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# Vulnerability

Sermon • Rev'd Andrew Hoggan • 4 January 2026

Isaiah 60:1-6 • Matthew 2:1-12

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Let's Pray, Lord Jesus, as we stand on the cusp of a new year, open our minds and hearts afresh to the wonder of your great salvation, and the depth of your love for us and for all, amen.

The 6am news this morning reminded me again that our world is largely one in which power, dominance, self interest and self promotion is held to be an acceptable way to get ahead, and stay ahead.

As I listened to the words of a current global leader, guessing beforehand pretty much how things would be pitched, predictably grand words were used. Everything was spectacular, terrific, awesome. It's self aggrandisement in the final analysis and it's a populous political ploy.

I'm agnostic over the right or wrong of what has happened. Time will tell if this is more about drugs or oil, but probably both.

Anyway when I hear some of the leaders in our world and compare them with Jesus there is quite a contrast.

At this time of year, remembering how God entered our world that first Christmas, we often emphasise how vulnerable Jesus was. We do that to remind ourselves that God chose to identify not with our power and self sufficiently, but with our frailty, dependence, and need.

But even though that is an essential dynamic of the gospel, it's still pretty hard allowing ourselves to be vulnerable. I know that I'm somewhat more comfortable when I'm in control and have contingencies in place. I don't like risk and taking chances.

One of the ways I try to be vulnerable is to acknowledge when I get things wrong or admit when I don't know something. It's far easier though to say "I don't know", when things are complicated or complex. Not so easy when it's a basic thing that I recon I really should know.

So full disclosure in the interests of vulnerability. It pricked my pride, embarrassed me even, to discover after 30 years of ordained ministry, the bible may be saying something different from how we present the birth of Jesus in pretty much 100% of the Christmas Pageants I've seen in churches, or on TV or in the movies.

Then I wondered "should I admit that?" The very fact I asked that question means I'm into image control with is not a great sign of willingness to be vulnerable.

Let's get a little background on some key characters in this story.

**King Herod:** Jewish, but was aligned with, and put in power by the Romans who gave him the title "king of the Jews". He was ruthless and increasingly paranoid as he neared the end of his life.

Herod had members of his immediate family executed when he thought they were plotting against him. Some were innocent. When he was dying, he had another son executed. He also had 3000 or so leading citizens put in prison.

The reason? When he died they were to be executed and that would ensure there would be a good amount of mourning and weeping around the time of his death. Thankfully when he died the order wasn't followed.

Herod the Great. Herod "king of the Jews" was not a nice character. Certainly not the sort of fellow you would want knowing exactly where you live if you also are being heralded as "king of the Jews"

**Wise men from the East:** Astrologers, probably advisors in a royal court. Best guess is that they came from Babylonia, because in Babylonia there were established Jewish communities and these Royal advisors were familiar with OT prophecies around the coming of the Messiah.

As astrologers, and given the environment they were in they were in, they probably were engaging in occult type practices and magic which makes the story all the more remarkable.

To reach Jerusalem they would have had to travel at least the distance from here to Auckland and back. That's at least a 4 month journey. It's quite a commitment for a bunch of pagan or Gentile astrologers to make. It's also an important detail if we are trying to work out when they visited Jesus.

Now, if I was to ask when do you think the wise men or the astrologers visited Jesus. Like me, prior to looking at this passage, I would have said they came on the night of Jesus birth because that's how we enact it in all our Christmas pageants. Shepherds, angels, wise men, animals all around the crib.

However, if we let the biblical accounts shape things and look at Matthew and Luke carefully Jesus was a toddler, probably around two when the wise men brought their gifts. That makes Jesus even more vulnerable.

It wasn't just, "yep I've got a murderous, paranoid, powerful tyrant after me, but very soon I'll be safe in Egypt". It's, "I've got a murderous, paranoid, powerful tyrant after me and I'm sticking around for a year or two." Bethlehem is only 10 Kms from Jerusalem.

As far as the timing of the wise men visit I wonder how did I get that wrong for so long? It kind of begs the question what if I am ever overseeing another Christmas pageant.

Am I going to say "leave out the wise men." "Leave out the star too", because it is not mentioned in the Lk account with the shepherds, angels and animals. We only pop the star in because it's there when the wise men visit. Would people be upset? Would they say you can't do that. It's how it's always done?

That aside, there are details in the text that have the wise men offering their gifts when Jesus was between 4 months, the time it took them to get from where they lived to where Jesus was, and two years and younger, the age Herod picked to take out all the boys when he realised he had been tricked.

If we wonder why Matt and Luke have different details, it's important to realise Matt and Lk focus on different aspects of the birth and early life of

Jesus and his family because they have a different agenda. They each want us to understand the story from different angles.

Matthew tells it more from the perspective of how God directed Joseph. Luke more from how God directed Mary. Mark and John don't even mention the nativity. They want to focus on different things.

Vs 10, notice the text says the wise men entered a house. Further, the Greek word Matthew uses to describe Jesus in the context of the wise men or astrologers visit, is infant or toddler, not baby.

In the Lk account where various animals, the angels, Mary and Joseph, but not the wise men, are mentioned, the Greek word Luke uses for Jesus is the word for baby.

