

Grace Presbyterian Church, Orleans
“We have come to worship Him”
Matthew 2: 1 - 12
Pastor Jonathan

January 5, 2020
Epiphany & Communion

What do you like most about worship? A different way of asking this is what would you say you like most about your worship experience here at Grace?

Coming to worship is the theme of Epiphany. It is the biblical core of the history found in Matthew, chapter 2. Why did these men from the East make the long journey, some say of thousands of miles? To worship the King of the Jews, the fulfillment of the two thousand year old promise to Abraham and the thousand year old promise to David. And now we are here three thousand years later than David and two thousand years later than Jesus' earthly ministry. Marvel a bit at those numbers as they are the key moments in the history of the world, not regularly taught any more in Western schools.

What the Magi had already known about the king of Jews, we don't know. But we do know they were expending significant time and effort and money to get to meet this new king. We know they wanted to worship Him. And that is big. In spite of it being so big, we contain the story in a nativity-sized box. So let's break the box, and see what's really inside.

How much effort are you willing to put into worship? Coming to church and not taking your Sunday morning to yourself takes effort. I know. Just getting the kids here or grandchildren takes effort. Or just getting yourself here. I know that too. I know the devil and his forces provide opposition within families to come to worship. There is resistance from children to parents. There is conflict between parents. There is often different levels of looking forward to worship in different family members. Isn't that true?

You know the story of the man in bed on Sunday morning, and his wife begins to talk to him about going to church. Stay with me now, even if you know this story. He says, “Honey, I'm not sure I want to go to church anymore. People can be mean. And sometimes issues come up and I don't like dealing with the conflict. And besides I'm not sure people even like me.” And the wife says, “But dear, it's not that bad. I think you should be going to church.” And the husband says, “Yeah, give me one good reason.”

And the wife says, “Well, the first reason is that you are the pastor of the church...”

We laugh at this story, but we also know at a deep level that there are many spiritual battles we fight to just show up at our place of worship, here at Grace. You probably could tell a few stories. Couldn't you? How difficult it can be to go to church. I'm not even talking about the sports events that are now regularly in competition with coming on a Sunday morning, and what parents go through in that regard. There is consistently a great struggle to make it to any particular church for worship, at any hour...that struggle is throughout the ages and in many ways, for we were made for worship, and the opposition knows it. Worship is essential to who we are. Human beings were made in God's image and we are incomplete when we are not in right relationship with God. So please count the cost to worship regularly, wherever you are in your travels in the world. Seek Jesus out. Worship Him regularly, consistently, daily, and come together with his people at least on Sundays, and preferably at least one more time during the week in a small group. And if there is no small group that fits your schedule, let's make sure you get one. Make that your resolution for 2020, as a start to your spiritual commitment here.

I'm talking about just making it here. Now put yourself on that camel in that caravan two thousand years ago, starting out on a few months long trip to find a king in a country largely unknown to you. Astronomy or astrology led these wise ones to Jesus. They were alert in looking into the heavens, the skies and saw the star. Now whether that was a conjunction of planets in 6 BC or an actual star or a comet or some other celestial occurrence, we really don't know. What we do know is there was something and Someone leading these Easterners to find Jesus.

They likely came from the Parthian or Arsacid empire east of Syria (247 BC to 224 AD), as that was the largest land in the east at the time, with its core cities geographically aligned to modern Iran. You have heard of that country lately. Zoroastrianism was the major religion of that empire and the Magos or Magi would be a part of the ruling class, likely the only ones educated and able to afford the gifts they brought. Imagine being a part of that caravan. Mostly imagine how much commitment in time, resources and energy for such a trip, from Iran to Israel on a camel.

Matthew is the only Gospel writer who records this trip and this occurrence. He was interested in the political impact that Herod's involvement would necessarily involve. The Magi perhaps assumed that Herod would seek, like they did, the new king. They appear to not have had any concern about stopping and asking him directly about the prophecies of the Messiah and the exact town in which the king was to be born, according to Old Testament Scripture.

