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## Introduction

"We have breaking news!" That phrase is familiar to us. Newscasters will say at the beginning of the evening broadcast, "We have breaking news..." and if it is serious in nature, they will actually interrupt Pat Sajak and Vanna White right in the middle of a spin on Wheel of Fortune, saying: "We interrupt this program to bring you this breaking news." When that happens, whatever the breaking news happens to be is pretty serious in nature as it impacts a wide range of people.

For example, for those of us who are older, we will remember the late Walter Cronkite interrupting television shows to bring the breaking news that then President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. Fifty years ago last month, America experienced the meaning of that phrase "we have breaking news" in the deepest of ways. Moreover, people responded to the breaking news in a wide variety of ways. *Life* magazine wrote that the "news came like a clap of thunder, reverberating around the world." Some people wept. For others, it was as if time was frozen. Still others, political opponents to Kennedy, showed little or no remorse. Some things never change, even after centuries pass. This weekend, we are looking at a text in which there was breaking news, and that breaking news brought about a variety of responses.

For those who are with us as guests today, we are in the midst of Advent, a time of year that celebrates the arrival of Jesus Christ into our lives. We are being challenged by God and His Word to change the way we "do Christmas;" wanting it to be "new and improved." A couple of weeks, we were challenged to change the way we THINK about Christmas, while last week, we were challenged to change the way we SPEAK about Christmas. If we do so, Christmas this year will be new and improved; new in that we've not "done Christmas" in this manner and improved because we will take Christmas back; rescuing it from what it was never intended to become.

Our passage is familiar to many people, even to those who have never read it because it has been on the cover of Christmas cards for years, and we've sung a Christmas carol about the guys in the text many, many times.

## Matthew 2:1-12

*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 when it rose and have come to worship him."*

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

*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."*

*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. 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, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.*

This passage shouts: “We have breaking news!” Imagine if all of us were investigative reporters for local television station and we were covering this story, we would ask many questions so that we could accurately report the breaking news. So, we are going to use interrogative questions, and we hope to clear and clean up some of the poor reporting of this story from over the years.

## **WHO**

The reason this is “breaking news” starts at the very beginning of the passage. Imagine the sight of the arrival of the magi. As reporters, the facts are few when it comes to the wise men. We’re not told how many there were, their names, their mode of transportation, their place of origin, etc. We’ve assumed there were “three wise men” from the fact that three gifts were mentioned: gold, frankincense and myrrh. That is poor Bible study, yet Christmas cards, nativity sets – even the song *We Three Kings* all reinforce this potentially wrong fact.

Magi, a word from which we derive magic and magician, were a group of highly educated men, particularly in astronomy and astrology. The word “magi” was first used by Herodotus, a Greek historian; noting that magi were men from the Medes. If you remember the story of Daniel, he and his buddies were numbered among “wise men” in Babylon, which later became Persia—the land of the Medes. Where was it? TO the EAST of Israel. Magi, or wise men, were powerful, influential guys. They would not have traveled alone, but probably with a security detail (since they had expensive gifts). So, there could have been more than three—maybe five, six or ten wise men—along with a host of other men in the caravan. No wonder they stood out as soon as they arrived in the city of Jerusalem!

As foreigners, they went through town and kept asking anyone they met, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?” If anyone should know about this new king, the Jews themselves should know, particularly their leaders! King Herod heard about this and he summoned them for a private audience (v. 7). Their large entourage and their persistent questioning unsettled King Herod.

Another key person in this “breaking news” is King Herod. This is Herod the Great, who built the mountain fortress Masada that overlooks the Dead Sea, as well as the Temple in Jerusalem and much more. Herod had at least ten wives, one of whom was Jewish, which explains why Herod knew quite a bit about the Jewish faith. Herod was a power-hungry tyrant, which leads us to ask WHY this was such “breaking news.”

## **WHY**

News reached Herod that some wise men and their security detail had arrived from somewhere east of Israel, and they were asking everyone in Jerusalem where they could find the new king of the Jews in order to worship him (and not Herod). Verse 3 reveals that Herod was “disturbed” by this, and the word means “to shake and stir up.” With a new ‘kid – king’ on the block, Herod felt threatened and the citizens of Jerusalem were even shaken up. Seeing these important people ride into town and asking one person after another where they could find the newborn king of the Jews was unsettling for everyone. That’s what made this “breaking news.”

## **WHERE**

So, Herod called “all of the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law” together to get to the bottom of this. These were the leaders of great influence among the Jews, and they pointed to Bethlehem! Just five to six miles away, in the sleepy little town of Bethlehem, the Messiah would someday be born. This was just one of the FOUR prophecies in this one chapter alone about Jesus, and there are over three hundred prophecies about Jesus in the Old Testament. So, the jealous King Herod called a secret, high-profile meeting with the Magi and sent them to Bethlehem to “search carefully” for this new king (see vs. 7-8).

