2022 Christmas – V

**THE WORSHIP OF THE MAGI**

Matthew 2:1-12

Key Verse: 2:11

“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.”

Merry Christmas! Every year we celebrate Christmas on December 25th. The Birth of Christ is the good news of great joy for everyone. But did you know that December 25th is not the actual birthday of Jesus?

Even though there are many speculations about it, no one knows the exact day of Jesus’ birth. It does not mean that the birth of Jesus didn’t happen. By the way, we don’t know the precise day of Julius Caesar’s birthday either. But historians claim it to be the 12th or 13th of July. There is no doubt that Julius Caesar was a historical figure. The birth of Jesus is not only a historical fact and but also the fulfillment of God’s promise.

By the way, did you know that the phrase “**Merry Christmas”** does not mean “Happy Christ’s Birth!”? The term “Merry Christmas” is coined from the phrase “*Christ’s Mass,”* which means “Christ’s death.” So when we say, “Merry Christmas,” its literal meaning is, “Happy Christ’s death!” Wow! It’s ironic to celebrate the birth of Christ by saying, “Merry Christmas!” But think a little further. Would it have been possible to have true joy without Christ’s ultimate sacrifice for our sins? No. Jesus would not have died unless he was born. And unless he died for our sins, no grace of forgiveness of sins and salvation would be available for us. So, let’s celebrate Christmas even more. **“Merry Christmas!”** “*Feliz Navidad!”* *“Frohe Weihnachten”* (German) *“Joyeux Noel”* (French)

Today’s text contains the story of the Magi who came to worship the one who had been born king of the Jews. In the story, we find the word “worship” repeated at least three times (2, 8, 11). While the worship of the Magi is highlighted, we also see the different responses toward the king’s birth from King Herod, the Jewish religious leaders, and the public. This morning let’s see the differences between true and false worship. Most of all, let us learn how to be true worshippers of God.

Look at verse 1. “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem.” The phrase “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea” indicates it was sometime after the birth of Jesus. According to the description of verse 16, it was at least two years after the birth of Jesus. So, when the Magi came to Jerusalem to look for the child, he was no longer an infant but a child. It seems that after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph had intended to live in Bethlehem, perhaps permanently.

At that time, Herod the Great was the king of Judah. Even though he was only a half-Jew (Edomite) and not a descendant of King David, he was appointed to be the king of Judah by Rome through his political manipulation.

Who were the Magi from the east? We are not sure exactly who they were and where they came from. They were also called “wise men.” Probably they were from Persia, modern-day Iran, which for centuries had been a center for studying the stars. In history, tens of thousands of Jews had been exiled and settled in Persia (former Babylon) for many long years, nearly a hundred years. We are familiar with Daniel, who had been in command of the wise men’s council in Babylon even though he was one of the exiles (Dan. 2:48). He was highly respected as the chief of staff in Babylon. I am sure these Magi were familiar with the Jewish culture and religion, including the notion of the promised Messiah according to the Jewish Scriptures. We are unsure whether they were politicians, religious leaders, scholars, or scientists. But it wouldn’t be too stretch to say they were seekers of God or inquirers of the ultimate truth. Otherwise, they wouldn't have traveled a long distance, nearly 900 miles away, which indicates that it would have taken a few months to arrive in Jerusalem (Pic#1).

By the way, why did they come to Jerusalem? Look at verse 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.’” In those days, the Jerusalem temple, rebuilt by King Herod, was known to be a masterpiece. So many pilgrims from surrounding countries came to see the magnificent temple buildings. (Pic#2 & 3). But the Magi came to Jerusalem not to see the great temple building. They came searching for the one who had been born king of the Jews and to worship him.

