

A Present of Praise [adapted from "Oh Come Let Us Adore Him", by Larry Baker]

I read recently about the village of Rattenberg, Austria, located behind a 3,000 foot high mountain range that blocks out sunlight three months every year, subjecting the town to darkness or being in the shadow from November to February. It's like one very long night.

Or at least it was.

An innovative technology firm came up with a solution to bring sunshine to the community. They're planning to build huge mirrors that will receive light on the sunny side of the mountain and reflect it into the dark village. This has worked so well, that several other similar towns in Europe have implemented the same strategy.

This is exactly what our job is at Christmastime.

God sent his light into the world, his only Son Jesus Christ, but some people can't see the light. They live in darkness. We who have experienced the light of God's love need to reflect his light so that others might see it.

That's why at Christmastime I don't want to just talk about how everybody else gets it wrong.

I want us to concentrate on how we can get it right. How can we magnify the light of Jesus this Christmas season?

Ironically, one of our best examples of this from scripture, comes from some individuals who by all accounts should have been the receivers of the Gospel. Instead, to the great shame of God's people, these men became heralds of the good news.

Of course I'm talking about the Wise Men - also known as the Magi. Let's read about them together from the Gospel of Matthew, beginning in chapter 2, verse 1.

READING

Matthew 2:¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² 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."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Let's pray.

Before we get much further, I think that it's important for us to take a moment to unlearn much of what we think we know about the magi.

Much of our tradition teaches us:

- that there were three men
- that they were kings
- that they came from the Orient
- that they met Jesus in the manger on the night of his birth.

But a careful reading of Scripture seems to reveal some difference to those ideas!

1. First of all, from the Biblical account we have no certainty how many visitors came to Bethlehem. The Bible just says there were 3 gifts.
2. And they were not really kings, at least not the way we'd understand it. They were first called kings as early as the 3rd century, seemingly alluding to Ps 72:11 - which describes kings from distant nations giving glory to God.

But our text never mentions them as kings as such. Magi were more of astrologers, wisemen, discerners of the signs of the stars.

This is particularly strange, because astrology and divination were condemned by God for the Israelites. In Deuteronomy 18:10, God says, "Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, ¹¹ or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead."

Whenever astrology and other similar practices are mentioned in scripture, it's always closely paired with the danger of idolatry - worshipping created things rather than the Creator.

And now, surprisingly, we have these foreign figures steeped in astrological study that has led them to worship the one true God.

3. And they did not come from as far as the Orient as we think of it today, but merely across the desert from some nearby Eastern nation.

History actually tells us that these Magi were a sort of priestly caste from Persia (east of Rome). Their role included elements of priestly or religious leadership, study of astrology and science, diplomacy, as well as study of philosophy and magic arts.

They would have been leading figures in religious and royal life - often serving in ambassador roles, such as congratulating a foreign nation on a royal birth.

Now, here's the part that really gets me. [Pam, can you bring up our map slide] To our best knowledge, the magi would have taken one of these routes.

There's a chance they could have originated South east in Yemen area, but since they had some knowledge of Jewish prophecy - it's more likely they originated somewhere in the vicinity of Parthia or Persia - my vote is for Persia because we know that the prophet Daniel travelled in the same sorts of social circles as these kinds of people when the Jews were in exile under the Babylonians and Persians.

That means a journey of over 1,300 miles. That would be like walking from here to Miami, Florida. AT MINIMUM, they would have been coming from around Babylon area, which is modern day Iraq. That's about 350 miles from Jerusalem - roughly the same distance it would be for me to visit my family down in Wild and Wonderful West Virginia.

They travelled ALL THAT WAY, and Herod and the religious leaders that hear about their news are reluctant to make the trip themselves from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

Anyone know how far it is from Jerusalem to Bethlehem? [PAUSE] 5 miles! That's here to Dunlap. Some of you drove farther to get to church this morning.

4. FINALLY, if you read carefully, you will note that the wise men brought their gifts not to the manger, but to a house. In fact, verse 1 of this chapter tells us specifically that this all happened *AFTER* the birth of Jesus. We don't know how long after, but given the distance they had to travel, it could have been up to 2 years. Presumably, since the baby's birth, Joseph has been able to find more suitable lodging. Undoubtedly, the story didn't quite happen the way it's usually depicted in our nativity sets or on television or film.

