months ago and everyone knew. So it's kind of surprising that these wise men aren't told where this new king is.

But there's more to this. Think about it from Herod's perspective. He is the King of the Jews, and he knows he hasn't just had a baby. Wise men travel for 7 weeks based upon a star to come and see the newborn King of the Jews. Verse 3 tells us how Herod feels—disturbed. Why? Well, Herod knows that there is this prophecy about the Christ, a king sent by God who would come and rescue his people. Herod knows about this Christ, this coming King, and he knows that when he

comes, it will be “game over” for whoever is king at the time. And so do the people of Jerusalem. Herod and the people of Jerusalem know about this Christ, but they are unsettled because they know that if the Christ has come, it means change. They are happy knowing about the Christ, but they don't want to know the Christ.

I was brought up going to church, but my family stopped going in my teenage years. Nonetheless, at my high school, our Chaplain would run lunchtime events to try and reach kids and tell them about Jesus, and I used to go to these all the time. Each week they would tell the good news about Jesus, they would let us all ask questions, and most importantly, they would give us free food. And here's the thing, I was very happy going along to these events and learning about Jesus. In fact, I could have explained the gospel to you very easily, but I didn't want to know Jesus. I was content with knowledge of Jesus, but I didn't want to know Him because knowing Him would mean change. I would have to change my life, radically. Stop drinking and partying and chasing girls. And so I was happy with knowledge of Jesus.

I was just like the people of Jerusalem. They had knowledge of this Christ, this coming King, they even had a prophecy of where he was to be born, not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem. But they didn't want to know him. The wise men travelled 800 miles based upon a star to see this newborn King, but the people of Jerusalem wouldn't even travel 6 miles based upon their own Scriptures! 6 miles... that's less than two hours walking! This is crazy. The people of God have been waiting hundreds of years for the Christ, this coming rescuer who was going to overthrow the powers of oppression, set free the captives and rule and reign over the kingdom of Israel once again. But they won't even travel 6 miles just in case he might have arrived?

Perhaps even the wise men at this point were a bit worried. I mean, they've travelled 800 miles based upon a star, to find the new king of the Jews, but when they get there, no one knows anything about him. Herod suggests—probably in a very sly sort of way—that his sources indicate this king might be in Bethlehem. But Herod isn't going, and none of the Jewish people are going. Not only that, but verse 10 seems to suggest that the star had disappeared. They were probably just about at the point of giving up—perhaps like a 49ers fan, or maybe, more seriously, like a parent who has almost given up on their child succeeding academically. They've tried and tried and tried to help them, but nothing seems to work. They've come to believe: this kid is destined to fail.

Our wise men were right at that point of giving up when, verse 10 says, the star appeared again and they were overjoyed! Overjoyed is perhaps a little understated here by the translators. The text says, they were joyful... with joy... to a great extent... exceedingly. It's a bit like this. Here's a video clip of a teenager who's dad had almost given up on him ever succeeding in life because he was doing so badly academically. A year earlier, the father told the son that if he doesn't pass in Math,

which he was totally failing at, he will never be able to get a decent job. Here's the moment the son tells his dad the good news—he passed.

[<https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/283462/1%20Passed%20Maths.mp4>]

That's what the wise men were like! Rejoicing exceedingly with great joy! They were not content with knowledge of this new King. They weren't content with just seeing His star. They weren't content with just knowing where he would probably be born. No, they weren't like Herod and the people of Jerusalem. These wise men, were exploding with joy because the star to them was the confirmation that they would indeed meet this newborn king! That he was going to be in Bethlehem! That they would come to know Him.

This sort of pushing through in desperation to know Jesus reminds me of a dear older lady in this church named Robin. I first got to know Robin through our Christianity Explored class. She came because she didn't believe in Jesus, but she had a lot of questions about Him. Robin is one of the most intelligent people I have ever met and her brain is incredibly sharp. She had more questions about Jesus and Christianity and faith than anyone else I have ever met. She tells me she was a Physics major at Wellesley College, and she was taught to always ask questions like: "How did this get to be?" And, "How did these laws develop?"

But behind it all, I believe, was this desperation to know Jesus. She may not quite have believed in Him, but she was desperate to know Him. She was totally relentless! In fact, she was already coming to Chapel Hill on Sundays, going to Women's Life on Tuesdays, and then she came to not one but two Christianity Explored classes! After that she came to our membership class. She just kept seeking and seeking and seeking. But, she didn't forsake her integrity in this process. In fact, after finishing the membership class she decided not to join, because she couldn't faithfully say she had committed her life to Jesus.

