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Speaker: Pastor Mark Hanke
Bible passage or verse: Matthew 2:1-12
Title of sermon: **Faces of Grace**
Series: Come Close - #2

Matthew 2:1-12 - NIV:

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem **2** 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." **3** When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** 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. **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 shepherd my people Israel.'" **7** 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." **9** 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. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** 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. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Do you remember your journey to Christ? Do you remember, kind of, I would say, how you got there? Do you remember the things that happened? For me, it was a long journey. It was. I grew up in the church, and, you know, my mom took us to church, and -- the better we behaved, we got to only go to Sunday morning. When we got really nasty, and -- you know, and she could tell -- Sunday night, and then, if somebody in the family was really not walking with Jesus, we did Wednesday. So -- that's the way my mom disciplined. The more you misbehave, the more church we're taking you to. Well, she prayed for us, and she did all the things that a parent should do. She was phenomenal. But probably like a lot of you, as I was making my way along, Jesus did a great job loving me, and I never doubted Him. People in the church -- not imperfect, and because I was horribly immature, I used every little excuse I could to kind of just wall off God from me. Oh, I went to church. It was the longest hour of my life every time Pastor Kinnefly preached. And -- you know, it was something you endured. And I did certain little fun things, like turn the hymnal up on its edge for the person sitting in front of me so that when they sat down, they sat down on a hymnal. Yeah. Yeah -- Candy, I won't use her last name, probably has never forgiven me. But it sure got her to scream. And it made that service a whole lot more fun for me.

But I remember the night when my good friend Jim woke me up, and kind of asked, as he could see, it's not that I didn't believe in God, it's not that Christ wasn't real to me -- He just was sectioned off. And I remember how God used that dear friend to wake me up. What's your journey like? Mine was long. I think in some ways you could break down -- all people fit into one of two categories when they come to Christ. One of them is kind of like what Pastor Leon kind of talked to us about. It's the shepherds' experience. What were they doing? Well, they were out tending their flocks by night. They were out minding their own business, having conversations with each other, kind of like, you know, "Hey, how are the kids? How's your wife doing?" You know -- just some normal stuff, then all of a sudden, just like what Leon did to us -- the sky lights up, angelic beings start to sing, and I don't know if shepherds are tone deaf, but I for whatever reason can't imagine them singing well. And on that night, suddenly breaks into their world, sheep were not on their mind, and the angels began to

break out in song. Suddenly. Some people, when they come to Christ, it's just sudden. They're walking along, and whatever happens, it's an accident or it's an intrusion of God in their life. Some people, I mean, they're struggling with alcoholism, and BAM! God steps in and they never have another drink. That's not the story for a lot of people, but some. I know many who -- man, I know one lady, she was selling weed, and WHAM, God hit her, and she came to Christ, she burned all of her weed, all of her clients that were buying from her were furious. She came to Jesus and it was overnight. Others -- like the Magi in Chapter 2 of Matthew -- their journey to God is long. They searched for Him. They asked questions about Him. And what you discover is that God can find anyone on any path. It's not that all roads lead to God -- don't misunderstand me. It's that God can find anyone on any path. That's encouraging. Why? It tells us that there are a lot of channels of grace. There are a lot of ways that God in His infinite wisdom and kindness and mercy finds ways to people that we would have never imagined.

"After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea" -- Chapter 2 of Matthew -- "during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem." Who were these Magi? Well, we sing a song. It's not terribly correct, but we sing it. We didn't sing it tonight. It's "We Three Kings of Orient Are." Well -- they weren't kings. Ah, they were from the east. When we think of orient, we probably think of Asia. They were probably not from Asia. More likely, Mesopotamian region, which would be today modern-day Iraq. Who were they? Well, they weren't kings. They were scholars. We might use the term today "astrologers." They were individuals who studied the stars. Unlike the shepherds, they endured the night. Magi -- they loved the night because that's when the stars came out. That's when they did their work. These guys were graveyard workers all the time. If you're a graveyard worker, you have a friend in a Magi. Because that was their passion! Their passion was studying the stars. What would they study the stars for? It was in the stars, the constellation of the stars, and everything. It was their guidance. The stars were their instructors. The stars -- all kinds of things. These guys were scholars. Today we would use the term maybe even "scientist." But they were seekers of God. They were. They weren't Christians. We might use the term "secularist." And they came, and they said, "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." There's -- oh, there's all kinds of speculation about what happened. I'm going to leave that to you. You know -- what was the star? What was the constellation? All of the stuff. I don't find that overly helpful. If you find that to be fascinating, God bless you. What I find fascinating is, they are idolators! Pagans! And God uses our idols like He used their idols, to draw them to Himself. What I find utterly fascinating is God's kindness just in this story. He doesn't tell them, "Get rid of your paganism to come to me." He uses their paganism to draw them to God.