## **WHEN**

This all took place a few months after the birth of Jesus. The Magi did NOT arrive at the time of Christ’s birth. They did NOT kneel beside a manger filled with hay, next to “the little Lord Jesus, no crying He made.” The Christmas cards have got it all wrong. Notice, verse 11 indicates that they went to a house. Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus are no longer in a barn or stable; but they are in a house. By this time, Jesus has been circumcised (by the eighth day) and Mary has

dedicated Him at the Temple (after forty days). So, Jesus could be a few months—or more—old by this time. Moreover, as soon as the wise men leave, Joseph would be told to take Mary and Jesus and flee to Egypt because Herod would try to kill Jesus. That infers that the circumcision and the rite of dedication have been completed.

## WHAT

What did the key people in this “break news” do? What actions did they take?

Herod was ticked off! The Magi left by another route to return home (see vs. 12). Now imagine how hard that would have been. There may have been more than the traditional three wise men, and their security detail and others who may have been in their entourage; and they were all trying to get out of little Bethlehem undetected. When they did not return to tell Herod of the newborn king’s whereabouts, he flew into a rage (see vs. 16) and he ordered that all baby boys two years of age and younger in the vicinity of Bethlehem to be killed. Don’t be surprised at this act of indescribable cruelty. Herod had his brother-in-law killed, and even one of his mother-in-laws. He killed one of his wives and three of his sons. Herod was hated, and he knew it. He knew that on the day he died, no one would grieve his death. So, get this—Herod ordered that the moment he died, soldiers were to kill people his soldiers had taken into custody so that there would be weeping and wailing on the day of his death. This guy was sick! What was Herod’s response to the “breaking news?” Absolute hostility!

What about the chief priests and teachers of the Law? What did they do when they heard that the Messiah had been born? Absolutely nothing. What does NOT appear in a text should stand out to us. The spiritual leaders of the Jews did NOTHING. There is nothing in the text indicating that they went to Bethlehem in search of the newborn king. What was the response of the Jewish spiritual leaders to the “breaking news?” Absolute indifference.

Yet, what about the Magi? What did they do when they heard of the birth of the Messiah, King of the Jews? They went looking for Him, and it is reasonable to think that they traveled many miles, making a concerted effort to find Him. They dropped what they were doing, kissed their wives good-bye, packed a few things and got on the road to a long and risk-filled journey. Herod could have killed them had he wanted to. Once they found Him, they worshipped Him, a word meaning to kneel and bow. Imagine the sight of grown, powerful men of influence and resources bowing to a baby a few months old! They then presented Him with costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It strikes me that myrrh was presented to Christ at His birth of Christ, and at His death. Just before being nailed to the cross, wine mixed with myrrh was offered to Jesus as a painkiller and He refused it. Myrrh was even used as spice in the wrapping of His burial cloth around Him. What was the response of the Magi to the “breaking news?” Absolute surrender.

## HOW

The one last interrogative asks: how? How does this ever-familiar story speak into our lives? It has everything to do with our response to the “breaking news” that Christmas (i.e., Advent) reminds us is about the coming of Christ into your world and mine. People respond differently to “breaking news.

Like Herod, some people are **hostile**.

- Obviously, there are those individuals who are not of the Christian faith and they oppose the Christian aspect of this holiday. The Family Research Council and Liberty Institute published a 150 page report, citing more than 600 specific acts of hostility towards Christianity; such as Catherina DeCarlo, a nurse at Manhattan’s Mt. Sinai Hospital, was forced to participate in a late term abortion against her religious convictions, and was threatened with job termination and the loss of her nursing license. Though we do not hear of it on the evening news nor read of it in the morning paper, hostility towards all things Christians is heating up.
- Still, it may be that you have decided to make Christmas more about Jesus than ever before, and you have friends or family who do not appreciate what you are doing; how you are acting this year when it comes to Christmas. In their minds, you are messing with traditions and ruining their holiday. As a result, you are getting some push back, some strange looks, and some unfriendly texts and e-mails. Case in point, the following appeared in the October 18, 2009 issue of *The Indianapolis Star*. It’s a letter to “Annie’s Mailbox,” and it reads:

**Dear Annie:** My whole family has gone commercial over Christmas. My kids received more than 100 gifts last year. I know everyone gives out of love, but how can my kids get a proper view of Christmas with this kind of indulgence? My wife's parents gave so many presents they ran out of paper! I have suggested to my wife that we ask for donations instead, and while she likes the idea, she is afraid someone's feelings would be hurt. I would rather have one homemade gift and nothing else, but it looks unlikely. I am losing my love for the holiday. How can I get the true meaning back in Christmas? – The Other Charlie Brown in Louisville, KY.

**Dear Reader:** If you cannot get the relatives to stop showering you with presents, simply pack most of them up and donate them to charity (the presents, not your relatives). Use this as an opportunity to show your children that giving to those in need is the most rewarding gift of all.

Like the spiritual Jews (i.e., religious people), some people are **indifferent**.

