

You Mean Christmas Isn't Over?
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Matthew 2:1-12
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Were any of your Christmas experiences like that? I think there are some of us who didn't think that the 5 extra pounds was all that funny! I did have experiences like that this Christmas...I did assemble a bike! And I saw this video before I put the bike together, so I was praying that all the parts were there!

Now I hope that you had some experiences of Christmas this year that were not connected to the hustle and bustle. But think about it, what experience of Christmas tends to linger with you longer? Is the peace you felt at a Christmas Eve service, the satisfaction of giving to the needy? Or is it the frustration of long lines and crowded shopping spaces, or the hustle of getting ready for company or getting ready to go on a long road trip with 3 kids and dog?

I can tell you that for me, when I get on this side of Christmas, I've had enough. I'm ready to pack it away until next year! For those of us who orient our careers around the church, Christmas Eve is a finish line! We walk out of these doors at 12:30 to 1:00 in the morning after 4 services and a couple thousand people and weeks of preparation and it feels to me like Christmas is done. Don't get me wrong. I'm not a scrooge. I enjoy the season well enough. I'm attentive to my soul and staying connected to God throughout the season, but when it's done, I'm glad it's over. How about you?

This year, for some reason more than any other year I can remember, I'm bothered about my post-Christmas attitude. I think maybe God is telling me that I'm carrying the wrong experience away from Christmas; that there's something wrong about the feeling of relief I have now that Christmas is in the rear view mirror. I received this message as I was reading the story of the Magi who came to see Jesus from Matthew chapter 2. Just so you know, I really didn't want to preach on this topic, so I searched quite diligently for something else to preach about today. But I felt compelled to come back to this story and eventually gave in to what I think was God saying that maybe I wasn't the only one who needed to reframe my understanding and experience of Christmas. So let's take a look at this story as it comes to us in scripture:

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi ^[a] 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." ^[b]

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

9 After 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. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On 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. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2:1-12 TNIV

So today we're going to look at the story of the Magi, or sometimes we call them Wise Men, who came from the East to visit Jesus. Even though we like to include the Magi in the scene at Jesus' birth in our nativity sets and our Christmas plays, they probably weren't there. They were late-comers to the party. They actually extend the Christmas season. The time of arrival of the Magi is widely debated, and some scholars argue that it may well have been a year or more before the magi arrived. In the ancient church, Christians began a tradition of recognizing their arrival on January 6th – 12 days after Christmas and also known in the church calendar as Epiphany, which means "manifestation" or "to be made known". The song, "12 Days of Christmas" is intended to help mark the time between Jesus' birth and his making himself known, or his epiphany, to the first recorded gentiles to believe in him, the Magi. So one of the roles that the wise men play for us today is a reminder that Christmas day is not a finish line to the Christmas season, it is the starting line. Our spiritual ancestors waited in expectation through advent, then celebrated for 12 days. So yeah, spiritually speaking, that means Christmas isn't over yet!

I tend to believe that all of us have some spiritual issues with Christmas. What I mean is this; we celebrate the original, spiritual experience of Christmas (God with us – God becoming flesh) and we celebrate the cultural experience of Christmas (shopping, gift exchanges, feasts, gatherings, parties, Santa, and Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer). I enjoy participating in both, and while I don't think that there's anything morally wrong with that, I do think it causes us some spiritual confusion.

For example, when a friend or co-worker asks you "How was your Christmas?" what is your answer? Do you say, "It was awesome? I spent extra time getting in touch with God and felt filled with joy and peace both in worship and in life. It really is amazing that God would go to such extremes to save me." That's probably NOT what you say...it's not what I say. I talk about traveling and visits with family and friends and the cool stuff I got and how excited the kids were when they opened up "Guitar Hero".

This is the confusion I experience, and I think the story of the Magi and the way that the early church used this story will help us. And the first thing that they teach us is that Christmas isn't over yet. Oh yeah, culturally, it's done. Oh the trappings and music linger on, but practically, it's over. But spiritually, this is a great time for us to focus on the amazing gift of Christ Jesus coming to be with us. It's a great opportunity for us to bring some clarity and some depth to our experience of joy and peace at Christmas.

