I want to say good morning to everybody here and everybody at all of our sites and everybody who's joining us online. I have been really looking forward to this weekend a lot, and I want to tell you a little bit about this message. I'm going to talk a bit about the Scriptures, and we're going to listen to the stories of two people who surrendered their lives to God, and then I want to talk to you about that decision in your life.

This season we have been living with what's called the "Serenity Prayer." The first week we learned to pray, "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change," and the next week we prayed, "God, give me the courage to change the things I can." If you have not heard those messages, go online and catch up. Those two prayers can leave us with a problem. Sometimes it's hard to know, "Do I need to accept this or do I need to change this?"

Somebody in my life is clutchy and needy, and if anybody tries to talk to her about it she says, "That's just who I am. You just have to accept that I'm that way." If I say, "No, God doesn't want you to be clutchy and needy. You could be different. You could get a counselor. You could change your attitude. You could embrace life. You don't have to be a whiny, clutchy, needy person," she doesn't receive that in a way that's helpful to her.

Or parents might ask, "I have a child, and they're about to make a bad decision. I think they're going into a relationship or they're going to get married and it's a mistake. I don't know. Do I accept them because they're adults or do I try to change them?" Or "Do I just accept I'm an introvert, that's who I am, get
comfortable with it, or do I challenge myself and say, 'Maybe it wouldn't kill me to make eye contact with another person at least once a week or so'?

Do I need the courage to change something or the serenity to accept it?

That's what brings us to this week's prayer. "God, give me the serenity to accept what I cannot change, the courage to change what I can," and then wisdom. "Give me the wisdom to know the difference." We've been looking at the Christmas story all through this series. This week, talking about wisdom, we have to look at the wise men. I want to talk about the wise men and then pause to hear two stories along the way and then invite you to make the same decision the wise men did.

These are the wise men. They are, I think, the most intriguing, most mysterious characters in the Christmas story. People wonder why they're there. Somebody wrote about what would have happened if there would have been three wise women instead of wise men. They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped to deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts. The whole story would have been much better in that case.

The wise men are in this story for at least two reasons I want to talk about in this message. The first one is that they embody a basic wisdom decision every human being is going to have to face once Jesus comes into the world. Here's how the story goes. "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem…Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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.' When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him."

There's this very stark contrast. The wise men are looking for a king; Herod wants to be king. Herod's primary goal was to stay on his throne. In his little world Herod was the master of the universe, and he had no intention of resigning. He's really disturbed by this story, because his title was "King of the Jews," so if he hears somebody else claim that title, there's going to be a problem. He even killed three of his own sons and one of his wives. He was married to 10 or 11 women. He killed the only one of his wives he really loved and killed his mother-in-law just to keep his throne secure.

If you want to be king and somebody else, Jesus, comes along who claims to be king, one of you will have to give way. There is only room for one king. In any life there is only room for one. We have been learning, as we've journeyed in this Sermon on the Mount, that every life is a little kingdom. Your kingdom is the range of your effective will. Every little kingdom comes with a throne. The question for today is…Who's sitting on the throne of your life?

I'm sitting in this chair because this is the modern-day equivalent of a throne. This is a chair that's called the XtremepowerUS Leather Boss Executive Luxury Chair. I'm not making it up. That's actually the name of this chair. It has an ergonomic design. It has padded cushions. It has a little gas hydraulic switch that can enable me to elevate myself so I'm higher than anybody else in the room. To this day we call the person who is in charge the chairman. It's the person who sits in the seat of authority, in the chair of power.

Just sitting here, I feel powerful. I got this chair as a prop just for this sermon, just to help you all picture this, but of course we don't want to waste it, so now I have to decide who on our staff will get to sit in this wonderful, wonderful chair forever and ever from now on. I'm asking God for wisdom to make that decision really well, but I have a pretty good idea. There's a little King Herod inside all of us. I resist the
claim of a sovereign God who would rule over my life. I want my ego on the throne. I want to be master of the universe.

That brings us to our first story, Vince Siciliano. I'm going to ask Vince to come on up. He was talking about his spiritual journey with our elders a few weeks ago, and it resonated so deeply with this part of the message I asked Vince if he would come and share his story with us. This is now the fourth time he has done this, and I told him, "The 11:30 audience is the most enthusiastic, greatest, most energized group to speak in front of." So will you welcome him?

