



BelPres Church

Open Handed

Matthew 2

Speaker: Dr. Scott Dudley

Disclaimer: This transcript was computer generated and may contain errors.

Great to see all of you here, those of you who are here in the room, those of you online, thank you so much for joining us. Happy Advent, it's great to have you here.

There's a family I know who fit the kind of the stereotype of a hallmark greeting card family, right? Like everything seems to be perfect. They have everything our dominant culture says that we're supposed to want. Like the parents and kids all went to elite universities, they're all wealthy, they're all super good looking, and on top of that, they're nice. So you can't even resent them for it, right? They're just so nice.

A while back, they took a family vacation to Hawaii, and they decided to have a family picture taken. So they went out, they had the picture taken on the beach at sunrise when all the colors of the sky were reflecting in the water, and they were all dressed in white, and the grandkids were super cute, and there was a gentle breeze blowing through their flowing hair, right? And they posted this on Instagram, and the first comment underneath was, oh, jeez.

Mine was the second comment, and I said, you speak for all of us, right? Because I don't have those things. I mean, I don't even have hair for the wind to blow through and flow, right? Nothing flowing up here, right?

And the end of this story isn't even the typical sermon illustration where I say, but inside they were hollow and empty and miserable. No, they were perfectly happy. Here's why, I think here's why. Because they weren't attached to all that

other stuff. They were more attached to Jesus than the wealth and the education and all of that. Those are good things, but they weren't attached to them. They held them with open hands.

Because those things can be good, but if those are the things we're looking to, to make us happy, make us feel secure, give us a sense that we're valuable as a human being, well, then they're going to become leashes around us.

We're coming to the end of our sermon series we've been doing this fall about how Jesus unleashes us from whatever is holding us back, whether it's an unhealthy drive to succeed or fears about money or an addiction or a bad habit. Jesus unleashes us from those things and for the adventure of his kingdom.

And last week, we celebrated our 70th anniversary as a church. And many of us turned in commitment cards saying how we're going to use our time, money and influence to advance those eight unleashed projects that we talked about for a couple of weeks. Many of you turned in cards and cards are still coming in. And some of you, we know, are still praying over those cards. So we don't have final numbers. But the response was very, very strong.

Hundreds and hundreds of you are offering your time and your influence. Financial gifts ranging from two figure gifts to seven figure gifts. Everyone from little kids to students to great-grandparents bringing their gifts to the Lord. And we'll have more sure numbers for you in January. Not going to say them now because they're just going to change. But we know that many of you made some really steep sacrifices.

And our staff, our elders and I take that seriously. That is sacred stuff. Your sacrifices are sacred things. And we're committed to being good stewards of your sacrifice. So for those of you who made commitments or are still praying over commitments, I just want to say thank you and well done. Well done.

You're helping a lot of people. And for those of you who have not yet stepped into this, this is an ongoing vision and the invitation is open. For you can still join.

And the bottom line of this entire fall, the entire sermon series, really the bottom line of it all is freedom. The Bible says for freedom, Christ has set us free. That's one of many ways that Jesus brings us good news.

And in January, we'll be doing a new sermon series about all the ways that Jesus brings good news to us in our individual lives. And one of those is Jesus wants to set you and me free.

Which we see in a Christmas text in the Bible, in Matthew chapter two, which creates a comparison and contrast between a king named Herod, who has everything that we're supposed to want, just like that family I talked about at the beginning, but unlike that family is leashed to those things. And then the Magi, the wise men, who are free and unleashed.

It says after Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, where's the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.

So the Magi were probably astronomers from what is today Iraq. And they're following the star. And then it says, when King Herod heard this, he was disturbed for fear of losing his throne to a rival king. And all Jerusalem with him for fear of Herod and what he might do in his jealous rage.

When he 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, they replied, for this is what the prophet has written. But you, Bethlehem and 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.

That's one of about 500 Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah. And Jesus fulfilled every single one of them.

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

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, okay, so notice, not the manger, not the stable, the house, because this is after Jesus was born. Up to two years after Jesus was born. And by the way, nowhere in this text does it say there were three of them. There are three gifts, but they're, basically, your nativity set at home is all wrong. Go home, throw it away. It's just all messed up, okay? It's an unbiblical nativity set.

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. I probably would have returned two of those gifts. Seriously, what are you going to do with frankincense and myrrh? I mean, like diapers. How about diapers?

Scholars say the gifts are symbolic, but they don't agree on what they symbolize, so go figure.