However, Robin didn't give up seeking, and what happened next was what changed everything. For a long time she had been trying very hard to forgive someone for something very painful. Consistently she was unsuccessful, despite even praying to Jesus to help her. But then one day, as she describes it, she was praying again and found herself in Jesus' presence; all of a sudden she felt a warmth all over her torso, and then a deep feeling of joy, before finally a release. She said it was like the rain coming down, it just descended on her. And from that moment on, she no longer had any feeling of a need to forgive this person.

Robin was not content with merely knowledge of Jesus, she wanted to know Jesus. And Jesus made himself known to her in a very real and tangible way. And Robin was left feeling just like the wise men: overjoyed. And neither she, nor the wise men stopped there. The wise men went on to Bethlehem and met the newborn King themselves, verse 11 says, "they bowed down and worshipped him," and, "opened their treasures and presented him with gifts." And Robin, after this moment, when she was overcome with joy, said she could not resist Jesus

any more. She had to commit her life to Him. And so just like the wise men, she worshipped Jesus as her King, she bowed down her life to his Kingship, she opened up her heart so Jesus could be her treasure, and she offered her gifts of service to Him.

Our passage concludes by telling us that the wise men "returned to their country by another route." The wise men did not leave this encounter in the same way they arrived. And anyone who knows Robin knows that she is a different person now than she was before. She left that encounter with Jesus by another route. And the person who knows this the best is the one she was trying so desperately to forgive—they sensed such a change in Robin that they immediately knew that Robin had forgiven them. You see, when we are not content with knowledge of Jesus, but pursue knowing Jesus, we are transformed—we become different people—because knowing Jesus changes everything.

What did the wise men want for Christmas? The Christ. They didn't just want knowledge of him, knowledge of his birth, knowledge of his star, knowledge of the prophecies about him, they wanted to meet him, they wanted to know him. And so I boldly want us to ask ourselves this question: are we satisfied with knowledge of Jesus, or do we want to know Him?

I've reflected on this in my life and there have been many times where I have been satisfied with knowledge of Jesus. When I studied apologetics—which is how to answer difficult questions about Christianity—I spent a lot of time studying the Bible, studying philosophy, puffing myself up with knowledge, so that I could help people get to know Jesus. But sadly, this sort of study of the Bible, got me so often to a place where I had knowledge of Jesus, but I didn't know Him. I knew how to answer questions about suffering, but I didn't know what it meant for Jesus to be with me in my suffering. I knew how to answer questions about Jesus' miracles, but I didn't know the miracle it was for Jesus to be alive in me. It is so easy to get knowledge of Jesus confused with knowing Jesus.

And I think the same can be true of knowing Jesus' body—the church. That's how the church is described in the Bible, as the body of Jesus. Are we satisfied with knowledge of the church, or do we want to know the church? When I first arrived at college, I began attending a church called St Aldates. And for a semester I was content turning up a little late to the services to avoid that awkward moment beforehand where you don't know who to talk to, and then leaving immediately so you didn't have that awkward moment after. Sometimes I would even go use the bathroom if I was early just to avoid the awkwardness. And for that semester, I got to know about the church, I had knowledge of them, but I didn't know them. And God convicted me of that. He challenged me to get to know Jesus' body. And it required some changes. I had to go and see my rugby coach, who was a very intimidating man, and ask if I could step back from playing rugby for a semester. He told me that it would probably be better for me to keep playing rugby and annoy the Christians. Why? Because at least they will always forgive you! He did

let me step back though. And as I joined a small group and got involved in college ministry, I got to know Jesus' body better, I experienced more joy, and love, and contentment. Oh, and I met a beautiful young woman who would become my wife.

Where are you today? Are you content with knowledge of Jesus? Or do you want to know Jesus? Are you willing to open the treasure of your heart up to Him? Are you willing to lay your life down before him, like the wise men, so that you might know him, and that he might transform you... so that he might bring you joy... so that you might rejoice exceedingly with great joy? Don't you want that? I know I do.

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Who do you relate more to in this story, and why? Herod/the people of Jerusalem, or the wise men?
 2. Where in your life do you settle for knowledge of Jesus, rather than pursuing knowing Jesus?
 3. Why should we pursue knowing Jesus beyond just having knowledge of Him?
 4. What changes could you make to pursue knowing Jesus in a deeper, more intimate way?