Vince: You're great. Good morning to all of you. My name is Vince, and I was born to become a master of the universe. I grew up in Washington, DC, where my father worked for both President Eisenhower and later Richard Nixon, and that picture up there... That smiling boy against the wall is me. Obviously, Eisenhower should have had his hand on my head, but he didn't know about that.

As a kid, I rolled Easter eggs on the White House lawn, and in our household, my parents had a lot of well-known people over for dinner who would discuss the great topics of the planet and the people who could maybe influence them. It was that environment and my parents' insistent expectation that I would be number one in everything I did that led me to develop my "master of the universe" personality.

As a master of the universe, wherever I went I would be the smartest guy in the room...the student body president, the chairman of the board, etcetera. My quest for achievements brought me to Stanford, where I encountered my wife and avoided getting arrested during Vietnam protests. That picture of my wife and me climbing over that fence being chased by police was on the back page of the San Francisco Chronicle, and it was this big.

That never saw the light of day until about 25 years later where I showed it to my father, who at the time of that picture was a deputy commerce secretary for Richard Nixon. He would not have been pleased when I shared it, though it brought a few laughs. The challenge with being a master of the universe is that life intervenes. As a young CEO at my first bank I really didn't do that well. I didn't have the character to make the difficult decisions.

At another job where I was for a couple of years as the chief operating officer I got fired, basically for insubordination, and eight years later I got fired by the board where I was CEO, this time really for being out of step with the board. So even though I thought I was a very smart guy, eventually I realized I was a slow learner. After all, after three strikes you're out in the world, but God was just getting underway. I realized I wasn't as great as I imagined.

The problem with having success as a purpose (defining success as money, sex, and power) is that my sense of security and significance was in my work. I was an approval addict. I hung on everybody's word, and if it was a critical word I hung in a different way. When that rug is then pulled out from me I lose my sense of security and significance.

For seven years my wife and I lived in various countries while I was working there with Bank of America, and at one point she went off to China to teach English to English teachers in a college in Dalian. While there, she had an extraordinary experience discovering God in the depths of Maoist China in 1980. When she came back I was panicked, because I felt like I was losing my life. There was this gap between us. We were on different journeys.
She began to pray for me. In fact, I found a book wrapped up in plain brown paper on the bookshelf about "How to Pray for My Unbelieving Husband." When our first son was born and I looked into his eyes and the stars at night I realized there was a God, and at that point I became a seeker. I came to the great realization that the "master of the universe" role was already taken. It was not something I could be. So what could I be?

My search for significance brought me closer and closer to discovering Christ, and it was in a church in San Diego where I made my decision for Christ. No great drama, no spectacular celebration or trappings of being number one when it came to that decision. As a young believer, though, I was struck by the difference between going to church on Sunday and going to work on Monday. In the marketplace you were still defined by what you own, what you do, and what other people think of you.

It's my post-conversion story that God really showed up and was miraculous for me. I learned it didn't matter who I am; the question was whose I am. The Father said to me, "You are my beloved son, and your performance and approval are complete through your relationship with my Son. I want you to walk with me and join me in the process of bringing the kingdom to the world. You are in the 'kingdom come' business."

Now in business the goals of growth and profitability are so important...no margin, no mission...but I realized they were means goals, not end goals. The end goal is really to develop people, and what that means for me is helping people find and move toward truth in their lives (where Truth is a capital T, is a person), and ultimately a company that glorifies God, often without speaking any specific words about God.

This life call from God has been very challenging for me. There are times when I want to take it back and say, "Okay, God, I've got it; I'll take it from here," but it is a kingdom assignment and, therefore, cannot be done without dependence on the Master of the universe. I don't pretend to have it all figured out or even that I'm doing very well, though at times I secretly believe I'm probably doing it better than everybody else. Thank you for listening to my story about how I moved from trying to be the master of the universe to a servant of the Master.

**John:** This is what wisdom does. Wisdom has to come to grips with "Am I going to try to be the master of the universe or am I going to resign and say, 'God, I want you to come and take charge of my life'?” The wise men give us that picture. Herod wants to be the king; they're looking for a king. But there's another reason the wise men are in this story that I want to talk about in this message. They are a picture of God's heart for people who don't belong in this story. They are a picture of what grace can do.

