

Transcript of Sermon By  
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First Baptist Church  
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## **The Journey to Bethlehem: The Bump In the Road**

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

#### **Morning Prayer:**

Everlasting God, you did surprise the world at Bethlehem, coming in the form of a child. We pray that you would surprise us today with some unexpected aid in our lives. If our lives are confused, then surprise us with peace. If darkness better describes our circumstances, then surprise us with some shining light that reveals to us a path or course of action that we should take. We confess that we need you, our Father. We need your strength and spirit to sustain us in these days. Make us strong that our faith might prevail against the strain of economic times, against relationships that pain our hearts, against all those forces which would rob faith of its power or salvation of its joy. Come to us today even in this worship service with an unexpected insight with an expected moment of joy or happiness, with some unforeseen invasion of your power. Work your power to change us into the Christians and servants of your kingdom that we long to be. Work a miracle of strengthening spirit in us that our words, our deeds, our prayers, our generosity would lift the lives of those around us in the hope of Christ's birth. May we be the kind of Christians who do not look for others to lift us. Because you have worked in our lives, may we be the kind of Christian who sustains others. We pray that you would surprise us and allow us to see what is possible if your spirit works within us. We ask it all in Christ's name. Amen.

#### **Meditation Text:**

Jesus' birth evokes hostility in those seeking to remain enthroned and will not bow down to anything other than themselves. Not all the world, then or now, welcomes God's presence in human affairs. The struggle between Herod and the Christ is waged outwardly in the world and inwardly in every person. Who shall rule?

—Lawrence Farris

Christmas will make you believe in the devil. I know it is about Jesus, and Jesus is God's son, but Christmas will make you believe in the devil. If you have not had an experience like this, you should be thankful.

Let me explain by telling you this. You decide you are going to buy a special gift. You don't want to give money to the person this gift is for. You don't want to give a gift card. You don't want to order it on line. You want to go to a store and pick it out. You want to touch, see, feel, wrap, send, and give. It is just an important gift.

On a Saturday in December, with your best Christmas spirit possible, you get up and drive to the mall and you are ready to have a good time. Of course, the first glitch occurs in the parking lot. Just as you get ready to pull into a good space near the front of the mall, somebody cuts you off and gets your space. You breathe deep and count to ten. You look back around to one of the three spots that you passed to get to this spot, and they are all now taken. For those of us who have some rural background in our families, you wind up parking in the *lower 40*.

Did I mention that it has started to rain? You make your way into the store, and the first person you encounter is what I will classify as an Alpha power shopper. This person has the ability through non-verbal communication and a rude entitlement of presence to move anybody out of the way in order for her to look at whatever she wants. You really wanted this to be a good day. Your grandmother always told you that you could always beat someone by being polite so you are going to be polite. You just move and never make eye contact. After about 30 minutes of shopping, you are really frustrated so you decide, *I am going to settle for this*.

After years of shopping, we all know that whenever we *settle* for something, it is never satisfying. If you are buying it for yourself, *settling* always ends up with something you don't really use or don't really wear, and you wonder, *Why did I buy it?* If it is a gift and you settled for it, it never seems to produce quite the joy or the reaction that you wanted.

The day is getting away so we settle for this gift. We go up to the cash register to in line. We wait in line, and finally when it is our turn, somebody breaks in line and says to the cashier, "I need you to help me find this in a size 8." They go off, and you are left standing there at the cash register. By now, your Christmas spirit is ebbing a little bit. The cashier comes back, and the cash register is out of tape. The cashier gets on the intercom and says, "Cash register tape needed on register 4." So somebody has to bring the tape. Finally, they get the tape on, and start to take your order.

No, you do not have a Rewards Card. No, you do not want to open a credit card account even if it means 10% off. No, you probably will not fill out the on-line certificate and get a chance to win a \$50.00 gift card. What you do want is a box. The cashier tells you, "Please take your receipt and the item to the back of the store."

So you go to the back of the store and stand in line another ten minutes. Then, they do not have the size box you need, and according to the attitude of the person who is giving you the box, you should be really happy that you are getting any box.

You take it back out to the parking lot. I mentioned it was raining, didn't I? There are no cars parked next to yours, but there is this nice red streak down the side of your car when somebody has pulled in or pulled out, hit your car, and left no note. Merry Christmas! Did I mention that Christmas will make you believe in the devil?

You try to have the spirit. You try to have everything that we talk about at church. This was going to be the year, and at every turn something takes place that seems to want to grind that Christmas spirit right out of you.

Have you ever tried to have a family night to decorate the Christmas tree?

“You will put that phone down and stop texting and enjoy this.”

