

Sermon – December 22, 2019
The Cast of Christmas – Magi: Adoration and Worship
Crown of Life Lutheran Church, Rigby, ID
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Today we are going to follow the Magi, the wise men, as they seek Jesus in order to worship and honor him.

When I mention these three names *Mona Lisa*, *The Scream*, and *Impression, Sunrise*, what comes to mind? If you thought, “They’re all famous paintings,” you would be correct.

They actually have a couple of other things in common. First, they are all considered treasures of art. And second thing they have in common is that they were all stolen at some point.

Mona Lisa was painted by Leonardo da Vinci in the sixteenth century. In 1911, a museum worker walked out the Louvre with the *Mona Lisa* under a smock. Two years later, the thief was caught trying to sell the painting.

The Scream by Edvard Munch was painted in the early 1900s. In 2004, *The Scream* was ripped off a museum wall by armed robbers. Fortunately, it was recovered and restored.

Impression, Sunrise was painted by Claude Monet in the late 1800s. In 1985, armed robbers stormed the Marmottan Museum in Paris and took the painting. It was recovered by French police five years later.

As we are closing in on Christmas, I wanted to remind you of what an amazing and precious treasure the first Christmas brought to us. As our planning, preparation, and commitments reach a fevered pitch in these last few days before the holiday, I don’t want the real treasure of Christmas to be stolen out from under you.

The point of Christmas, after all, is that God came to dwell with us so that we could dwell with Him forever. As John reminds us in the first chapter of his Gospel, the “Word was God . . . [and] the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (verses 1, 14).

When you think of the enormity of God, the complexity of His creation, and the majesty of His glory, this effort for our salvation is beyond comprehension. Why would God go to such lengths to restore us to Himself? The answer, of course, is found in His nature.

It's found in the one word God uses to describe Himself in 1 John 4:8: "God is *love*."

So, with Christmas nearly upon us, I wanted to help us preserve and protect the real treasure and meaning of the holiday by looking at the account of the Magi. In the short account in Matthew 2 centered on the Magi's worship of Jesus, we see three very different responses to this wonderful event.

King Herod, the teachers of the law, and the Magi all take a different approach to the birth of Jesus.

It seems the meaning and the power of the event are lost on Herod and the teachers of the law ... the Pharisees. But the Magi's approach of worship was a great response to what God did that night.

When we consider that night was the culmination of hundreds and even thousands of years of prophecy...

when we consider that God went to these great lengths for each of you

when we remember that Jesus did indeed save us from our sins, what else can we do?

If we follow the Magi's example, we will find that the power, wonder, and meaning of the holiday will not be wasted on us or stolen from us.

Enter the Wise Men

Most of you have heard the account of the Magi - or the wise men - many times, but I wonder if the image in your mind lines up with the Bible.

Before we begin looking at these different responses, let's think back to our first lesson this morning, which described the visit of the Magi.

Despite what many of us sing every year, you'll notice that the Magi weren't kings, and that the Bible does not even say how many of them there were.

A Bible Commentary explains that "the term Magi loosely covered a wide variety of men interested in dreams, astrology magic, books thought to contain mysterious references to the future, and the like."

So instead of kings, more likely they were scholars and astrologers who had some working knowledge of and belief in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Perhaps they were connected with Hebrews who lived in the east. The tradition that there were three of them probably comes from the fact that there were three gifts given to Jesus, but it's possible that each gift came from a number of Magi.

We don't know where they came from—except that it was to the east. And we don't know what the star was. Some suggest it could have been a sign in the heavens, a comet, or a supernova. Others believe it was a purely supernatural event - like the pillar of fire or cloud that led the Israelites through the desert during the Exodus.

The most amazing thing about the Magi is that in this short account in Matthew, these foreigners with questionable religious practices, who were gazing at the stars, were the only ones who responded appropriately to Jesus's birth.

It serves as a stark reminder for those of us who are in the church, AND consider ourselves to be followers of Jesus. Are we, like the Magi, focusing on our worship, adoration, and gifts for the King? Or, are we so familiar with the story that our wonder has been lost?

While we might expect those outside the church to miss the real meaning of Christmas, will we make certain our hearts stay focused on what this holiday really means?

A little later we'll dive a bit deeper into the Magi's response. But before we do, let's consider another response we see in Matthew 2:4–5. After encountering the Magi, Herod called the chief priests and the teachers of the law together and asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

They answered his question by quoting the prophet Micah, who pointed to Bethlehem about seven hundred years before Jesus was born there.

But **HERE** is the really interesting thing ... we **NEVER** hear from any of them again about this matter.

Don't you find this incredible? The Pharisees and the Chief Priests have just heard that the Messiah **HAS BEEN** born, so they look at the Scriptures to answer the question "Where would He have been born?"