Lest you ever be threatened or fearful of somebody else's passionate secularism, just chuckle under your breath and think of these dear secularists. These scientists. Who were utilizing the stars to do what? To find the glory of the divine world. Did they have in mind Jesus Christ? No, not really. But it tells us, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" They were searching. And God subverts their paganism, their non-biblical world view to be the very tool that He uses to draw them to himself. I find that one of the most encouraging parts of this whole story. You don't need to be threatened by paganism, you don't need to be threatened by secularism, you don't need to be threatened by a person's passion to see science as the end-all of all of the world. Why? Because God in His infinite mercy has the ability to use anything that we pursue as a tool to draw that person to Himself. You see, God can find people on any road. Not only that, but He uses the Word of God to draw them to Himself. Oh, He does. In the text, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" Now -- can I ask you a question? Where did that phrase come from? Where did that line come from? Well, it comes from the Scripture. Now again, we're not talking about Jewish people. We're talking about Gentiles. We're talking about gentlemen who were what? Astrologers from Iraq, if you could imagine. Somewhere in that vicinity. And yet, what are they doing? They're quoting the Bible. They're quoting the prophecies. Why? Well, because Psalm 119 says that the word of God is going to be a what? A lamp unto our feet.

I knew a dear brother who has led hundreds and hundreds of people to Christ. I've watched it with probably I would say ten to 20 of them at least. And every one of them, this is what he would do. He would turn the Bible, and they would read from the text of Scripture. "Let me ask you a question -- what do you think God does?" Or, "How does God view your sin?" "Well, I don't know." "Here, read the Word of God." And he wouldn't tell them -- he let them read it. And I would watch them, one by one, as they were reading the text of Scripture. You could almost see inside the Holy Spirit was pulling back a veil, and they were reading this, and there was a sense that right when they were reading, it's almost like what the Apostle Paul said to the Thessalonica church. "I know that you genuinely came to Christ, because you did not receive our words as the mere words of men. You received them as the very word of God." That's fascinating. It's fascinating to watch the mercy of God, these channels of grace, where God uses their paganism and the Word to do what? To find them on any path. It was Young who made the statement in the shack. I think it was misunderstood by a lot of people. Where he said, "God is so loving that He can find you on any path." He did not say, as some have misquoted, that all paths lead to God. No. I think that's a lie. All paths don't lead to God. But God can find you on any path -- He can. And He can find your friend on any path, and He can find your dad on any path, or your mom, or your brother. You just keep listing it. Any person -- you can just think of them right now in your mind. The person who is a secularist. The person who sees science as the end-all. The person who sees psychology as the end-all. The person who sees some form of idolatry, some fabrication of their own god, as an end-all. It doesn't matter! You see, the channels of grace can come to us on any path. And God reaches down and He grabs these Magi, these astrologers, and He draws them to himself. It's a long journey, but God is leading them. To what? To the message of grace.