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

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him. So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night, and left for Egypt, where he stayed until after the death of Herod.

When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.

So Matthew here deliberately creates a contrast between Herod, who has everything we're supposed to want and is leashed, and the Magi, who are free.

For starters, Herod is leashed to fear. He is terrified of losing his power, his status, his wealth. He's terrified because those are the things he clings to because he thinks that's what's going to make his life worthwhile. But they are clinging to him. They've become leashes to him, and he's terrified of losing them.

Because those kinds of things can offer us the illusion of security but not the reality. In Herod's case, he's not even really a king. He muscled his way into the throne, but he's kept there by as a puppet of the Roman Empire, and he has to do what Rome tells him to do. Rome is pulling the strings, and he's just the puppet.

There's nothing wrong with our desire to be well liked, unless that's how we feel good about ourselves. And then other people's opinions are the strings pulling on us, and we're the puppets. Our jobs, our school, and doing well on those things, that's a good thing, unless that's what we're living for. And then those things are pulling the strings of our lives. And strings is just another word for leash.

So a question for us, for me to ask is, who or what are pulling the strings in my life? Because something always is, something always is.

Herod is leashed to fear. The Magi, even though in some ways they're at risk of Herod's rage, they're free, they're unafraid. He's leashed to fear. Which leads to my second observation. Herod is the problem. Magi and Jesus are the solution.

So Herod was a bad, bad man. He was just, he clings to power. He ordered his wife and all three, and three of his sons, his own sons, killed, because he was afraid that they were gonna take his throne. So he killed his wife and his three sons. His will ordered that on the day he died, hundreds of people should be killed, so that there'd be sadness in the land when he died.

Okay, man, if you have to have people killed when you die, so somebody is sad, clue number one, you're not living in a good way, right? It's you. Hi, you're the problem. It's you, to paraphrase Taylor Swift.

All of this because he's leashed to his power, his position, his prestige, his wealth, and he's terrified of losing those things. It's a version of the phrase hurt people, hurt people, leashed people, leash other people.

If we're control freaks, if we're leashed to having outcomes be exactly the way we want to, and we're very controlling about that, we're going to try to leash other people and control them, spouses, kids, co-workers, parents, friends, and they're going to resent us for it because we're putting leashes around them.

If we're leashed to money or how much people like us, we might step on people to get those things. If we're leashed to fear, that may change how we parent, cause us to bubble wrap our kids and put them on leashes and hold them close so that nothing hurts them, which leaves them unprepared for real life. Leashed people leash other people. So, a question for me to ask is, how are my leashes leading me to leash others?

Herod orders that all the boys be killed in Bethlehem, which forces Jesus and his parents to flee to Egypt to escape his violence. Part of the reason God came himself and the person of Jesus was to experience everything that we experience in life. And Jesus here joins the millions of people over the centuries who have been forced to become refugees to escape violence and persecution.

Refugees are people who are fleeing their country because of violence or persecution, because of their race, their religion, or their politics. And Jesus becomes one of those people.

And right now, around the world, more people are fleeing their countries around the world than at any other time in human history. More people are on the move. And all kinds of countries are trying to, having controversy about how to

handle all this. In Europe, there's controversy. Mexico has its own problems on its southern border. Canada, here in the United States. And the Bible affirms both the need for well-ordered borders and calls us to care for refugees. Quite a lot of verses on that.

Now, we're going to disagree on how to balance well-ordered borders with caring for refugees and how many people get in and all of that stuff. We're going to disagree about that. But we can agree scripture calls us to treat refugees with dignity and compassion because they are made in the image of God. No dehumanizing language and instead offering support.

People fleeing persecution is the problem Jesus calls us to be the solution, which is why for almost 50 years in one way or another, this church has been caring for and supporting refugees. Three of those eight projects many of you gave to last week are about caring for and supporting refugees because Jesus calls us to be the solution.

Herod's leashed to fear, which leads him to leashed others. The opposite of that is the Magi. They're not hurting anybody. In fact, they're trying to make life better for people, and they're announcing that the Messiah has been born. They're letting people know about that. They are free. They are unleashed.

Herod is leashed because, and this is my next point, whereas Herod listens to himself, the Magi listen to God.

God is speaking in this text in all the ways that he speaks to us through dreams that Joseph has to go to Egypt, or the Magi have to go home by a different route than the one they came. And it's just kind of interesting to note, you know, the Magi come following a star, but they leave following God's direction. So somewhere along the way, they've gotten to know the one true God.

