

December 11, 2011 - Footprints to Follow

Well, it's that time of year and I don't know if you realize it or not, but pretty soon someone's coming to town. I don't want to spoil the secret for you, but it's just a matter of days now. I know, in our house, some people might even be counting the hours till the arrival happens. We're doing lots of things in expectation of this and we cleaned up the house a little bit and we put up the decorations and we've been out shopping for the presents and whatnot. Yesterday, Michelle started baking some of those special treats that you do in expectation of this arrival and I don't want to spoil the secret too much, but I'll give you a little bit of a hint. (Picture of someone's beard). Can you guess who is coming to town? My in-laws. My in-laws are coming to town this week. We're making preparations. We're cleaning things up and we're making a space for them to stay and the kids are excited. We're getting ready for all that.

Whenever an important person or important event is about to arrive, we start making arrangements. We get about getting ready. We begin to prepare. I don't know if you're aware of this or not, but when actors sign a contract or musicians sign a contract, or even politicians sign a contract to appear, they include in their contract something that's called a 'rider'. The rider is essentially this list of things that the celebrity insists, that the person putting on the event does, to prepare for their arrival at this event. I did some reading this week about some of the different riders that different celebrities put together before their events and things that they expect the event holders to prepare for them before their arrival. I'll just share a couple of the most interesting ones I found.

One is from 80's rock band and hairspray spokesman, Van Halen. One thing they included in each and every rider they had for every concert they performed was, they insisted that before their arrival their dressing room be stocked with M and M's. But, not just any M & M's, they insisted it be stocked with M & M's but, no brown ones whatsoever. So when they got there they would check through the M & M's to make sure there were no brown ones. I can imagine being the vendor who was putting on the event and having to sort through all the M & M's and having to pick out all the brown ones.

Probably the most dramatic example of crazy rider expectations that I found came from pop diva and well-known...well diva, Miriah Carey. She has a long, long list of preparations that must be made prior to her arrival. Including and not limited to the following: A brand new toilet seat on every toilet in her hotel suite; gold facets on all of the sinks and showers; she insists that her own bed linens be flown in ahead of time and be put on the beds. Now, all of those are not too extreme, I can kind of understand, well, gold facets I don't get, but... Clean toilet seats I understand. Her own bed linens, okay, I get that. Then it starts to get a little more strange. She insists on having a large stock of a certain brand of mineral water. How much mineral water you ask? Enough so that every day, she and her dog, can take a bath in it. So, she has all these bottles of mineral water there. Then on top of that, she insists there be one box of bendy straws; she needs two air purifiers; a bottle of Crystal Champagne; then, she

needs to have the hotel room stocked with kittens and puppies. Kittens and puppies both in the hotel room. Then the one that I thought was the most extreme and bizarre, is that she insists that the event holder provides an attendant to take her used chewing gum when she's done with it. That is one of the extreme conditions in her rider when she goes to a different event.

So, all of that got me thinking. If people will do such great things and go to such great lengths to prepare for the arrival of eccentric pop stars and politicians, it makes me wonder what preparations were made for God's arrival? What groundwork had been laid for the birth of the Messiah? As I reflected on it, I realized that God had been preparing for this day for a long time. He had been preparing for this day since the day that Adam and Eve had left the Garden. Since the day that He had entered into a covenant with Abraham. Since the day that He led the Israelites out of Egypt. God had been preparing for this day since the day that He anointed David as King. Since the day that he brought Nehemiah back to repair the wall. Literally thousands of years of instructions and relationships and revelations and prophecies, all in preparation of the arrival.

You know, our stories today are merely some of the last chapters in what is volumes and volumes of preparation. However, I think they will tell us some important things about what is to come and so, let us dive into our stories this morning.

You have already been made familiar with them through the readings and the acting out but let's just read a little bit of our first story out of Luke 1:5-7, just to kind of set the stage here a bit:

“When Herod was King of Judea there was a Jewish Priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive and they were both very old.”

And so, you have these two people and they are Godly people, they are following God's commands and living a Godly life but they have no children. They are unable to conceive, Elizabeth is barren and now they are both very old. And Zechariah just happens to be on duty at the Temple one day. While he's in the Temple burning incense, an angel appears to him. When the angel appears to him Zechariah's reaction is the same as everyone who sees an angel. He just like, falls on his face and is terrified. You notice, whenever you hear an angel appearing in the Bible, one of the first things the angel has to say, even before he says “Hi! My name is Gabriel.” He has to say “do not be afraid”. Because when people see angels in the Bible, it's not these cute little winged things that most of our artwork has, they are warriors and they are God's messengers. So, Zechariah sees this angel and he is freaked out. He is terrified. The angel says “Do not be afraid, it's okay, I bring you good news and the good news is, you are going to have a son.” Now, that's great news, Zechariah thought, but it's a little tough to swallow because, let's be honest, we're both really, really, old and we are past the

