



How many of you have a welcome mat in front of your house? I knew we had a mat in front of our house but as I was writing this sermon in my office, I couldn't remember if it said, "Welcome" or not, so I had to call home and ask Mary, "Can you send me a picture of the mat in front of our house?" Sure enough, it says, "Welcome." I'm guessing, you might be second-guessing what your mat says as well. When it comes to Welcome mats, sometimes we simply wipe our feet on them without even seeing the "Welcome" they offer. But thanks to Amazon delivery people, welcome mats have a renewed value. Now when a gift gets delivered to our doorstep and we see that picture on our phones, it's often the welcome mat that serves as the identifier. That's my house. I got a gift!

I often think of Epiphany as God putting a big old Welcome mat out. The simple message of Epiphany is that Jesus is the Savior of all. No matter who are you, where you live, what you've done, that baby whose birth we celebrated ten days ago is your Savior. All are welcome at Bethlehem! But how do we treat this message that Jesus is the world's Savior? Is it simply a mat that we wipe our feet on without giving it a second thought or is it something we treasure, "Hey, this gift is for me!"

If you're like me, I hate to admit that all too often I've wiped my feet on this message without giving it much thought. We may not be Grinch or Scrooge, but was Christmas just the same-old, same-old again this year? Is there a part of you that is happy that things are getting back to "normal." Kids back in school tomorrow. No more crazy lines at the store. Calendars that have a little white space instead of being chocked full with Christmas parties, church, and travel? Are you looking forward to a little less clutter around the house as the Christmas decorations get packed away? Don't get me wrong – I'm not saying that we need to keep our trees up year round, but it begs the question – was Christmas something you simply wiped your feet on this year or was it something that made you ponder again, "Wow, this gift is for me!"

If it was more the former than the latter, it's not too late as we join the caravan of wisemen and travel to Bethlehem again today to see the welcome mat that God lays out for us. First of all, just marvel at the lengths God took to say, "Welcome" to these foreigners. First of all, he blessed them with skills to know about the heavens. And somehow he gave them a knowledge of Scripture, perhaps it was through people like Daniel who brought the message to their land 600 years prior. As a result, when they saw an out-of-the-ordinary, the light went on for these astronomers, "Could this be the star that fulfills the Messianic promise, 'A star will come out of Jacob?'" Both those things – their knowledge of the sky and of Scriptures – was all part of God's guiding hand to make sure they knew this gift of a Savior was for them.

But that was just steps one and two. Consider how God guided their trip. Last week, my family drove 777 miles through the night to pick up some of our kids and our granddaughter at the Phoenix airport to celebrate Christmas at a VRBO with family between the holidays. That was about the same distance these men traveled. But we could get there in 12 hours. They couldn't just pack their gifts and luggage in the back of a Honda Pilot or hop on the next flight with Persia Air. Their trip would take weeks, if not months. Imagine the planning, the supplies, the safety measures. And God guided them the whole way because he wanted them to know this Savior was for them.

But when they got to Israel, they didn't know where to look. Again, it hit me how frustrated I would have been if I couldn't find our VRBO. Seriously, I drove all this way and I don't know where to go?! Imagine them. I think we sometimes get this false idea that they followed the star the whole trip, as if it was God's GPS. That's not what Scripture says. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they said to King Herod, "We saw his star in the east." Past tense. They didn't follow a star. They didn't point to a star. They were simply hoping and praying that the star they saw months earlier was an indication that the Savior was born in Israel. But they didn't know for sure. And they didn't know exactly where to go. But again, God intervenes. Because he wants them to know this Savior was for them, he provides help, somewhat ironically, from Herod's advisors. Knowing the prophecies, they said, "Why don't you try Bethlehem?" So they load up the camels for another six mile journey.

And then it happened. *"They went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until stopped over the place where the child was."* Some may consider this trivial... but humor me a bit and just take a moment to marvel at the miracle God performed to make sure these guys knew Jesus was their Savior. As the earth rotates stars appear to move from east to west. What direction was Bethlehem from Jerusalem? South. And the star "went ahead of them?" Not only is the direction a miracle, so is the speed. Stars at Bethlehem's latitude travel 885 miles per hour, meaning by the time the wisemen arrive in Bethlehem, the star should be in southern Egypt or Sudan. But this star, *"stopped over the place where the child was."*

*“When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.”* Don’t minimize that reaction! Just imagine. You saw a star that gave you hope. But you haven’t seen it for weeks or months. Your back hurts from riding a camel. Your lips and face are cracked from the desert sun and sand. Your companions have been getting on your nerves with their, “Are we there yet?” and their potty breaks. You maybe doubt what you saw. Maybe you’re even doubting God’s promises. But then you see it. The star. And you are overjoyed. Three words in the original – joy, great, greatly -- to express one huge emotion: this gift of a Savior is meant for me. With everything that God had done to get them to this point, to assure them that this gift of a Savior was for them, you can bet they weren’t going walk over this welcome mat with their dirty feet. Rather, they dropped to their knees and worshiped. This gift is for me.

Brothers and sisters, I pray we do the same. It’s so easy to wipe our feet on God’s grace that was celebrated at Christmas and think of it as no big deal. Or maybe our boredom with Christmas was really masking our ingratitude for this indescribable gift from God. Or maybe we loved the same old, same old, without realizing that Christmas tradition became our idol instead worshiping the Christ-child. There are so many things that can lead us to wipe on our feet on God’s welcome mat instead of seeing the gift he has placed for us there.

That’s unfortunate, because when you think about it, in so many ways, you and I get to see even more than what the wise men saw. We don’t simply get to visit a toddler with his mother. Through the eyes of Scripture, we’ve seen that toddler mature. We’ve seen him resist the devil’s temptations on our behalf. We’ve seen him suffer and die in our place. We’ve seen him conquer the grave to guarantee eternal life for us. We’ve seen him ascend to the right hand of his Father, where he now rules on our behalf.

I get it, I doubt you followed a star to 8790 Red Rock Road today. But while God didn’t use a star to lead us to his Son, consider what he used to lead you here. In our second lesson, Paul said the unsearchable riches of Christ were a “mystery,” hidden by God in ages past. And yet God used people like Paul to preach the message of Christ crucified to Gentiles. A message preserved for us today. Or years ago, maybe your ancestors didn’t travel a desert but they traveled an ocean and they came into contact with the Word when they arrived in this country. Is that any less of a miracle of what God did for the wisemen as they traveled from afar? Or maybe it was a neighbor who told your great-grandmother about Jesus, so that you know who Jesus is 100 years later. Is that any less of a miracle than God using advisors who told the wiseman, “Why don’t you go to Bethlehem?” Or maybe it was a postcard in a mail that led you to check out this church. Is a card with a stamp any less of a miracle than a star in the sky? And we can go on and on. Point being, in so many ways, God has laid out a welcome mat for you. God has laid out a welcome mat for us. And no matter how many times we’ve wiped our feet on that welcome mat before and walked away, he keeps the mat out there, so that when we see Jesus sitting by that mat, we know that the gift sitting at the door of our heart is for me. Amen.