God speaks to scripture, as he does in this text, through those prophecies that get quoted from the Old Testament. He speaks to other people. He speaks to thoughts that aren't our thoughts. He speaks to the events in our lives and the things that we care about.

So for instance, in this story, he uses a star to get the attention of astronomers. It makes sense. God does that in our lives. What does God use in your life to get your attention? And if we listen to God's direction, he will lead us straight to Jesus. But if we listen to ourselves, it will lead straight to captivity and bondage.

The Magi find Jesus because they followed him. And one of the things that distorts our ability to hear from God is being fixated on our own agendas. Because it's really hard to hear what God is saying to you if you've decided in advance that he's going to tell you what you already want to hear.

It's a little like a story I heard about a church Christmas play where three six-year-old boys were playing the wise man and the first boy said, I bring gold and the second boy said, I bring myrrh and the third boy said, Frank sent this. Something got lost in translation, right? Something didn't get heard right.

Herod heard the prophecy where the Messiah would be born, but he didn't bother to check it out. He heard it, but it didn't sink in. And it didn't sink into the religious leaders either who told Herod the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Six miles away, that's it, six miles away.

They'd studied the prophecies of the Messiah their entire lives. They had been praying for the Messiah their entire lives. They'd preach sermons on the Messiah over and over, and they don't bother to go on a 90-minute walk max to see the Messiah. Because they are so focused on their own agenda, their power, their privilege, their career, their status, they miss seeing Jesus.

So a question I ask myself is, how much do I miss Jesus' activity in my life because I'm focused on my own agenda? Herod is leashed to fear of losing his stuff, which causes him to leash others. Because he's listening to himself and his own agenda, not to God.

And finally, Herod lives life tight-fisted, and the Magi are open-handed and generous. There's a clear difference in this story between Herod, alone in his palace, terrified of losing the stuff that he's clinging to, that's clinging to him, leashed and miserable, whereas the Magi are free. They get to be part of the miracle of seeing God come himself in the person of Jesus. They're having an adventure, traveling together to see all of this.

Herod goes through life with his fist clenched around the things that he's hanging on to, that he thinks are going to make him happy. But the Magi go through life open-handed. They're generous, right? They bring gifts. I mean, maybe not the most useful gifts, but it's the thought that counts, right? They're open-handed.

They're free from fear, free to experience God's presence in their lives, free to go on this adventure together as a community. The text says, when the Magi saw the star, they were overjoyed. It does not say they were adequately joyed

or underjoyed, right? They were unusually joyed, a great amount of being joyed. In fact, in the original Greek, it literally reads, they rejoiced with great joy. It's like Matthew stacks joy words on top of each other.

If our fists are closed, hanging on to everything, God cannot put blessings in our hands because they're closed. But if we live life with open hands, God can pour his blessings out for us.

So some questions to pray about this week as we turn to Christmas. What star is God using to get my attention? It could be the Bible. Maybe it's a problem you're having. Maybe it's a person. Maybe those two things are the same thing. I don't know. Maybe it's an opportunity. What's the star right now that God's using to try to say to you, come to me, come to me, come to me? Second, how might you be missing what God is saying to you by being so focused on your own agenda?

And then third, how can God use you as a star to guide other people to him? Super simple way of doing this is just to invite someone to come with you on Christmas Eve. Folks who don't go to church are often really open to go on Christmas, so invite someone.

We've got lots of room, lots of room, 10 services, surely one of those is going to work in your schedule. So just come and bring somebody, because Jesus wants to set you and me free to set other people free.

A little over a year ago, I was privileged, along with some other people from this church, to meet a man named Anthony Ray Hinton. And some of you may know who he is or read his book. An African American man who in 1985 in Alabama was put in prison for murders that he did not commit.

There were no fingerprints. He had an alibi. There were no eyewitnesses. The state's case rested on a flawed ballistics report that was done by a visually impaired engineer with no training in ballistics, who couldn't even look into the microscope properly and nevertheless said the bullets came from a gun that Mr. Hinton's mother owned. Racism was also a part of it. One of the detectives who arrested him say we got the wrong one, but at least we got one, except he did not use the word one. He used a racial slur.

Thirty years later when they retried the case, three independent ballistics experts said there's no way those bullets came from Mr. Hinton's mother's gun. And Mr. Hinton was released in 2015.