In response to this news about the birth of the Messiah, the people who have dedicated their lives to God and the Scriptures, the people who made their living from teaching about God's law and His prophecies about the Messiah ... these people ... who should care the most ... **DO NOTHING.**

They don't investigate; they don't search Him out. They just say, "He's probably over that way somewhere."

How could they ignore the possibility that the Messiah has arrived? But they do ... they take no action. When news comes that the Messiah has arrived, they give Herod the biblical answer: "Head on over to Bethlehem."

From what I can gather about the Pharisees, I think they were excited about the IDEA of a Messiah, but they really did not believe He would ever exist ... they did not believe God's prophecies from hundreds of years ago would ever be fulfilled.

So, it seems like they didn't really care about the prospect of the Messiah being born. They were more interested in what they knew about the Messiah than about the opportunity they had to worship the Messiah in person.

Just from our talk today, you probably know more about the Magi than most people, but don't let your familiarity with the events of Christmas steal away the wonder of it all.

Don't make the mistake the Pharisees made when they put KNOWING ABOUT God ... ABOVE KNOWING God.

Jesus didn't say, "I know my sheep, and my sheep know ABOUT me." He said, "I know my sheep and my sheep KNOW me" (John 10:14).

So, let's move on to the rest of King Herod's response when he heard that the Magi had come to worship the One who had been born King of the Jews.

We know Herod was paranoid and power hungry, since history tells us that he killed his own two sons because he felt threatened by them. True to form, Herod pretended that he wanted to worship Jesus, but we see later that his real intent was to kill the Messiah.

Herod's response to Christmas is an extreme example of self-preservation and fighting for the status quo - the exact opposite of the worship of the Magi.

Think about this ... whenever we demand that things go OUR way in the holiday ABOVE what God might be doing, or what others need, we make a similar mistake to the one King Herod made on that first Christmas.

Many followers of Jesus during the Christmas season serve others in special ways. There's no specific command to do this, and please don't feel guilty if this is not part of your plan.

But I do want to encourage you to allow God to interrupt your plans, if He so desires. Part of worship is allowing God to have His way ... even when it collides with our preferences or expectations.

Herod was so concerned with keeping control that he totally missed the greatest blessing in history ... Jesus' birth.

So now, let's consider the example of the Magi.

When they saw the child with his mother, they simply bowed down and worshipped him. Then, they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

We know nothing else about the Magi. But what we do know is that their response to the Christ-child is the only one that makes sense.

If you want to maintain the wonder of Christmas, I suggest that you also start with worship. There is nothing that centers our hearts and minds on what really matters like worship.

We don't worship God because He NEEDS it ... we worship God because WE need it. Giving Him the praise He's due always reminds us of who He really is.

Our worship fuels and feeds our gratitude. When we worship, we experience a deeper connection with God and fall deeper in love with Him.

We can plainly see that the teachers of the law and the Pharisees should have known better. They knew about God, but they didn't seek to know Him personally.

The Magi show us the way to make the most of Christmas ... through worship. There are hundreds of passages in the Bible that have the word worship in them.

The common theme that runs through the majority of them is the idea of (1) giving preference to God, (2) laying what we have before Him, and (3) laying who we are before Him.

Of course, there are a number of ways to do this directly from the Bible ... by bowing, lying facedown, lifting hands, clapping, serving, making sacrifices, trembling, singing, thanking, giving, kneeling, shouting, confessing, exalting, and dancing. Those are all ways to worship God as found in Scripture.

For example, the Magi worshipped through their gifts and offerings.

The shepherds worshipped through proclaiming the good news.

The angels worshipped through song.

And Mary worshipped by pondering all the amazing events in her heart.

If we do anything this Christmas, let's remember what God has done ... and give God His due. He is WORTHY of worship. But just like the Magi, you can choose whatever form of worship best fits the occasion.

The Magi had precious metal and spices - they gave God what they had. What do you have to give to Jesus this Christmas?

The beauty of worship is that it can be done in so many ways: through song, through prayer, through gathering and fellowship, through celebration ... even through service.

If you have kids whose eyes fill up with delight on Christmas morning, I hope you SEE THAT as an opportunity to thank God, and quietly worship Him for giving you family.

As you share meals, I hope you begin in GRATITUDE for His provision.

If you face disappointment or heartache, I hope you find a way to identify with the ultimate reason for Christmas ... the cross of Jesus and His peace.

As you raise a toast or come to church, I pray that your head bows to the Mighty Creator and your heart lifts in joy because of all that He's done for us.

The Magi worshipped the King. It was not because they were supposed to or because He required it, but because their hearts demanded it of them ... in other words, they WANTED to.

They encountered the Word who became flesh, God with us, and they were never the same again. So, as Christmas nears, let's seek God and give Him the worship and praise He rightly deserves. May He MEET you in your gift, and may you FIND Him like all wise men do. Amen