But we know Herod, later called Herod the Great, to distinguish him from his family members, and successors, was not so great. He was not liked by the Jewish population, made "King of Judea" by the Roman Senate, certainly not liked by the Pharisees and Sadducees, clearly not a king of Israel or Judea, in the biblical sense of being an ancestor of David. So Herod wasn't pleased to hear that a caravan came from a long distance to look for the new king of the Jews, through astronomical calculations, by way of the stars. He was threatened. I was trying to act that out on Christmas Eve, but I'm sure it didn't come through, as acting is not high on my CV. But back to Herod, who decided to play along with the Magi. He answered their questions about where specifically the new king was prophesied to be born. He answered their questions by getting his own scholars and researchers to remember from Scripture, specifically Micah 5, that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.

And similarly, the Magi shared with him at what time the stars had shown him to be born. (2:7) Essentially, they shared information about the Messiah. Herod fooled the Magi by asking them to report back to him, once the baby king had been found, so that he too could "worship him." But everyone reading the story at this point knows there could be nothing further from the truth than Herod wanting to worship the newborn King. His intent was murderous from the beginning. He would kill the newborn King as quickly as possible. In fact, we learn later in the story (v. 16) that he would have all the male infants in the city killed, under two years of age. Imagine being a Roman soldier on that mission. Horrific.

So Herod dismisses the Magi. They go on their way. The star apparently leads them directly to the house where Mary and Joseph and Jesus are now living. Note that it is a house and not the stable. The nativity is an artistic placing together of parts of the birth stories in Scripture and does not accurately represent in a chronological fashion the biblical account. But it helps us remember. So it was at their new home that the Magi open their

gifts. And no, we don't know how many Magi there were. Yes, there were three gifts. Yes, those gifts represent royalty, priesthood and prophesying Jesus' death for our salvation. Jesus is our King, Priest and Prophet. He represents the highest expression of these three offices.

These gifts allow the Holy Family to travel safely to Egypt and live there, while Herod goes on his killing rampage.

The magi also pay attention to their dreams, as Joseph did. They receive an instruction to not inform Herod and to go back to their homeland by a different route. Herod doesn't take kindly to this "being outwitted by the Magi," as the New International Version translates it. His murderous intention is then carried out to the full.

But as we reflect again on this narrative and incredibly significant piece of history, we are asked to reflect on the fact that Jesus the Messiah, was not just the King of the Jews, but God incarnate coming to save humanity. The Gospel was now coming to all nations. This is clearly the message of Epiphany, that all nations and people groups are welcome to worship Jesus, the King of the Jews, as their Saviour and Lord.

All of us, far from that place in Bethlehem, are welcome to come and worship. Consider the cost. Even now when the worship we offer is still legal and not as costly as it is in countries where such worship of Jesus is illegal and punishable with jail and death, consider the cost. We are called to worship together the One who we know gave His life for us. We come to His table today to recommit ourselves to Him, the worship of Him, to His mission in our lives. This table represents the place where we meet Him together. Here He speaks the words, "All you who are weary and heavy laden, come to Me, and I will give rest for your souls...Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart...My yoke is easy. My burden is light." (Matthew 11:28-29)

Here we recommit ourselves to follow the One who gave all that He could for us. Perhaps you are not sure, if you should commune today. Perhaps there is something you need to do, or someone you need to forgive before coming to this Table. You can pass the elements on, if you need to. The Lord knows. And if you are not committed to Jesus as your Master and as the Saviour from your sins, then just pass the elements on. But if you know Him, love Him, want more of Him in your life, then please take and eat; take

and drink. In this life, it is only a snack, hardly even a taste. But it is a symbol, a present reality of Jesus in your life, receiving Him, wanting His way more than anything.

Take the time to consider anew today all that Jesus has done for you, through his birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection. We come to Him with His whole life story before us, and our whole life story before Him.

We come to Him, as the Magi did millennia ago. We offer Him our hearts, our time, our minds, our reason for living. We choose to listen to Him in the Holy Scriptures. We choose His ways as our ways.

Listen for what He says to you today.

Let us pray.