Well, when he was first put in prison, he was understandably very angry. Who wouldn't be? It's this horrible injustice. He didn't do the crime.

But he has a strong relationship with Jesus. And one day he said to himself, you know what, the state of Alabama took my joy. But that joy I had didn't come from Alabama. It came from Jesus, so I'm not going to let this world steal my joy because that comes from Jesus.

And he decided, he said, I'm going to live the best life I possibly can right here on Death Row. He said he learned to free his mind.

He said his whole life he had this fascination with Queen Elizabeth. And when he was telling us this story, he looked at us and said, bet you didn't see that coming, did you? Nope, nope, never forget. Fascinate, lifelong fascination with Queen Elizabeth.

So he would imagine himself going to Buckingham Palace and talking with the Queen, and they'd talk about Prince Charles and William and Meghan and Kate and all of that stuff. And then the Queen would get up and say, Mr. Hinton, would you like a spot of tea? And then would pour him some tea.

And he said, I realized I could get out of prison anytime I wanted in my mind, especially by connecting with Jesus and experience his power and his presence that gives us hope and joy and courage right there in a cell on Death Row.

Well, one of the people he met in prison was a fellow Death Row inmate named Henry. And Henry's father was the grand wizard of the white supremacist group Ku Klux Klan. And his father was a grand wizard there and one day ordered Henry to go outside and kill the first black person that he saw, which he did, very brutally, which is why Henry was on Death Row.

And Mr. Hinton, a black man, made friends with Henry. And as they got to know each other, Mr. Hinton would just ask Henry, why do you hate me? Like in my experience, there are good and bad people in all races. Why do you hate me? And over time, transformed Henry. Henry began expressing genuine remorse over his hatred and what he had done and repented of those sins.

When Henry's father, the grand wizard of the KKK, came to visit him, Henry introduced Mr. Hinton as his best friend, which did not please his father at all. Their friendship lasted for 15 years.

And as Henry's execution date got closer, he asked if Mr. Hinton could be with him on that day, and the state said, that's fine. So when they came to get

Henry for his execution, Mr. Hinton hugged him and said, I am so grateful. I am so thankful that I have been able to be your friend for these last 15 years, and I know that I'm going to see you again someday.

And before his execution, they asked Henry if he'd like to say anything, and this is what he said. This is a quote, All my life I was taught to hate. My mother taught me to hate. My father taught me to hate. My community taught me to hate. And for the last 15 years, the very people that they taught me to hate is the one who showed me nothing but love. And tonight, as I leave this world, I leave now knowing what love feels like.

You wouldn't think prison is a place where people get free. But Mr. Hinton was unleashed from his understandable anger and found freedom and joy. His word, not my word, through Jesus and through forgiveness.

And Henry, who was leashed to hatred, was unleashed by the powerful love of Jesus coming through Mr. Hinton. Leashed people leash other people, but it works the other way around too. Unleashed people set other people free.

And I don't know if I could do what Mr. Hinton did. I don't know if I could do that, but I would want to. I want to be like him. He connected with Jesus' presence and power that got him through all of that. He lived open handedly and generous with his time and with his love, and was guided by Jesus, not his own agenda. And out of a horrible injustice, Jesus brought freedom and joy, because that's what Jesus does. That's just what Jesus does. And what he did for Mr. Hinton, he can do for you.

So what is it that you are holding on to so tightly that is holding on to you? Is it fear of failure? Is it an addiction? Is it unhealthy patterns of relating to other people? What is it that you are hanging on to that is hanging on to you?

Who the son sets free is free indeed. So bring it to Jesus, lay it at his feet, because Jesus breaks every chain. He breaks every chain. Jesus breaks every single chain, and he can set you free. So, Jesus, you are the chain breaker, and only you, Jesus, can set us free, really free. Lord, thank you for the demonstration from Mr. Hinton's life about your power. And Lord, please do for him, do for us what you did for him.

Wherever we are bound, wherever we are chained, break those chains, and set us free in your name, and we're gonna give you all the glory, because you deserve it. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or community group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- How would you characterize the Magi's response to Jesus' arrival? The Chief priests? Herod's?
- Why was it necessary for Jesus' family to flee to Egypt for safety, rather than God simply providing supernatural protection while they stayed in Bethlehem? What does this teach us about God's methods and human responsibility?
- How can we find hope in trials and suffering as seen in this passage?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Take the challenging parts of your conversation to Jesus. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.