Now I'd like to take a few minutes and refresh our memory about the Magi. Who were they and where did they come from, and stuff like that. The Magi were to the Persians a little like the priests were to Israel in that part of their role was to lead religious rituals. Unlike the priests of Israel, whose role was confined to religious functions, the Magi had a broader role in their society. They were teachers and instructors to kings and royalty; they were holy men skilled in philosophy, medicine, and natural sciences like astrology. Maybe the best contemporary description is that they were sages. They were revered and they had a high place of authority and power in their society.

Matthew doesn't really tell us how many of them there were. The tradition of 3 of them began in less than 100 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, probably because of the three gifts mentioned in the Bible. One early church authority described the Magi as "almost kings", in an attempt to inform Christians of their place in Persian society, but in time that reference launched a tradition of calling them kings, a label we still use today. The three names commonly associate with the Magi (Gaspar, Melchior, Balthasar) can be traced back to writings from the 6th Century, but we obviously have no proof of their identity.

They would have traveled from Persia, which is in the lower Tigris-Euphrates valley, a journey of somewhere around 1000 miles. There is a wide variance on the estimated time that it would take to travel that far by camel in those days, ranging from 3 months to up to a year.

Who they are is way more important than how far they traveled. Matthew wrote his gospel to Christians who were first Jews who became followers of Jesus. He wants his readers to note that it was outsiders – gentile priests of a different belief system – that recognized God’s sign and followed it to discover what God was doing. Contrast this to the Jews in Jerusalem, all of 8 miles away from Bethlehem, who seemed to know nothing of this star until the Magi came through searching for clues. Even after they get clued in, the priests and religious leaders do nothing in response. Herod, who is also an outsider to the Jews, is the only one in Jerusalem who responds to this news and in his paranoia makes plans to eliminate this potential threat to his throne.

The message here is pretty straight up. Jesus comes for all people, even the outsiders. More than that, the outsiders matter to God. And even more than that, sometimes the outsiders see what God is doing better than the insiders. This is both a caution to the church for Matthew and also a picture of a reality that they saw in the world, as more gentiles were coming to Christ than Jews. And this is important for us who are insiders in the church to remember. It will help us to keep our focus on leading people, all people – especially those who are not in a church – to an active faith in Jesus. It’s part of the mission from the very beginning.

Now when we look at the story of the Magi and especially when we turn our attention to the response of the Magi when they encountered the Christ child, I think we can grab some clues about the ways we can continue to experience God’s presence as we continue celebrating the Christmas season.

They sought God

We’ve already mentioned this a bit, right. The Magi were searching the heavens for signs, and when they found one, they pursued it. They made a risky journey to see what God was revealing. They listened to God’s voice when they were warned to return home without seeing Herod. They had a desire or hunger to know God, so they sought God out. So the question comes to us, “how are you seeking God?”. What are you doing in response to the hunger in you to better know God? How are you at responding to God’s signs and leadings in your life? What new, risky, journey of faith have you stepped into lately? Is there anything about your life that can be beyond attending worship that can be viewed as part of your pursuit of God? One of the things we are constantly reminding people to do here at Saint Paul’s is to get active with their faith. Part of that is to be intentional about growing in your faith...about pursuing God and knowing God. One of our new WNL courses is about this pursuit...it’s called Head, Heart, and Hands. It’s about growing in knowledge of scripture, deepening our faith through the spiritual disciplines and experiencing God through servanthood. So join a WNL group, call Nancy Hampton, our director of connections and find a place to serve. Step out into the community and volunteer at Watered Gardens or Crosslines. If you’re already doing these things, then ask God to show you the next step. There’s always a next step.

Just as it was for the Magi, pursuing God is a journey to encounter the Christ.

They were “overwhelmed with joy”.