We might ask, "does it really matter if our pageants mix up a couple of the details?" Let's just say details matter. And we open ourselves up to the arguments of the sceptics who might discount the whole story if they can show some of our details are wrong.

Vs 2 talks of a star. "His star." "We saw "his star" at its rising."

It's worth pondering the fact that a group of pagan occultist Astrologers, were more open to the truth of Jesus as the fulfilment of prophecy than many in Jerusalem. We will unpack that in a little bit.

Suffice to say, it shows God can open the eyes of anyone. Bishop Tom Wright suggests that here very early in the Jesus story, we get a hint that the Gospel is not just for the Jews but the Gentiles also.

Let's take the encouragement that anyone who is willing to see can have their eyes opened. Even a bunch of pagan astrologers quite probably engaged in occult practices. What is clear is God was leading these unlikely followers. And, what more, these were the very ones who supplied the resources that Joseph, Mary and Jesus would need as they fled to Egypt to escape Herod.

Vs 11 talks about the star stopping over the house in Bethlehem.

It's hard to know what is meant by the star stopped over the house in Bethlehem. If you look at the footnotes in your bible it just says they saw the star, not the star stopping.

That taken into consideration. When the wise men originally saw the star some 4 months before, an astrological phenomenon may well indicate a city like Jerusalem over a range of 1500 klms.

It's hard to see how an actual star could pinpoint an individual house which is under 10 k away. One of the suggestions is that what is called a star may have been an angelic being that was actually signalling the exact place or house where Jesus was perhaps toddling around.

Now whatever it was that was guiding the wise men to the exact house, it was light, it was in the sky and whatever it was, it was miraculous and it was God's leading.

Vs 3 "when King who had heard this, that is the king of "the Jews had been born" he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him". We can understand why Herod might be frightened, but why "all Jerusalem with him?"

Probably a number of reasons. If Herod "the king of the Jews" is usurped or threatened by the genuine "King of then Jews" he might completely loose it and people would undoubtably suffer.

Another reason, maybe. Rome would not want a non puppet, non politically motivated "king of the Jews" rising to power. Rome was merciless when it came to crushing competition or non compliance.

Crucifixion was a Roman invention and a graphic way of saying "cross us and this is what happens." It may have also been that while Jerusalem was protected on the West side by the a Roman's from the East they were vulnerable.

One commentator, Tom Wright again, noted that it's more than likely, the fear of Jerusalem was a sign of poor spiritual health among Israel's leadership.

You see if Israel was healthy spiritually you would expect the religious leadership to celebrate at the news that the true king had come.

- Are they are frightened because they are corrupt and have aligned themselves with Herod?
- Are they frightened because the "true king of the Jews might expose them?" As indeed Jesus did over and over again when he grew and engaged in ministry.

Tracing through the details makes Jesus situation all the more vulnerable and for a protracted period. No matter. There are many stories in the bible where it looks like all the odds are stacked against Gods plan.

If we wanted a parallel with Jesus birth and early life, Moses was born at a place where the pharaoh of Egypt was on a genocidal campaign to control the influence of the Israelites by throwing all the Hebrew baby boys into the Nile river.

Who would've thought that Moses would be rescued by the daughter of Pharaoh and be nursed by his own mother when a bystander, who just happens to be Moses sister, offers to find a wet nurse.

To finish and make an application as we highlight Jesus vulnerability. What might that mean for us who are called to be like Jesus?

- Might it look like us being real and vulnerable with each other?
- Might it look like us not having to be defensive if challenged?
- Might it look like us not having to act like things are ok when they are not?

And yes. It's incredibly hard to be vulnerable. I know I am sometimes guilty of "fake it till you make it" because I want it to look like I know what I'm doing. Thankfully, I might be getting a little less concerned with looking like I have it together in my old age.

It's a balance though and wisdom is needed.

- How do you maintain vulnerability and inspire confidence?
- How do you maintain vulnerability and safety given there are ones who will exploit and or manipulate vulnerability?

Jesus spoke the truth. Challenged where needed. But he picked his moments and his battles.

I think it would be true to say to the degree we understand the gospel is the degree to we are willing to be vulnerable.

What does the gospel tell us .

- We are sinners saved by grace.
- We are profoundly loved and accepted in Christ.

When we really know and accept that it can have a deep and profound effect of our wellbeing and that can translate into honesty and vulnerability. Let's also say it's important to be in the right company if you want to be vulnerable and safe.

That said, there is one that we are always safe with.

- One who knows us completely and loves us completely.
- One who knows what it is like to be vulnerable and truthful.

We are in safe hands with Jesus and the one who sent him.

- We can trust God, and we can trust those who prove to be trustworthy and show themselves to be somewhat like Jesus.
- Wise and appropriate vulnerability is a very powerful and attractive way of connecting with people and showing the reality of our faith.
- It is a way that is markedly different from what we see in many of the world's powerbrokers and leaders.
- It's the model Jesus gives us in his servant leadership example and hands down it's the best kind of leadership.

Let's pray, Lord Jesus help us to be like you that the world might believe, amen.