You might know, if you know a lot about Bible stuff, that the Christmas story is basically a story for the people of Israel. Jesus himself was Jewish and lived in Israel amongst the people of Israel. The wise men not so. The wise men are from the east, the text says, probably Persia. We don't know for sure, but they're not part of Israel. They don't have the Scriptures. They don't obey Torah. They don't go to temple. They don't worship the one true God. They don't belong.

Worse, they're actually called magi. We get our word magician from that word. They practiced astrology, and the Bible is quite opposed to astrology, to fortune-telling and sorcery. For one thing because they're superstitious and often quite silly. There was a famous story in the 80s. A psychic astrologer sued her doctor for $988,000 because she had a CAT scan and she said the CAT scan destroyed her psychic ability
somehow. It seems to me if she was a psychic, shouldn't she have known not to go through the CAT scan, if that was going to destroy those abilities?

Worse than that, the Bible is opposed to astrology because it was a form of idolatry. It was a form of something that was very common in the ancient world (it still happens), where people want to tap into spiritual power but use it to serve them without being concerned for justice or compassion or character, and because God is a personal God and spiritual power that's rooted in God flows from a supremely good character, the Bible is really concerned about that.

That's why every other use of the word magi in the New Testament is negative except for in this story. Ironically, amazingly, God sends the magi a star. They're astrologers, and he meets them where they are in their practice. In other words, he uses their false idolatrous, misleading, superstitious belief in astrology to lead them on a quest that ends up where they had no idea it was going to end up, which is Jesus.

These guys…ethnically, religiously, historically, morally…have no business in Jesus' story except just this: Jesus' story is now everybody is welcome, nobody is perfect, anything is possible. When they see this child they bow their heads and bend their knees. It's really interesting, and it often works this way. Herod had all of the benefits of religion and respectability. He had Scripture, he had temple, and he had murder in his heart. These guys had no Scripture, no temple, but they had worship in their hearts.

When they see Jesus, it says they rejoice with exceedingly great joy, because it turns out that there is a God and he's not out there with a star someplace; he's personal, and they see he's right here. He comes with great humility and poverty as a little baby. Very vulnerable. I believe God still sends out the star to bring people to Jesus. I think the star happens anytime your life gets interrupted by an event that sends you on a quest where you begin to search.

That could be a victory or a failure. It could be a divorce. It could be the loss of a job. It could be a problem in your family. It could be a heartache. It could be anything that sends you searching for something more. I want to ask Holly Hayes if she'd come right now. She's the other story we're going to listen to today. She has an amazing story of her journey to God. She actually used to be a part of our church, so some of you will remember Holly, but could all of you welcome her and thank her for coming?

Holly Hayes: I'm so honored to be with you guys today back in my hometown and in my home church. For the last few years I've been a member in mission as I had the opportunity to work for a church in Paris, France, as their worship leader. Just this last year I met and married my husband, who I actually met in a Bible study here on the peninsula. So if you are single and are hoping to be married, study the Bible. I just want to start by telling you that you're all in such wonderful hands with your pastors and staff here. I want to encourage you to take advantage of all of the incredible resources this church has to offer. I know I am the woman I am today because I was loved and pastored here in this church community. I stand here before you today a woman of dignity, and I probably look like a pretty normal, healthy, well-adjusted person to you, but that hasn't always been the case.

After my parents divorced when I was 14, I spiraled into a cycle of alcohol and drug abuse that led to some incredibly dark places. By the time I was 15, I was drinking and using drugs every day. By age 16, I had dropped out of high school. By 19, I'd been arrested multiple times, had had two DUs, had been raped, had been abused, and had had three abortions. As a 21-year-old, I found myself homeless after losing two jobs as an escort because of my drinking.
What had started as an escape for me had turned into an addiction. I knew I couldn't keep going on living the way I was living, but I knew I couldn't stop either. On February 10, 2001, I balled myself up on the floor of a public bathroom. I was suicidal and sobbing and watching my tears hit the floor, and three words fell out of my mouth: "God, help me." I never believed in God. I had no experience with church or any context for who this God might be or where this prayer might have come from, but those words fell out of me, like my soul crying out from the depth of this pit. "God, help me." And he did.