What is the message of grace? Well -- it starts off actually not with good news. I know you've heard the four spiritual laws, and I like them, but the reality is, that's really not where the gospel of grace begins. The gospel of grace does not begin with God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. The gospel of grace begins with this -- you're an outsider. You are. I think that's what God is saying. Go back and look at this. This is the book of Matthew -- Matthew, disciple of Jesus Christ, with the intention of writing this book to whom? A Jewish audience. Now, what do you know about Jews? They were insiders. They were insiders to God's game. They were insiders to God's family. And in fact, if you ever talk to Jewish person today, an orthodox Jewish person, and you talk to them about the concept of salvation, being saved -- they will look at you like you're trying to tell them a diet of mud will be beneficial to you. "Huh? Saved?" My neighbor was a Jew, and I talked to him about salvation. He goes, "Saved? I don't need to be saved. I'm Jewish." And so, why does Matthew put this story in here? He's writing to Jews. Why does he tell them about a group of gentiles? Because he wants to offend them. He does! I think he wants to offend them! Why? Because the only Jew in this story is Herod, and he is trying to kill Jesus, and the poor gentiles who in their mind were clueless are worshiping God. That's the story. My Jewish friends -- and there's some here tonight -- the first message of grace is this -- you're an outsider. In fact, it even gets worse than that. Maybe you can use the term as it does in the book of Romans. "We were once enemies of Christ." I actually have really never found a person -- maybe just a devout atheist -- I can't hardly find any of those, but -- the reality is, I've seldom found a person who's said, "I am an enemy of Christ." They may tell me they hate the church, they may tell me a lot of things, but very few of them -- and yet, that's how the Bible describes us. We are all excluded. And as Matthew is writing to the Jewish audience, he's telling them, "Your people, Herod" -- he hates Christ. You see, Jesus is reaching outsiders. Enemies. Who are they? You and me -- prior to Christ. People who did not know Christ. People who would not worship Christ. People who had not submitted their heart to Christ. People who thought in that position, "I know better than Christ, I can live my life." It's the individual who believes God exists but gives Him no homage, no worship. An enemy of Christ.

That's really the message of grace, but what is the secondary -- and this is the one we love, and it is true -- God has overcome your exclusion. He has. God has overcome it. How do we know this? "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. Then Herod called the Magi

secretly and found out from them exactly from where the star had appeared and he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and make a careful search.'" Probably the best words that Herod could say. "'As soon as you find them, report to me so that I too may go and worship him.'" He had no intent of it. "After they had heard the king, they went on their way. The star had gone ahead of them. And then when saw the star, they were overjoyed, and on coming to the house...." This is no longer where Jesus is born. It's probably months afterwards. "In coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother, and they worshiped him." What's the message of grace? They hadn't even left their jobs. They were still astrologers. They hadn't even had time to tell their wives, their children. They didn't have time to talk to any rabbis, they didn't have time to clean their life up at all. They came, led by a star, and they worshiped Christ. Their lives have been changed. Why? Because God overcomes our exclusion by His grace. He reaches to the furthest individual, the individual who was not raised with Christ, the individual who was not raised to submit their heart to God, the one who has had no great encounters with the Word of God -- somehow, they found the Book of Isaiah. He doesn't tell them, "Get your moral failures cleaned up." He doesn't tell them, "Repent and go back." They walk in, and they worship.

There was an anthropologist who was working in Africa -- his name is Vincent Donovan. The Maasai people. It's a group of people, they were separatists, if you will. They were individuals who kept far from other folks. And Donovan went into this group of people, and as he began to watch them, he noticed that when they would together for tribal parties, there was one individual who always stood on the outside. Every gathering that they came together, Donovan began to watch this gentleman. Finally, he made his way up to him and he asked him, "Why do you never join? Why do you never participate?" And he told Donovan, "I once committed a heinous crime against my community, and there's no redemption for my action. I will forever be an outsider." He lived in the community. He ate with the community. But when they had community events, something inside of him knew that he needed to separate himself. It's kind of like a woman who once came to her pastor, and said, "Pastor, I just don't fit here." "Why?" Her husband was standing right next to her. "It's because, if they knew what I have done -- I have sinned against my husband, against this church, and there's simply no way that they could ever accept me." And her husband, as the pastor looked out of the corner of his eye, to the periphery, he looked at him, and it's almost like the husband was agreeing with her. "Her sin is so heinous -- I don't think she will ever feel loved here." "And it's not your church, Pastor -- there's no church where I could feel loved."