years when people normally have children. I love the response that Gabriel gives to Zechariah when he says “Well, how can I know that this is really going to happen?” What Gabriel says is this, he says “I am Gabriel. I stand in the very presence of God. It was God who sent me to bring you this good news.” Now, how are you going to argue with something like that, so Gabriel says “Trust me, I’m Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God. I bring you this good news. It’s going to happen.” But just because, I don’t know if it was because Zechariah doubted or just to almost give a testimony that this was going to happen, Zechariah became muted for the next 9 months and he couldn’t speak until the baby is born. But eventually, the baby is born and when they name the baby ‘John’ as they were instructed to do, Zechariah then finds his voice again.

Now, please consider that story for just a minute. Does it sound vaguely familiar to anyone? Does the plot line ring any bells for you? Do the characters and events remind you of anything? Let me hit the high points here. There’s an old couple; there’s a barren woman; and there is a promised son. Now, if you are familiar with your Bible, you may be having a mild case of de ja vois right now. But, if you were a first century Jew, you would be convicted by the coincidence in this story. You see, back in Genesis, chapter 18, a man named Abraham had three visitors come to see him. Abraham too, was very old. The visitors came to him and said “By this time next year, you will have a son.” Abraham found that very hard to believe but his wife, Sarah, found it even harder to believe and inside the tent she couldn’t help it, she burst out laughing a little bit, because she knew, I am way past the years when this is possible. But the men told him, “You will have a son.” And sure enough, a year later, Isaac was born. You see, this story is the story of Abraham and Sarah all over again. It’s the story of the Patriarch of Israel. It’s the story of the inauguration of God’s covenant with man. So, if you were a Jew witnessing these events, you would almost certainly see them as a sign that something was about to happen. As an omen that this child would somehow be very special. As a warning that you should probably get prepared for whatever it is that God was about to do.

Right in the middle of this story a special guest just happens to drop in for a visit. It’s now been three months since Zechariah got the message from the angel that he would have a son. Elizabeth is three month’s pregnant and a relative comes to town to see her. The relative is none other than Mary, the future mother of Jesus. Mary is fresh off an angelic encounter of her own. She is told the whole story of what has happened so far by Elizabeth because Zechariah can’t say a word. Now, imagine what that does for Mary. Imagine how you feel in this instance if you are Mary. You have just talked with an angel and you are suddenly and inexplicably pregnant, even though, you have never been with a man. You are told that your baby is going to be God’s son. He is going to be the Messiah who is going to redeem all of Israel. What thoughts are running through your head at this moment. You are thinking things like “Impossible. Unbelievable. Simply crazy. This can’t be happening.” She’s come to Jerusalem because her world at home has been turned upside down. She’s pregnant and will soon start to show. Her fiance is still trying to process the news, he’s had a visit from an angel too. He’s still trying to assimilate all of the messages he’s received. In the midst of all of this chaos and uncertainty, God reveals Himself again and assures her that He has been preparing

for this. Mary stays for a little while and then, full of assurance that God's hand is upon all of this, she returns home. However, six months later, Luke tells us this, in Luke 1:57-58:

“It was time for Elizabeth's baby to be born. She gave birth to her son. When her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had been very merciful to her, everyone rejoiced with her.”

Now, it is possible, at this moment, that Mary was one of those relatives who came to celebrate the baby's birth. On the eighth day, which is a very special day, all the family and relatives would gather at the home and the baby would be circumcised and then he would be given his proper name. Everyone says “We want to name him after his dad. We're going to call him Zechariah after his dad.” And Elizabeth says “No, no, we're going to call him John.” I don't know if you've ever been in one of those family situations, you can just kind of feel it right? Elizabeth says “No, no, we want to call him John.” And all the mothers and mothers-in-law and all the aunts and uncles are saying “No, you can't call him John. None of our relatives are called John. We'll call him Zechariah after his father. That's a good name for him.” So finally, Elizabeth can't seem to convince them and so they ask Zechariah “What should we call him?” They're all expecting him to say “Call him Zechariah, after me. That's just the way things are done.” And Zechariah gets a tablet and he writes out “His name is John.” And suddenly, Zechariah's tongue is loosed and he can speak and there is great celebrating and rejoicing and I imagine Zechariah starts praising God and prophesying and after 9 months of silence, I imagine he didn't shut up for weeks because he has all of these words just pent up in him. He hasn't been able to tell people what happened to him in the Temple other than jotting a few notes down. So Zechariah is talking and everyone is just amazed by this. Luke says “Awe fell on the whole neighbourhood and the news of what happened spread throughout the Judean hills and everyone who heard about it reflected on these events and asked “What will this child turn out to be for the hand of the Lord is surely upon him in a special way.” This little baby, John, this is a side note. Actually this little baby grows up to be John the Baptist who is this long haired, camel-hair wearing, locust and honey eating guy, who is out in the wilderness. But, John the Baptist actually starts several months before Jesus' ministry and when John is out talking to people his message is very simple. “Repent and turn back to God.” And then people come to him and they start flocking to him and John says “You know what, I'm not the guy. I'm not the One that you are looking for, actually, in comparison to the One who is coming after me, I am small potatoes. My job is simply to prepare the way for Jesus.”