That very night I met someone who took me to my first recovery meeting. That was February 10, 2001, and I've been sober since February 11, 2001. On the night of February 11, I walked into the basement of a church for the first time, and I saw this room full of people who were smiling and hugging each other, and they had clean, bright, happy faces that were full of this joy I'd never known. I was homeless at the time, and I was wearing this light blue sweater, and I had whiskey stains down the front of it, and I knew I smelled.

But every single person I met that night smiled at me. Some of them even hugged me, and they welcomed me with open arms. They could tell I was hungry, and they pointed me to the stale Chips Ahoy! and coffee in the back of the room. I couldn't believe they were giving me cookies for free, and I couldn't believe they were welcoming me, and I couldn't believe they were telling me to keep coming back. It had been so long since I'd been welcomed anywhere.

I lived on those smiles and Chips Ahoy! for my first few months in sobriety. Over the years I began to practice the 12 steps, and those really helped me to heal from the things that led to my addiction in the first place. I grew in character and in strength, but I still had no idea who this God was who had saved me in the bathroom all of those years ago. I tried everything the world says to try. I did yoga and meditation and Buddhism and consumerism, and I read every book Oprah recommended, but none of those things seemed to match my experience.

I knew I hadn't thought my way into this new life. I knew I hadn't "affirmationed" my way into it. I knew I hadn't done anything to earn it or to deserve it. I had been rescued by a God who seemed to love me in the depths of my mess. I had this friend who was a Christian, and she told me that God speaks to her through the Bible, through his Word, and I thought, "Wow, I'd really like if God spoke to me." I knew I had a Bible. I had actually stolen this Bible, which I found hilarious at the time.

So I went to my bookshelf and grabbed this stolen Bible, and I said, "Okay, God. If you're real, if you're in here, speak to me." I put my finger inside the stolen Bible and tipped it open, and I landed on a passage called John 8. It was this story where a woman had been caught in adultery and had been brought to Jesus to be stoned to death for her sin. Jesus says to the crowd, "Let he who is without sin throw the first stone at her." Instead of allowing her to be killed for her sin, one by one he allowed them all to walk away.

When he's left alone with her he forgives her and commands and empowers her to leave her life of sin. I was absolutely floored. For the first time I was face-to-face with the God who had saved me. I'd always thought it was Jesus who punished and condemned. I'd always thought that someone like me would be completely disqualified from ever even being in his presence, but this woman stood raw before him and was met with this loving, forgiving God.

It was so clear to me. This is the God who goes around to public bathrooms, picking girls like me up off the floor and giving them a whole new life, and this was the God who had saved me. I spent the next year
researching Christianity by reading the Bible, first the New Testament and then the Old. In that year I found healing and wholeness that I never would have imagined. Years of shame and trauma started melting away from me as I spent time in his presence through his Word.

I saw how the whole picture of the Bible was the greatest love story ever told. Throughout Scripture I saw God using even people like me, and I saw him rebuking the perfectionism and religious ritual he encountered in the Pharisees. I saw that as we humble ourselves he lifts us up and that his strength truly is made perfect in our weakness. I saw the character I had met in that basement recovery meeting all of those years ago in the person of Jesus.

At the end of that year I went to Israel and was baptized in the Jordan River. After that I returned, and I stepped into a church for the first time. It was actually here in this sanctuary about six pews back. I bounced in that day so full of joy, so excited to meet my new church family. I couldn't believe you guys had music and you had someone teaching about the Bible live in person, but I couldn't help but wonder from my pew that day if I would have been welcomed here on February 11, 2001, smelly, stained, broken, hungry, still healing from my fifth abortion, still in a relationship with the man who was selling me.

We pray for God to save the lost and the lonely and the broken, but are we really ready to welcome them with open arms and smiles and stale Chips Ahoy? I'm so grateful God gave me a basement side door. I've written a book about this journey, and it's called *From Basement to Sanctuary*. It just came out in October. This book is really about what I believe the church can learn from the 12-step recovery movement and what those in the recovery movement can learn about this Jesus who loves to save the lost and the broken.

Our pastor John has so graciously written a beautiful forward for the book, and I'm so honored that I have his support in my life and my ministry. You guys are so lucky to have a pastor who really embraces this message of recovery, because I believe we're all either in recovery from our sin or in denial, pretending to have it all together. I just want to encourage you today that there is recovery available for us all and life with Christ. There is no sin that's too great for him to forgive. There's no brokenness, no mess he can't unravel, and there's no life he can't redeem for his glory. I hope my story is proof of that for you today. Thank you.

