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TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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ISAIAH 49:5-7

MATTHEW 2:1-12

“THE JOYFUL JOURNEY OF THE MAGI”

*The main point of this sermon is that our journey to Christ is complete when we find him to be our greatest joy who is worthy of our most excellent gifts and treasures.*

**No Mountain Too High, No Valley Too Low**

There are some things you just cannot miss. No matter the cost, no matter the obstacles, there are just some things too precious, too meaningful to let go. One summer when our family was on vacation in northern Michigan, our cottage lost power, so my Dad, my brother, and I piled into our minivan to watch the British Open on our portable TV.

Or think of the movie “Home Alone.” Nothing was going to keep Kevin’s mom from getting to her son, even if it meant riding in a Budget moving van with John Candy and his polka band, the Kenosha Kickers

Things come along in life that are just too monumental to miss. We’ve all experienced them. The birth of a child. Thanksgiving or Christmas with family. A graduation. A long-awaited reunion with a close friend. Things appear in our lives that move us to great actions, no matter the cost, no matter the obstacles.

**Wise Men Begin Their Journey**

And isn’t that what happened to these wise men? This star appeared in the sky, alerting them, in some mysterious way, that something too important to miss was underway. They didn’t know how far they’d have to travel or what dangers awaited them, but they must have felt in the depths of their hearts that this journey would be worth whatever it cost.

And so, who were these daring wise men? These magi? Well, we don’t get much help from the familiar Christmas carol we just sung, because the magi weren’t kings, and Matthew never tells us there were three of them. Magi were often advisors to kings. They were learned men who specialized in astrology and the interpretation of dreams, and in some cases magical arts. Think of Daniel and his friends in the Old Testament: they were educated men whose wisdom was valuable to the king. So, it isn’t unusual then that these magi would be interested in meeting the newly born king of the Jews.

But, what about the strange way they got from the East to Jerusalem? What are we to make of this star? There are several theories put forward by astronomers and biblical historians, but the truth is, there’s no way for us to know exactly what they saw. Did they see a comet? Or perhaps a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn? Or maybe a supernova? We don’t know.

And anyways there’s something more important to take away from all this. The magi were pagans who studied the stars. They gave their lives to astrology. It was their livelihood. It was what they knew best. And so, what we see is that God descended to the level of the magi to communicate with them.[[1]](#footnote-1) You see, to this day, God will get our attention in different ways. In a sense, God will speak in the right way to get our attention at the appropriate time. Think of the parent who gets down on the floor to play with their child. The parent descends to the child’s level. That’s what God does. He’s willing to speak our language and get involved with our interests.

When you pause to think about it, aren’t you astonished at all the ways God has spoken to people throughout time? A burning bush, a talking donkey, a giant fish. And haven’t there been times in your life when God has grabbed your attention through a piece of poetry or a brilliant sunset or a startling, climatic event? All because God, like a tireless bloodhound, is seeking you.

You see, the magi were the most unlikely and unexpected kind of people to come looking for Christ. They were foreign astrologers. No one would have thought these would be the type of people interested in a newly born king of the Jews. But there they were, knocking on Herod’s door, all because God moved the stars to stir their hearts and set them on a journey.

**The Wise Men Meet Herod, the Anti-King**

And when the magi meet Herod, the anti-king in the story, what do we immediately learn about his heart? We’re told that upon hearing the news of a recently born king of the Jews, “he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him” (v. 4).

Herod, especially in the later years of his life, was devoted to one thing: keeping a tight grip on his throne. He even had his wife and three of his sons killed, fearing they were plotting against him.

You see, Herod wasn’t fully Jewish. His father was the head of the police force that kept order for Rome in Palestine, which paved the way for him to be named king of Judea by Rome in 37 BC. And Herod had proved he’d go to any lengths to keep control. Any threat to his power and authority would have been dealt with swiftly and without mercy, which is probably why all of Jerusalem was frightened along with Herod. News of a newborn king of the Jews meant that they too might suffer under Herod’s fanatical drive to keep control.