Now, whether Mary was there when John was named or not, or whether she heard about it afterwards, again, just months before her own baby's birth, her faith is affirmed and she has affirmed that God has been preparing for Jesus' arrival.

Perhaps that's where you are at this morning. Perhaps you need some confirmation that God is in control. Perhaps you need comfort in knowing that God is not disinterested or oblivious to what is going on. Perhaps you need assurance that there is a master plan and the master planner has your best interests in mind. Perhaps you need encouragement to forge ahead in the uncertain times that are in front of you. Perhaps you just need some affirmation that your

faith has not been misplaced. It may not come in the form of an angelic appearance or an impossible pregnancy or a miraculous muting but, God is at work in your life and in the life of those around you and I believe that if you look closely, you just might find that preparations are being made and that God is poised to walk with you through whatever it is that lies ahead.

As the writer of Hebrews says, “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart full of assurance and faith having our heart sprinkled to cleanse us from the guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful and let us consider how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds.” Heb. 10: 22-24.

On to our second story. Our second story this morning comes out of Matthew, Chapter 2. In this Chapter we read about a couple of guys who have, in all honesty, been messing up Christmas pageant’s and Nativity Scenes for years now. Your standard Nativity scene, whether it’s the one you have on your mantle or the ones they have during the Christmas play, look something like this. You have Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in the manger. They’re all inside a stable and because it’s a stable there are lots of animals there. In come the shepherds to worship Jesus and then the wise men come along with their camels and then lastly the angel is there as well. But that picture doesn’t actually fit what happened, especially not with the story of the wise men. You see, as far as the story of the wise men are concerned, well, first of all, there’s no angel there. There’s a bucket full of angels out in the field where the shepherds are but they leave before the shepherds even come to Bethlehem. So there is no angel. The shepherds have long since gone by the time the wise men arrive. In fact, by the time the wise men arrive, Mary and Joseph had left the stable all together. Which means there’s no animals either. By the time the wise men get there Mary and Joseph are certainly staying in a house somewhere and baby Jesus may not be such a baby anymore. He may be, quite possibly, one or maybe close to two years old, which when I thought about that this week, it totally changed my perspective on the story of the wise men coming, because at one year or a little bit more, He could have been walking. He could have been saying a few words and that totally changed my picture of what that encounter would have been like. Now, this brings us to what is probably the most historically inaccurate Christmas carol ever, We Three Kings of Orient Are. Few problems with that song. First one is, they weren’t Kings and so, scratch that one off. We’ll talk about what they were in a moment, but they weren’t kings. Secondly, the three kings weren’t kings and there weren’t necessarily three of them. There were three gifts but there weren’t necessarily three wise men. Some speculate as low as two, some speculate as high as 12 with entourage accompanying them. And so, three kings, not three and not kings.

But the one that threw me off for a long time was when they say ‘Orient’. When I think Orient, I think kind of the far east kind of area of the world. I thought the wise men must have come from all the way over there to see Jesus. The truth is, when they talk about wise men from the East, they’re talking more middle-east rather than far east. At the time of Jesus, it looked something like this. And so, the wise men are actually coming from this area of the

map. So they make their way over to where Jesus is to find Him.