**John:** I'm almost tempted, if we had the time, to ask who else wants to come tell their story, because I know this is a church full of people with all kinds of stories. What I want to do in these couple of moments right now is to just call the question... *Who's going to be on the throne of your life?* The secret of our church is we're in the basement. This is just real people who desperately need God.

It's a funny thing, but it's only when somebody gets to the point where they say, "I can't pretend anymore. I can't prop it up anymore. I can't try to look good anymore. God, I'm a train wreck without you. I need you so badly." There are no okay, decent, respectable, "doing all right" people. There are just people who are train wrecks apart from God and then God's grace.

So here's a question... *Who's going to sit on the throne of your life?* You are not a good option for that role. When I try to do that, I get enslaved to my desires. I get deceitful. I lie. I mess up. You can know the God who wants to oversee your life and care for you, and if you don't know about that God I'm going to make a special offer for you this weekend. You can steal one of our Bibles, take it home, and read it (I will pronounce you absolved. I can do that. I'm a professional. I have that authority) and you can begin to learn about how God loves you and longs to forgive you.
The Bible has all of these statements, like, "All we like sheep have gone astray," like, "There is nobody righteous; no, not one," like, "All have sinned and fallen short." We're all the same. We're all just a mess, a hell-bound mess apart from God. That's all we are. Here's what you need to know: Jesus, who was born in a manger to communicate God's humble love, died on a cross to communicate God's forgiving grace. Nobody comes to God as master of the universe. Nobody brings their résumé. If you're a CEO, God is not impressed. If you're an addict, God is not repulsed. It's just grace.

So here's the decision today is about. What Vince did that changed his life, what Holly did that changed hers, you can do right now. I humble myself, I get real with God about my need, and then what I'm doing symbolically with my body you do in your heart with your will. That is, I get out of this chair and say, "God, I'm not going to try to rule my life anymore. I'm not going to be in charge anymore." This is the decision.

"Jesus, I want you to come and be the chief executive officer of my life, and I want, with considered intention, to surrender to you my will, my money, my time, my gifts, my words, my relationships. I will now, in that sense, die to myself, God, so that you can live in me. I want you to come sit in this chair." Everybody has to decide who's going to sit in this chair, and the invitation of wisdom is "God, I want to surrender my life, and I want Jesus to come do this."

This is why we're here as a church. God is still doing this. God will do this for you. I want to give you a chance to make that decision. I'm going to ask everybody now to bow your head and close your eyes. This is the most important decision a person can make, and it's a good one not to just drift around. If you have never done this before, I want to invite you to commit your life to God, and you can tell him like this.

"God, I acknowledge that I need you. I mess up more than I know. I have regrets. I've done things, I've been places that make me ashamed to think about it, and now, God, I want a clean slate with you. I want a fresh start with you. I ask you, God...no résumés now, no trying to impress you...would you forgive me based on the love of Jesus who died on a cross for me? Now, God, would you come into my life and take it over? Take over my time and my behavior, my relationships, my life and death. I want to be a follower of Jesus from this day forward, to know him as my forgiver and my friend and my Lord."

Now I'm going to ask everybody to please keep your heads bowed and your eyes closed, but if you have made that decision today, if for the first time you have turned your life and your will over to Jesus, I'd love to pray for you. So if you want, just raise your hand right now, and I will see it and say a prayer for you. God bless you. God sees.

Heavenly Father, you know every story. You see every heart. You love every man and woman in this room. God, you know about every raised hand and every surrendered will. You know whatever pain or difficulty or sorrow or anger or confusion brings us to you. I pray, God, especially for those who raised their hands, those who have handed their heart and life over to you today. God, thank you so much. We rejoice anytime anybody comes home to you.

Would you pour out love and comfort and bring just the right person, the right conversation, the right help for that person to be able to grow in their journey toward you? Then, God, I pray for anybody who's still struggling, who's still resisting for whatever reason. God, just keep whispering to them. Keep after them. Let them know they're loved until they come home. Now, God, would you speak to every heart in this room? Would the presence and the love of Jesus in these moments through these words become as real to us as they did to those men on their knees 2,000 years ago?

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