Herod, while a tyrannical madman, was a skilled politician. He could be subtle and calculating, as we see here when he called together the chief priests and scribes to learn where the Messiah was to be born. And what’s interesting is that these two groups—the chief priests and scribes—weren’t exactly chummy with one another. But they agree on what the Scriptures teach: that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem of Judah. And so, if these rival groups could agree on this, Herod knew it was reliable information. And so, the magi become his unknowing spies for the time being.

And so, what’s interesting is that when the magi arrive in Jerusalem, after covering hundreds and hundreds of miles to pay homage to this child, they are met by Herod’s fear and the apathy and disregard of the chief priests and scribes. What we see, from the very beginning, is that Christ will stir up great fear among some. There will always be those who think that Christ has come to take something away from them. Like Herod, they will see Christ as a threat to what their hearts cherish.

And there will be others, like the chief priests and scribes, who are content with the life they’ve built for themselves. The chief priests and scribes were religious people. They obviously knew their Scripture. They made their way into a profession where their religious knowledge was second-to-none and unquestioned. But sadly, that was enough for them. They showed no interest in going to see Jesus. And that’s always the danger for religious people. Head knowledge and pious moralism stand in the way of seeing one’s real spiritual poverty.

**The Wise Men Meet Jesus, the True King**

So, we see, different responses and attitudes toward Christ have been there from the beginning. And so, it isn’t surprising that Christ is still the object of fear for some, and still an object of disregard and insignificance for others. But the magi, the unlikely and unexpected magi, show us the right response is possible. In verse 10, we’re told that when the magi “saw that the star had stopped [over the house], they were overwhelmed with joy.” And the Greek is even more expressive. It’s more like they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. This is an over-the-top, beyond expression level type of joy and happiness. It’s the kind of joy you feel deep in your gut. The type of joy that words never quite capture.

It’s amazing, really. A group of pagan astrologers fall head-over-heels with excitement and joy at the sight of the Christ child. And we shouldn’t think they knew everything about Jesus’ identity. They didn’t have any special knowledge about the life he’d lead. And all that’s true, but we do get a window into what motivated them and encouraged them to continue in their journey.

The magi were wholeheartedly committed to bring Jesus their best gifts. That was the priority that kept them going – to lay at Jesus’ feet the very best they had to offer. Unlike Herod, they weren’t frightened by the thought of losing something valuable. And unlike the chief priests and scribes, they didn’t fall into complacency and forget what the journey was all about.

No one covered more ground to see Jesus than the magi. And we probably can’t quite understand how dangerous this journey would have been in the first century. In a real sense, they put their lives on the line to see Christ. It was a costly journey. But do you notice, they are the ones who got to rejoice. They got to experience an over-the-top joy that Herod and the chief priests and scribes passed up.

**The Joyful Life**

So, do you see what makes for a joyful life? It isn’t in keeping a strangle hold on what we’ve accomplished and climbing to the top of the ladder. It isn’t in filling our heads with knowledge to be the smartest people in the room. The joyful life is found when, like the magi, we live with open treasure chests before Jesus. That means we hold nothing back. Nothing is hidden or fenced in. He gets it all.

And what the magi didn’t know then but what we know now is that Jesus didn’t come to receive things like gold, frankincense, and myrrh. He isn’t that type of king. He’s the king who crossed an infinite distance to take the costliest journey to cross. And he did it all to open the treasure chest of heaven for us. To give us, by grace, the riches and glories of his kingdom. Christ shows us there is no distance too great, nor cost too high to keep God from His sons and daughters.

We’re beginning a new year. It will be another year full of obstacles and dangers. We might be called to go somewhere new in the service of Christ. We might be called to make a sacrifice that will alter how we live. And the question before all of us, is whether we’ll let 2020 be a joyful year. And all that really depends on an important question.

Will Jesus receive your best? Will you give to him your best in every circumstance and every relationship? That’s the path to joy. So, let us follow the magi into the new year, to fall at the feet of Christ and give him our worship and praise.

Amen.

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1. Daniel M. Doriani, *The Incarnation of the Gospels*, “The Adoration of Jesus,” Reformed Expository Commentary, Philipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)