When they called “the King of the Jews,” it didn’t mean a political king but the promised Messiah, a spiritual king. Otherwise, they wouldn’t ask such a question to King Herod. It seems that these Magi had been waiting and longing for the coming of the Messiah. Considering that they were astrologers, we can assume they were looking for a sign in the sky indicating the king's birth. One night, while they were gazing at the night sky, they saw an unusually bright star rose, which they believed to be the sign of the birth of the king of the Jews (Pic#4). They were very excited about it. Yet, they weren’t satisfied just to find the sign. They wanted to see the Messiah with their eyes and worship him, which required long-distance travel and big sacrifice. But they dared to challenge themselves. They were noble and courageous seekers of God!

But not everyone in the world is like them. In the following verses, we see how King Herod, the citizens in Jerusalem, and the Jewish religious leaders responded to the birth of the Messiah. Look at verse 3. “When King Herod heard this, he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.” When the Magi arrived at Jerusalem, they perhaps expected the Jews in Jerusalem would be celebrating the birth of their long-waited Messiah. Yet, they found that nobody even knew about it. Instead of rejoicing at the news of the possible advent of the Messiah, everyone in Jerusalem was disturbed, including King Herod.

Why were they disturbed by the birth of their long-expected Messiah? First, King Herod was bothered because he considered the birth of the Messiah a threat to his throne. How come? Well, Herod was not a Jew but an Edomite. He knew he was not a rightful heir to King David’s throne. After all, the Jews didn’t like him at all. So, when he heard about the possible birth of the Jewish Messiah, he felt threatened and overreacted to it. But he didn’t have to be threatened at all. If he had carefully investigated what was going on with an open mind, he could have found great salvation in the birth of the Messiah. Yet, he closed his mind in fear. Later, he killed many innocent boys to get rid of the Messiah (2:16-18). At the bottom of all his crazy behaviors were fear and a sense of insecurity.

The rest of Jerusalem’s citizens were not so different from him. They also became troubled because they realized that the news of the possible birth of the Messiah might lead King Herod to take further cruel actions against them. They were also deeply troubled because of fear and a sense of insecurity.

Fear is not a small thing we should ignore or underestimate. Even as believers in Christ, we often become fearful. But we should not give in to fear or insecurity in any circumstance. The first step to overcoming fear is identifying it because it loses its power once we recognize it. The next step to overcoming fear is to let Christ dwell in us, believing that he would protect and provide for us in all circumstances.

However, what did Herod do in fear? Look at verses 4-6. “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. ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, ‘for this is what the prophet has written; “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.”’” Herod assembled Israel’s leaders to investigate the Magi’s announcement further. The chief priests were mainly Sadducees, and most of the teachers of the law were Pharisees. They knew exactly where the Messiah was to be born.

In chapter 1, Matthew proved the identity and the legitimacy of Jesus as the Messiah through his family line as a descendant of David and his Virgin birth. Now, Matthew brings another proof of his Messiahship through his birthplace. According to Micah’s prophecy, the Messiah was supposed to be born in Bethlehem, in Judea. If Jesus were not born in Bethlehem, we could still put a question mark on his identity and legitimacy as the Messiah. In today’s passage, we see that Matthew carefully identified Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah, differentiating from Bethlehem in Zebulun (Jos. 19:15) (Map #1)

And the second part of the prophecy of Micah, “for out of you a ruler who will shepherd his people Israel,” indicates the characteristic of his kingship. The newborn king is the shepherd king who would care for his people. Even though he is the king, he will not force, threaten or manipulate people, but he will gladly and gently lead, protect, and carry them close to his heart. The newborn king would become a gentle shepherd for all people, including Herod, Jewish religious leaders, Jerusalem citizens, and beyond, including each of us. Therefore, we don’t need to fear him. But we need to let him come into our hearts, making his presence a reality, just as Jesus said in Revelation 3:20, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” Jesus, the newborn king, is the gentle shepherd for all human souls.

After getting information about the birthplace of the Messiah, what did Herod do? Look at verses 7 and 8. “Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He 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.’” Even though King Herod pretended to welcome the newborn king and promised to worship him, the Magi were wise enough to sense the evil in his eyes.