“You know that your sister always puts that ornament up. Quit tormenting her.”

“If you can’t be happy about this, you can just all go to your rooms and I will do it myself.”

Christmas will make you believe in the devil.

Why would we think that the world as it exists today, with the spirit of the world in which we live, is going to help us? Why do we think it is going to work with us? Really we should not be surprised that the journey to Bethlehem every year contains pot holes, speed bumps, and detours that always wind up taking just a little longer. Whether it is shopping, trying to get the family’s schedule together, or putting up the tree, there are always moments that try our Christian spirit, and Christmas will make you believe in the devil.

The first Christmas was this way, too. The angels were sweet. The shepherds came to bow down. Mary and Joseph responded to the leadership of God, and the Wise Men made that long journey so they could end up at the stable at Bethlehem and worship.

But Herod is a different story. Herod was a wicked man and he was a bump in the road on that first Christmas. What we know outside of scripture about Herod confirms the paranoia that we can read in Matthew’s Gospel. He would be akin to Ivan the Terrible or Genghis Khan. When he made arrangements to slaughter the innocents, that was not the first time he had wholesale killed a group of people that threatened him. When he took the throne, there was a group of Jewish leaders that he did that to. We know he killed a wife and a son that he thought were threatening his throne, and he was, indeed, paranoid about his power. The interesting thing is Herod was not a Jew. He was an Idumaeon. He was from a neighboring region, and he was able to get Caesar to put him on the throne. One of the things that kept coming to Herod in his lifetime was a reminder that the Jews, of which he was king, did not like him and he was not one of them. They did not respect his power and they would have been just as happy if Herod had disappeared from the face of the earth.

Here came the Wise Men, and they said, “Where is he who is born King of the Jews?”

Herod’s first thought surely was, “I thought I had wiped out all those people. I thought I had already taken care of this and there were no more legitimate successors to the throne.”

“Where might this child be? Where is he that you say is born King of the Jews?”

In preparing for this sermon, I noticed something that I had never noticed before this year. In the Gospel of Matthew, at the beginning, Jesus was described as King of the Jews and then he had to flee for his life. This was a threat and it was something that made people want to kill him. Of course, when he was raised up on the cross, the sign over his head said, “Jesus of Nazareth – King of the Jews.” Whenever the title is used, it threatens people. It is threatening that Jesus might be a king.

So many of the hymns remind us of this. A child is born a king, and it is not just about the birth of Baby Jesus in a manger at Bethlehem, it is about the arrival of God’s son, the Messiah, the Christ, the King of Kings. Handel called him “Lord of Lords,” using the passage from Revelations. He comes, and we know that this Jesus wants to rule our hearts and our lives. He wants to rule the world. He wants to be recognized as God’s son, the legitimate power, and the way life ought to be.

As Jesus grows to an adult, in his teachings, he tells us this time and time again. He said, “Unless you hate your father and mother . . .” What he really means is your love for me should look so strong that love for family looks like hate in comparison. After the resurrection, Jesus said to Peter, “Unless you love me more than these.” He said to others, “No one can serve two masters.” Constantly, Jesus offers us a choice—the world or the way of God.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is taken to the temple for circumcision. Simeon is there and he says, “I see that this one is for the rising and falling of many in Israel.” Already the prophet could see Jesus as a dividing sword. Choose. Will you serve God? Will you follow God or will you choose the way of the world?

The prince of this world knows this. If we expect the values of the world—the things we are taught that it is good to be selfish, the white lies, the self-deceptions that we tell ourselves so that we can go on living the lies that we live—or choose Jesus Christ. For so many, it is too much to ask to turn from these things that we have bought into that will destroy us but that we love so much. It costs too much to turn and love Jesus, so the world stands against Christmas, and the prince of this world will do everything in his power to take away the desire that we have to celebrate the birth, to applaud his coming, and to follow him.

Here we have Jesus, this sweet little child, but Herod is no dummy. He is no fool. He realizes that this Jesus is a threat, and the world we live in today knows the same. If we would call him King, then he demands our ultimate allegiance. If God sent him to save us from our sins—our lust, greed, hardness of heart, white lies, black lies—that means we must turn and repent and admit that we are indeed sinners.

Many people would rather continue to pretend that everything is OK and, therefore, there is not a desire to understand that Christmas could be the change of everything and the promise of life. Christmas really is good news. It is about peace, it is about hope, and it is about joy and love, and some hunger so much and some will find it. Others are too threatened, too bought in to the way things are, and they have too much at stake in the world as it is, so they turn their backs.

Christmas will make you believe in the devil, but it provides Jesus and a choice.

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