

Sermon January 7 Matthew 2:1-12 *“Honoring the Christ Child”*

Today marks what is known as Epiphany Sunday, commemorating the appearance of God to the world through a fully human and fully divine Jesus Christ. It is one of the oldest festival days of the worldwide Christian church. Each country has its traditions. For instance, in Mexico, children leave out their shoes, anticipating goodies and small gifts. Families gather to share sweet bread with figurines stuck inside. In Greece, priests throw a cross into the sea, and brave swimmers dive in with hopes of retrieving it faster than other contestants to win a blessing of good luck for the year. Essentially, today comes on the heels of the Christmas season: the twelfth day, a time of joy and faith in celebration of the baby Jesus revealing Himself to the world. It also marks the day of the Magi.

I realize that Christmas is now over, and the nativity scene is all but gone, and Christmas carols have begun to disappear from radio stations and stores. Even so, the events that we read from today’s text following Matthew’s Christmas narrative happen sometime after the birth of Jesus. How do we know this? Reading from verse 1, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem.” How far after his birth? We aren’t really sure. Some scholars land somewhere between a month and two years. Furthermore, scholars debate the number of magi who came to worship Jesus. Jewish law required waiting eight days following birth for circumcision. Then, in fulfillment of the Mosaic Law requiring the cleansing of a woman following birth, we read in Luke chapter 2 that Mary was purified 40 days after his birth.

The Law also required the purification of Joseph because he touched Mary while she was bleeding. How can we forget that it was King Herod who sent orders out to kill all the boys in Bethlehem who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi? Then we read in verse 11 of the text that Jesus and Mary were living in a house, most likely in Bethlehem. When we sing “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” the bible does not tell us that they were kings. Or even when they arrived in Bethlehem, only that, in all likelihood, a miraculous star guided them. Matthew shows little interest in details except for two significant observations. Gentiles came to worship the Jewish Messiah and the significance of the gifts to honor the Christ Child.

As Christians, we celebrate Jesus not only at Christmas but every day of the year. Now that Christmas is over, we should look at how to celebrate Jesus joyfully. First, let us pray.

**Holy Spirit, enable us to worship this morning. Assure us so that we might feel your adopting love so that we will leave here transformed and empowered to reveal your presence. In this, we pray. Amen.**

In his day, a number of people questioned who Jesus was. Even from biblical times to the present, questions remain. Herod believed he was John the Baptist raised from the dead, perhaps with a guilty conscience from murdering John. However, in chapter 16 of Matthew, when Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist, or Elijah, or more like the weeping prophet Jeremiah, and others said he was a prophet sent by God. But it was Simon Peter who answered, saying, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

In the world today, the Islamic religion believes Jesus was a beloved prophet of God sent to guide the Children of Israel, but not the Son of God. In Judaism, they believe Jesus was a

misguided pseudo-Messiah, meaning a false deliverer of the Jewish nation. I could go on about the various and very lengthy list of differences in modern-day beliefs about Jesus. However, for us, the most critical question is what the Bible says. What does God's word say about Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us? We could find various fruitful passages in the New Testament giving us the answer. But Matthew provides a simplistic and unique birth narrative immersed in Old Testament thematic passages describing the king of the Jews taken from the Books of Numbers 24:17, 1 Kings 10:1-13, Psalm 72:10-11, and Micah 5:1-3. If we walked through these passages, what we would find is a number of theological misunderstandings surrounding the present-day nativity scene. But as we all know, the world in which we now live entirely misrepresents all biblical truth.

Notice in verse 2 that those who seek Jesus would honor and worship. When the magi ask Herod, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?" Those of us who are familiar with the song "We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar" depict the wise men from probably Babylon or Persia who ask Herod where can we go worship the king. As you know, Bethlehem is significant in the Old Testament. Its meaning is the "house of bread." Considered the birthplace of Jesus, Bethlehem is still there, about six miles south of Jerusalem in the West Bank. Bethlehem was not a happy place then, nor is it now. Although Bethlehem generally rests under Palestinian National Authority control, Israeli forces have occupied Jesus' birthplace since 1995. The same town where one of our sister churches is located. The church we supported with the Christmas Eve offering. The same town that canceled all of Christmas activity because of war. But who were these magi, and why did they come? How did they know to come? Here's the best guess.

Following each of the three invasions of Israel destroying both Jerusalem and the Temple, there was a significant exile of Jews to Babylon. Then, following the Babylonian captivity, Jews were allowed to return, but not all of them did. Some of them became comfortable living in Babylon. Meanwhile, they continued to study the Scriptures, and they knew of a promise in the Old Testament beginning in the Book of Numbers 24:17. Moses wrote, "I see him, but not here or now. I perceive him, but far in the distant future. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." Is it possible that these men were astrologers, and now, according to what they read, they had to travel afar to see and honor the most remarkable king? No, they were great scholars of the scriptures, and they were not concerned about Herod or the emperor in Rome. But imagine their disappointment when they arrived in Jerusalem to see the final king, the king who ended all kings; instead, they found a not-so-kind king in Herod. So, the first thing we should learn is that regardless of our circumstances, are we wise enough to seek information about Jesus?

Here were the Magi, wise enough to learn from others and the scriptures. They were considered intellectuals from another culture and country unhindered by pride from whom others, in return, sought information. In this story, they seek information, standing meekly as genuine disciples when the chief priests and teachers of the law opened the Scriptures and read from Micah 5:2: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel." We should lay our pride to the side and be wise enough to learn from others.

Secondly, those who find Jesus are wise enough to worship their Messiah shepherd, holding nothing back in offering up our lives to him. Matthew tells us that these ancient visitors

brought gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Gold was an appropriate gift for Jesus, for it is the metal of kings, and it was an acknowledgment of his right to rule. It was the proper gift for a king of men. Archeological discoveries have often found gold relics among the dead. It is one of the greatest treasures of the ancient world. Many theologians have pointed out that when the wise men brought gold to the infant Jesus, they were being used by God to provide funds necessary for Joseph to take the young child and his mother to Egypt to escape Herod's attempt on Jesus' life. However, more significant was that in the gift of gold, these men confessed Jesus' kingship.

Incense was another symbolic gift since it was used in temple worship. People mixed incense with oil used to anoint priests and would often be blended into the meal offerings as praise gifts to God. The only exception to note is that incense was never mixed in meals dedicated to sin offerings. But the last and most significant gift brought by these magi was myrrh. Why? Because myrrh spoke of Jesus' death. It was odd to present a spice used for embalming at the birth of a child, but the gift was not bizarre, for it was a gift of faith.

These wise scholars of faith knew the Old Testament scriptures that repeatedly pictured future suffering. The prophet Isaiah in 53:4-5 says, "Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds, we are healed." The Magi's gift of myrrh symbolized Jesus' suffering. All in all, gold for a king, frankincense for a priest, and myrrh for one that was to die. These were the gifts of the wise men, and even at the cradle of Christ, they foretold that he was to be the true King, the perfect High Priest, and, in the end, the supreme Savior of humanity.

In closing, the point of the story is not that the story of Jesus' birth might entertain us but that we might find Christ as the wise men did and that we might worship him and offer him our gifts, too. If you have already found Jesus, that is awesome. Hold nothing back. Offer him your gifts. If you are still searching, if you seek, you will find him. Rejoice in the fact that Jesus died for our sins. If you come ready to worship Jesus with the offering of your life, I believe Jesus will do good works in you. Amen.