Up to this point, Matthew's gospel has been far less concerned with giving us details about Jesus' birth story, and far more concerned with the messianic prophecies fulfilled by Jesus' birth and the KIND of KING and MESSIAH that Jesus will be.

Once more the way the prophecies are fulfilled are more important than we realize. The priests and scribes rightly remember that Micah prophesied the Messiah would come from Bethlehem, but they apparently forgot that in the chapters leading up to that, Micah also prophesied that at that time people from other nations would come to the mountain of the Lord - that's Jerusalem - to worship God and learn His ways.

That's fulfilled here by the Magi - and yet God's own people didn't recognize the gift of the Messiah.

I want to suggest this morning that the journey and the response of the Magi teaches us something very valuable about how we ought to respond in the Christmas season.

I. REJOICE IN THE SIGNS OF CHRISTMAS (V 1-2, 9-10).

FIRST, WE OUGHT TO RECOGNIZE AND REJOICE IN THE SIGNS OF CHRISTMAS

The star the Magi followed is just a symbol. It represented what God was doing in the world. It pointed the way to the savior. Beyond just the people of Israel, by the time of the Roman empire, the hope of a savior king from Judah had also spread to other similarly occupied people groups.

The magi may well have read the stars in conjunction with a prophecy made known to them by Jews in dispersia living in the area: Numbers 24:17 says, "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel."

God gives us signs and symbols all the time to show us how He is living and moving in our world.

When it comes to Christmas symbols, some people are like Herod and the chief priests and the scribes. They see the symbols but don't recognize their true meaning. At the time of Jesus birth, this brightly shining star was there for everyone to see, but only the Wise Men perceived its meaning and recognized its value. That's why they rejoiced to see the star in the sky.

This month there are symbols of salvation all around you. Look for them. Recognize them. Rejoice in them.

Most of us have Christmas trees and Christmas decorations at home. What do they symbolize?

- It's been said that the evergreen tree symbolizes eternal life, because it's green all year round. [the fake ones stay green years at a time!]
- The Wreath symbolizes the never ending love of God.
- Bells symbolize the GOOD NEWS announced of Christ's coming.
- Giving of Presents reminds us of the gift of Jesus, our God With Us.
- The Candy Cane has been said to symbolize the shepherd's staff, because Jesus is the Great Shepherd. (And when you turn it upside, it becomes a J.)
- The star symbolizes not only the star of Bethlehem, but all of the prophecies that came to pass in the birth of Christ.

Many of these symbols originated from a blending of pagan traditions and Christian truths, as new people groups came to faith and began seeing the truth of their Creator in the created things they once held so dear.

There are people who will tell you, "Ah, that stuff is all nonsense." For them, I guess it is.

For me, I want to learn to be like the wise men. I want to learn to see the symbols of God's salvation in everything, even something as simple as a star in the sky.

That star was a mere symbol of the birth of Christ, and it was there for everyone to see. But since the wise men were able to recognize it, and rejoice in it, it led them to Jesus. So take time to enjoy the Christmas season; let the symbols lead you to Jesus.

That brings us to our next lesson from the Magi.

II. WORSHIP THE ONE TRUE KING (2-7, 11).

WORSHIP THE ONE TRUE KING.

When Tim Hughes wrote Here I Am To Worship, I don't know if he had Christmas in mind, but the song does tell the Christmas story. It could be a modern day Christmas Carol.

Light of the world you stepped down into darkness
Opened my eyes let me see
Beauty that made this heart adore you
Hope of a life spent with you.

Here I am to worship Here I am to bow down
Here I am to say that you're my God
You're altogether worthy, altogether lovely
Altogether wonderful for me.

I like the image of these magi from the east coming into the house where Jesus stayed, seeing him with his mother, and kneeling down to worship him.

They've already gone through Herod's palace and seen all he had to offer, but it's here, in a carpenter's rented home, under the light of the star, that they know they've encountered the true King of kings. So they bow in reverence.