- Roughly 175 million people think of themselves as Christians in America today, and I wonder if we are like the spiritual people in the day of Jesus. How many of us merely go through religious motions throughout the year, and particularly at this time of year? How many of us are what could be termed "submarine Christians"? Just as a submarine surfaces and can be seen from time to time, this is that season of the year when submarine Christians surface and can be seen. They haven't been around in the body of Christ in months, but all of a sudden, here they are. Could it be that their response to the "breaking news" of Jesus coming into our world is lukewarm indifference?

**ILLUS:** In his book *When a Nation Forgets God*, Erwin Lutzer retells one Christian's story of living in Hitler's Germany. The man wrote: I lived in Germany during the Nazi Holocaust. I considered myself a Christian. We heard stories of what was happening to the Jews, but we tried to distance ourselves from it, because what could anyone do to stop it? A railroad track ran behind our small church, and each Sunday morning we could hear the whistle in the distance and then the wheels coming over the tracks. We became disturbed when we heard the cries coming from the train as it passed by. We realized that it was carrying Jews like cattle in the cars! Week after week the whistle would blow. We dreaded to hear the sound of those wheels because we knew that we would hear the cries of the Jews en route to a death camp. Their screams tormented us.

We knew the time the train was coming, and when we heard the whistle blow we began singing hymns. By the time the train came past our church, we were singing at the top of our voices. If we heard the screams, we sang more loudly and soon we heard them no more. Years have passed, and no one talks about it anymore. But I still hear that train whistle in my sleep. God forgive me; forgive all of us who called ourselves Christians yet did nothing to intervene. Talk about being indifferent!

Like the Magi, some people are **surrendered**.

- Are we? How we ACT at this time of year is a strong indication of the degree to which we have surrendered to Jesus Christ. For example, Americans will spend an estimated \$400 billion on Christmas this year, and 40% of the toys given in December will be broken by March. Fifty percent of Americans will spend more than they can afford, with more than a third of Americans taking six months to pay off Christmas spending; while one out of five will have trouble paying the mortgage or rent in January because of how much money was spent in December. Why? So much of our gift-giving is both out of control and out of focus. The Magi did not give each other presents of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The presents were for Jesus. Is it possible for us to give presents to Jesus? Absolutely, and people who respond to this "breaking news of Jesus" with surrendered lives know how to give gifts to Him.

Matthew 25:35-36 reads: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat; thirsty and you gave me something to drink; a stranger and you invited me in; needed clothes and you clothed me; sick and you looked after me; in prison and you came to see me." He went on to say: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me" (vs. 40). We can still give gifts to Jesus this time of year by caring for those who are broken, discouraged and disadvantaged. Jesus is the focus of our gift-giving. After all, Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive. Consider giving only THREE gifts to the children: something they need, something they want

and something they can share. If we change the way we THINK about Christmas, we can change the way we ACT when Christmas comes.

Others must matter to us, and when they do, it can be life changing. Just watch this news clip from of a middle school football team from Olivet, Michigan; a small town where Leah and I met in 1976 while we were students at Olivet College. [INSERT NEWS CLIP: "On the Road Middle school football players execute life-changing play] This is the third week of Advent, which is all about the arrival of Jesus in this world. This week of Advent is all about JOY, and when we live surrendered lives to Christ, so much so that we think of others before ourselves, we experience JOY; unspeakable JOY as seen in that video. Remember, God, the Holy Spirit lives in us as followers of Jesus Christ. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:22-23) What IF millions of Christians around the world ACTED in keeping with those traits this Christmas? The world would be a different place! We don't need to have college degrees to live this way. We don't need to have perfect grammar to make a difference in this world. We don't have to be independently wealthy to impact the lives of those around us. We need to be SURRENDERED to Christ, with hearts full of love and compassion! Jesus said: "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

The one thing we've not yet mentioned in this "breaking news" account is the star. How could a star that is so far away from the earth (i.e., the closest ones are still light years away) be near enough to indicate "the house" where the Christ Child was? The Greek word for star (*aster*) also means great brilliance or radiance. It could be that there was a great brilliance moving and stopping over the location of the Christ Child. Just as in the Old Testament when the Israelites left Egypt and moved to the Promised Land, they were led by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God provided them with a great brilliance or radiance over and near them. Even Jesus was called the "bright Morning Star" in Revelation 22:16. Jesus the great brilliance or radiance, not a literal star. Many see of us have Christmas lights on our homes; some might even have a star on the house. Those driving or living nearby see the lights, but more importantly, do they see IN us the "bright Morning Star" (i.e., Jesus Christ)? They will if we are absolutely SURRENDERED to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

If we change the way we ACT this year, Christmas will be new and improved.

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### Post Message

It may be that you are here today and you are like the wise men in that you are spiritually seeking, and we want to help you in your search. If you have questions about Jesus Christ, please allow us the privilege of trying to answer those questions. After all, wise people *still* seek Him.

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