So, I couldn't help but wondering, after going through all that, if my understanding of the wise men has been so messed up for all these years, then the question comes to me, who were these guys and why is their story important anyways. Well a few quick facts about who they were. They were astrologers. People who study the movement of stars and that's how when a strange star appeared in the sky, they noticed it, and knew that there was something significant about it. They were a special order of administrators and priests, a mix of the two, that's where we get our word magistrate from. The word 'Magi' that's what we call the wise men sometimes. They were this special order that somehow managed to survive through several regime changes which somehow, is a little odd and unique I think. They survived through the Assirian Kingdom, the Babylonian Empire and the Meds and the Persians and the Greeks and then back to the Persians. You may remember, back in the Old Testament, the story of Daniel. At one point the King Darius appoints Daniel as one of three people in charge of all of his, depending on what Bible you use, it might say 'sad traps' or something like that. Some people speculate that, that group of people that Daniel was put over, is kind of this same group of people that went down through the years and perhaps, somewhere along in there is where Daniel shared the prophesies of the Messiah of the King who would come from Israel and rise up. Perhaps that's where it came from. They were not kings but they were king makers. They were known for being the ones who selected who would be the next to come to power, specifically when one dynasty was going to be the next to rise. Which was likely why Herod was so distressed when they came along and asked for the new King of the Jews. You see, the Persian dynasty at the time was about to fall and if these Magi were able to find a Jewish man and plant him on the Persian throne, he would easily gain popular support from the people of Israel should he return with the Persian army in tow. The people were looking for someone to remove the Romans and they knew it wasn't going to be Herod, because Herod was a puppet king, he was appointed by Rome. He was aligned with Rome. He collected taxes for Rome. He wasn't even a Jew at least not a full-blooded one anyways. And so, really the truth is nobody liked him. In fact, Herod himself knew this, he issued a decree that, when he knew he was about to die, they arrested 1,000 of the top citizens and held them in jail and his command was "On the day that I die, those 1,000 people should be killed so that lots of people will mourn on the day that I die, because I know nobody is going to mourn for me." So that's kind of how the people looked at Herod. No wonder he was threatened by all this, he was known for being a little paranoid as well, he killed several members of his own family under suspicion that they were trying to steal his throne. So, that's kind of the scenario we see when the Magi come to visit Jesus.

So, what actually makes their visit so significant. Well, they were coming from that area of Babylon, Aseria, kind of area. They tracked the same route that God led Abraham on as he journeyed from Ur all the way over to Canaan. And again, I think there's some symbolic parallels in that story. They were coming from a region that had, under many different empires, dominated and conquered and exiled and ruled over Israel for much of their history. But this time, instead of armies coming to insist that the Jews bow and serve a foreign King,

they were coming to find a Jewish King who would rule over them. They were King makers. They appointed new monarchs. They brought three gifts to pay tribute to the new King. The first was gold and gold was a gift that was offered to kings and Jesus would become the King of Kings. They brought incense. Frankincense specifically and frankincense was something that the priests would use in religious rituals and Jesus has become our High Priest and serves that role for us as well. The third thing they brought was myrrh. Myrrh was typically used for embalming after death. So even as they bring gifts to Jesus as a little baby, there is a fore shadowing of what He has really come to do and what He is really going to accomplish as He dies on the cross to forgive all of our sins.

And again, I am struck by God's hand in this story. Not only did He do whatever He did to the star, but He had people watching for it. He had people that understood what that was going to mean. He brought these men from a great distance on a journey with such symbolism from a place that we probably would have least expected good things to come from and they provided these gifts of such significance to Jesus as a coronation and an ordination and a fore-shadowing sign of what was to come. If Herod was distressed by the Magi coming, how much more must Mary and Joseph been reassured by it. But as struck as I am by all of that, I'm even more convicted by the realisation that all of these things may have gone for not if these men had not been ready and willing to follow. If they had seen the star in the sky and said "Yeah, we're really busy right now, maybe we'll follow up on that later." If they had seen the star and said "You know what, there could be a long journey, it could take a long time and it could be rather dangerous for us, maybe we shouldn't go." If they had seen the star and thought "Gold and frankincense and myrrh, those are getting kind of pricey these days, we could use that money for a lot of other things, right now." If they had seen the star and said "You know how this is going to look, don't you, not only to Herod, we come into his yard and say we're looking for a new King, how is that going to go over? But even to our own king and everyone else back home they will think we are crazy, they will think we are traitor, and there could be some serious flack for all of this."

And perhaps that's where you're at this morning. The star is shining in the sky, pointing the way. Preparations have been made. God is walking out ahead of you, but you're not sure if you really want to follow right now. Perhaps you feel that you really don't have the time. Perhaps you're uncomfortable not being the one in the lead. Perhaps you're worried about the potential cost. Perhaps you're scared of the potential reactions and ramifications or perhaps you just really don't want to go where God is leading. If that's where you're at today, be encouraged by the story of the wise men and the words of the Proverb writer, Prov. 3:5-6:

"Trust in the Lord with all of your heart. Lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your path straight."

Whether you are uncertain of the path to follow or uncertain if you want to follow it, you can take confidence and assurance that God has, is and will continue to prepare the way ahead of you. As He says in Deuteronomy, "Do not be faint hearted or afraid. Do not be terrified or

give way to panic before your enemies for the Lord your God, is the one who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies and to give you victory. Be strong and courageous do not be afraid or terrified because of them for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you.”