It causes me to ask myself, "Do I worship Jesus as I should?" I serve him. I do the work that I believe he's called me to do. I talk about him, sing about him, write about him. That's not enough.

He deserves my adoration. He deserves my prostrate devotion. He deserves my worship.

We often come to worship services looking for encouragement, inspiration, and a profound sense of life change or connection with God. And real worship often results in those things! But some folks say, "That just doesn't happen too often when I come to church."

Unfortunately, the problem is that many are coming to worship the backwards way around - looking for something for themselves when the gift is ultimately supposed to be for God.

When we come to worship for ourselves, we'll generally be disappointed when we find just that - ourselves. In all our Herod-like arrogance, we'll be disappointed when praise and gifts are about someone else. But when we come prepared to worship Jesus - the True King, the only worthy object of our worship - it's then that we find we truly receive as well.

Worship is a verb. It is a positioning yourself in the best possible way to get close to God ... It means confessing sin, leaving a critical attitude at the door, actively seeking for a word from God.

If the message isn't where you're at for whatever reason, you are actively seeking it through the written word, the hymnal, or in meditation. Even God won't make you worship, that's your job - your service to Him.

This Christmas, let's remember to worship Jesus. When we sing *Silent Night, Away In a Manger*, and *Joy to the World*, let's remember to direct our thoughts, truly, to the one who was born King of the Jews, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

When we come to church this season, let's put aside our preferences and put aside our thoughts of "What will I get out of the service" and let's do what the magi did: come into his presence and worship him.

And as we worship Him, we can follow one last example of the Magi:

III. BRING YOUR GIFTS (11).

BRINGING OUR GIFTS BEFORE THE KING

Much has been made of the symbolism behind the gifts.

- Gold is the gift for a king, and Jesus is the King of Kings.
- Frankincense is the gift for a priest, and Hebrews says that Jesus is our high priest.
- Myrrh is the gift for a dead man; it was used as embalming fluid. Jesus came into the world to die for our sins.

In reality, the gifts probably served a much more practical use for Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Shortly after the magi left, Joseph was warned in a dream to take his wife and child and flee to Egypt, because Herod was seeking to kill him.

The gifts most likely paid their travel expenses and living expenses while they were away: Gold could easily be converted to cash, frankincense and myrrh could easily be carried on a journey and sold in an Egyptian marketplace.

The Magi shared their treasure with Jesus. Not only that, they spent as much as two years on the journey to find him. It could be said that that, in itself, was part of their gift.

There's a story about a missionary school teacher in Africa who had been teaching her students about Christmas, and told them how we give gifts to one another at Christmas time. A few days later one of her students brought her a gift - a beautiful seashell.

She asked him where he got it and he said, "I walked to the beach and picked it out for you." The school was several miles from the ocean, so she knew it had been a long walk for him. She said, "You shouldn't have gone so far to get a gift for me." The student said, "The long walk was part of the gift."

You may not have the treasure of a Eastern Sheik to give to Jesus, but you do something just as valuable: YOURSELF. That's the gift he most wants to receive from you.

Maybe you remember the beautiful stanza from the poem and song by Christina Rossetti, "In the Bleak Midwinter"...

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb.
If I were a wise man I would do my part.
Yet, what I can I give him? [I will] give my heart.

This Christmas, come to Jesus bearing gifts. Yes, I hope that you will give generously of your resources so that others won't have to do without. Even more than that, I hope that you will give him yourself fully to him -- your time, your talent, your treasure -- as only the King of Kings deserves. Seek out ways that you can serve Him -- by ministering within the congregation and reaching out with Jesus' love into the world around you.

CONCLUSION

There's a saying I've heard repeated over the years during this season: Wise men still seek him.

That's what getting Christmas really comes down to: Seeking him, seeking Jesus.

- This is why I encourage you to rejoice in the symbols of Christmas that lead you to Christ, just like the star led the magi.
- It's why I encourage you to put Jesus at the center of your Christmas celebration, taking time to worship and adore him.
- And it's why I encourage you to come to him with gifts -- not just your money, but your time, and yourself. Give him all of you this holiday season, and you will truly discover Christmas.

Pray with me this morning.