See, what that individual in the Maasai feels and what I think a lot of people sometimes in the church feel -- it's a little bit about like what Pastor Jim talked about. There are a lot of people who just attend church, and they go, but they don't really feel a part. They don't really belong. Why? Because somewhere in the story of their life, there's a sin. There's an event. And it has disqualified them. Sometimes no one has even told them that. It's what they make up in their own mind. But the message of grace -- the message of the gospel -- is, God is open for astrologers. He's open for pagans. And He doesn't ask them to clean their life up. He doesn't ask them to leave their job. He draws them to himself, and He sends a star, the very thing that they have idolized all of their adult life, and He draws them into his presence, and it's there they recognize King Jesus. And what happens? They become messengers of grace. "On coming to the house ... they worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and they presented him with gifts of gold and incense and of myrrh." Oh, they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, and so they didn't. They returned home on another route. To do what? To tell the story of grace. They went back. They didn't go tell Herod; they didn't fall into his trap. They were warned, "Go home another way," and "Go and declare what you have seen." "We met the King."

See, Matthew is really brilliant, because here's a story of a Jewish man, an insider, from their perspective, who was conniving and manipulative and tried to do everything he can to snuff out the message of grace. To destroy Christ. And sometimes, interestingly enough, even within the church there are individuals who might even consider themselves insiders, but when they hear of brokenness, they look down upon it with judgment. When they sometimes look at an individual who

has pursued nothing but pagan idolatry, they roll up their nose and they're angry at them, and they want to move away from them, and they hate them, and they classify them in a certain way, and they even maybe villainize them. Whether it be their political persuasion, or their behavior, or their philosophy. And they put them in this little box, and somehow that box is so evil that in their mind it's apart from grace. That person needs to be destroyed. See, that really is Herod. Jesus didn't fit what he thought the messiah would look like. And instead of worshiping Him, he was trying to kill Him. But how different the Magi -- they were humble, they were searchers. And they were led by a star, of all things. And they came and brought gifts. Because being led by the star and putting the Word of God together, they came and they humbled themselves, and when God spoke to them again and warned them, "Don't fall into the trap," they honored God's word. And they went home another way. To share the message of grace. God's house is open to outsiders. God's heart is for us, not just for the Jews. God's heart -- it's open to all, and He can find you on any path that you are on. What does it help us do? It helps us to relax with those in our family whom we love and wonder, "Will they ever come?" God knows where they're at. And God, like the Magi, can use the strangest things. Sometimes we get in our minds certain things -- the way God must act and the things that He must do, and God I think sometimes sits up in Heaven and laughs at us, and He goes, "Oh, you poor folks! I am working my plan, and I will draw them." That, too, can cause us to worship. Because the message of God's grace and His mercy is so strong that He can find any person on any path. It's not that the path saves them. It's that God has the ability even to use their paganism to draw them to Himself.

Kari and I were once standing in Bethlehem, and we wanted to see the proposed birth site of Jesus Christ. So we waited three hours. That was big stuff. We walked down this step into this cave that was -- well, that cave had had the designers from Vegas get ahold of it. I was there for 15 seconds, and I thought to myself, "Boy, never again will I spend three hours to look at lights and glitter." I mean, I was waiting for a dancer to come out of that little cave. It was terribly unmoving. I was frustrated. We went to the Garden of Gethsemane. It's where Jesus prayed alone. And I was standing there next to a tree and envisioning that place, and people probably thought I was losing my mind, because I started having a conversation with the tree. And I wondered -- "Were you the tree that He leaned up against that night?" "Were you the one that held my Lord when His good friends couldn't stay the night with Him and pray?" I expected -- to be honest with you -- that when I went to the cave where they proposed that Jesus was born, that I would have a moment of just awe and worship. But the lights got to me. I'll probably never stand in that line again. But God surprised me -- because I didn't expect standing next to a tree just on a gravel path that I would have a moment where that entire night came alive to me, and the weight of what He bore, and the phrase of Scripture that says, "For the joy set before Him He endured the cross" -- He found that joy that night. Right there against that tree. And it reminded me again. Sometimes I think I know where God's going to speak to me. Sometimes I think I know how He's going to act. And then, He just is God. And He hits me on a pebbled path standing next to a tree.

See, Herod thought he understood how God was going to work. And what He didn't expect was a group of pagan astrologers who had never spent a day in a temple worshipping. And it would be them who worshiped God on that day. My friend, that's God's grace. Just when you think you've got Him figured out, He surprises you. Why? Because His heart is open to all, and He can find you on any path. That's not only true for salvation, as He showed us with the Magi. It's true for your journey today. God can take the thing least expected by you, and it's in that moment that He shows up. I hope in that moment you do what these dear Magi did -- you worship.

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