How much joy is in your life? I’m not talking about the feeling of happiness or joy based on circumstances which can be temporary or fleeting. I’m talking about the joy that comes from the presence of God in your life. You can experience this joy even when all you have left in life to cling to is your relationship with God. This is the Joy that God brings to us. It’s inside out Joy, not outside in. It comes to us through our connection to Jesus – nothing else can bring us this kind of joy that shines out even in the middle of our troubles.

The early Christians were known by their joy. Their joy was magnetic and contagious. It drew new people to Jesus because no matter what the Christians were going through, other people saw their joy.

One of the Core Values of our church is that we believe our faith is to be lived out with a consuming joy! If we truly are connected to God and we are living out his mission with our life, our joy will shine for others to see and they will be drawn to God through it. Let me invite you to take a look at your day to day existence. Who sees or doesn’t see the joy in you? There are certainly days that my family may see my frustration way more than they see my joy. Is that true for you?

We can do something about that. It’s not about pretending...fake joy has no power. It’s about adjusting our attitudes. Out of our gratitude for God’s gift to us in Jesus, and out of the Joy of

forgiveness and mercy we receive through him, we get over ourselves a little bit and start displaying gratitude and joy and mercy to others. Try it! Allow yourself to be consumed, to be overwhelmed with joy this Christmas and beyond.

They “knelt down and worshipped”

These were people of significant means and power. And as they approached the infant Christ, they did two things. First, they placed themselves under his authority. They recognized him as a King. Then, they worshipped him. They recognized him as Lord, as God made flesh.

Do you see how these two things go together? Just speaking about me, (you can see yourself here if it's appropriate), I think it's much easier to recognize Jesus as Lord than it is to honor him as my King. I think it's much easier to worship him than to submit myself completely under his authority. But these two things are inseparable. You cannot totally submit to Jesus' authority without also worshipping him. And worshipping him without giving Jesus authority can be shallow.

In the Newcomer's class, we teach that one of the expectations for membership at Saint Paul's is that they will make worship a holy habit. What we mean by that is that worship is not an option on their calendar for that week. It is part of their commit to Jesus and to his body (the church) to be present in worship.

See, we believe that consistent and intentional worship helps us place our lives under Jesus' authority. We believe that being in worship together helps us to live more worshipful lives. Worship shapes our lives to reflect God's mercy and hope and love to others. And bit by bit we are allowing Jesus to be not just our Lord, but also our King.

They “opened their treasures”

The Bible mentions three specific gifts; gold, frankincense and myrrh. These gifts have practical and symbolic significance. Gold is the gift for a king. So that tells us that the Magi were prepared to meet a king. Gold is also the gift that symbolizes endurance or permanence. As the poet who penned the hymn, “We Three Kings” put it, “gold I bring to crown him again. King forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign.”

Frankincense is a perfume that royalty might use, and was also an incense used in worship to symbolize praises and prayers rising up to heaven. We are getting a foreshadowing of Jesus who is our high priest, our intercessor with God, the one through whom we have access to God, through whom our prayers are heard, through whom our praise reaches heaven's court.

Myrrh, like frankincense has multiple uses. It is used as an anointing oil, which is fitting for a king. But it is also an embalming oil. Christians over the centuries have seen in this gift the foreshadowing of suffering and death that this king of kings would endure on behalf of God's people. Whether or not the Magi were privy to the bitterness that would come to this innocent baby we'll never know. But it sure seems as if they could see the dark cloud of Calvary on the distant horizon.

So these are the gifts of the Magi, but I'm really struck by the phrase, “opened their treasures”. That seems a little different, a little more significant than bringing gifts. If I came to visit you, I might bring a gift. But to open my treasures to you is to lay everything I have before you, and put it at your disposal. It means that I trust you with anything and everything that I consider valuable.

So I want to ask you to take a quick inventory of your treasures, both tangible and intangible. What is it that you treasure? What would it mean to open that treasure and lay it before Jesus? Can you trust him? What do you think he would do with that treasure?

Christmas is far from over! There is plenty for us to celebrate! God has come in human form to save us from our sins. And the Magi who journeyed to be in the presence of God Made Flesh can show us how to truly celebrate the presence of Jesus in our lives! Christmas isn't over yet! And for today, that is the good news!