Look at verses 9-10. “After they heard the king, they went on their way, and the star had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.” Bethlehem was located 5 miles south of Jerusalem, which could have taken them just a couple of hours to get there. Yet how could they find the place where the newborn king was in the middle of the night? Yet, God blessed them by intervening in their search through the star, leading them to where Jesus was. This star was the first GPS in history (Pic#4). When they saw the star, they were extremely happy.

We need joy more than anything, living in a troubled world. Recently, I had a chance to talk with a widow who lost her husband in 2013 due to kidney failure. Then she was hit by a car and had hip replacement surgery in 2018. Then while taking care of her three children, she lost her job. To make matters worse, her twin sons died of covid-19 one after another during the pandemic. While talking about her tragedies, she could not stop crying. Listing to her stories, I said to myself, *“God, come on, seriously."* Her life seemed to have nothing to be joyful about. All I could do was validate her sorrowful feelings.
Yet, at the end of the conversation, she began to talk about what happened to her father when she was young in India. Her father died and was buried after the funeral conducted by a priest. Then they heard kicking from inside the coffin. People got scared, including the priest. When they opened the coffin, they found her father was alive. He told everyone that he was told that it was too early for him to die, so he had to come back. While she was talking about this, she made such a big smile. Her face beamed with joy and hope momentarily. At the end of our conversation, she told me that she didn’t even have a chance to grieve for her dead husband and two sons. However, when she left, she looked much more relieved than when she came. We need joy more than anything, living in a troubled world. The source of our happiness is Jesus Christ our Lord. Nehemiah 8:10 states, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” The Magi were often surprised by joy as they journeyed to the newborn king.

Look at verses 11 and 12. “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. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.” The child Jesus, probably almost two years old, was liked like an ordinary child. But these wise men acknowledged the child as the Messiah, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. In their deep gratitude and respect, they bowed down and worshiped him.

The gifts they offered to him were very precious and expensive ones. Most scholars see these gifts as representing who Jesus is: gold is the gift for the king, frankincense for a priest, and myrrh for the one who dies. They offered these gifts as a token of their love, gratitude, and recognition for who he was. After worshipping him and giving their gifts to him, they returned home without asking to bless them with material wealth, good health, or even safety. They just went back home, I am sure, with great joy and thanksgiving. It shows that the Magi were true worshippers of God.

Hearing the birth of the Messiah, Herod was disturbed because he was an ego-centric person who rejected God and worshiped only himself. The Jewish religious leaders knew where the Messiah was to be born, yet they did not try searching for the Messiah even though they lived very close to where Jesus was. Even though both Herod and Jewish religious leaders pretended to worship God, they were not true worshippers of God.

What is the true worship that God is pleased with? We often think worshipping God is about singing heartfelt praise while raising our hands. We can be comforted and uplifted through those things. However, those things are not the heart of our worship. The difference between true and false worship is the presence of sacrifice. Apostle Paul helps us to understand what true worship means. He said in Romans 12:1 and 2, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God- this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” True worship is offering ourselves as living sacrifices, resources, time, money, talents, or whatever we have to serve the Lord and those in need, especially the poor, hungry, oppressed, and marginalized. That’s the act of worship God is pleased with.

We are ready to give them our best if we genuinely love someone. We will be more than delighted to do so because that’s the primary characteristic of love.

What do we take from today’s story? Like the Magi, we must make our journey to find Jesus, meet him personally, and make him a living reality in our lives. We should worship not just with lips. We should worship the Lord, sacrifice our time and, often, our comfort, and put aside our personal convenience to find Jesus. The difference between true and false worship is the presence of sacrifice. Last, we must submit to the Lordship of Christ Jesus. We will never regret when we make true worship our life goal and purpose. The reward is God himself and the joy of heaven. That’s the secret of the kingdom of heaven on earth. May we be true worshippers of God, like the Magi.