

HANDLE WITH WORSHIP

Christmas in the Wise Men's Hands

Text: Matthew 2:9-12

Handling Christmas

Over these past several weeks we have been looking together at how the original characters in the story of Christ's birth handled the events of Christmas. My premise has been that in the circumstances of the Christmas story we find echoes of the very same challenges and choices that still define our lives today. Nowhere is that clearer than in this final story we're going to study together this morning. We find it in Matthew chapter 2. Let's read together the first 12 verses.

The Mystery of the Magi

The question I want to pose this morning is: What can we learn from how the Wise Men handled Christmas – and how can that better equip us to handle life in this New Year ahead? It has to be said at the start that there is a great deal we do NOT know about these figures at all. For example, we don't know precisely WHERE they came from, save from someplace to "**the East**" of Jerusalem. Some speculate that they hailed from Persia (modern-day Iran) where the ancient Zoroastrian religion still held a following in the first century. The Zoroastrians believed in one great Creator God who sought to overcome evil with good. They believed that God had spoken through the wisdom literature of many traditions and that God's purposes could be discerned from a reading of the stars. The travelers we meet in Matthew 2 are obviously well-acquainted with the prophecies of the Jewish scriptures concerning a messianic king to come. They have looked to the stars for help in finding Him. So did they come from Persia? Did any come from Ethiopia or China as some other traditions hold? We can't say for sure.

We also don't know WHO the wise men were, though if you've heard the Christmas carol, you might have grown up believing they were "oriental [eastern] kings." That idea is drawn from the prophecy of Isaiah about the Messiah: "**Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn**" (Isa 60:3). If the wise men were those kings, however, Matthew missed it entirely. He simply tells us that they were "**magi**" -- a word commonly used to describe a class of scholars whose field of study embraced everything from history and science to astrology and magic. It seems very possible that these were Zoroastrian scholars, but we don't know for certain.

We also don't know HOW MANY magi there were. Christmas carols and cards alike typically picture *three* wise men – concurrent with the three famous gifts. A tradition dating back to the 8th century even gives the gift-givers names – Caspar, Melchior, and

Balthazar. Even older traditions, however, pegged their number at more like twelve. We know that there were certainly enough of them that the arrival of their caravan in Jerusalem generated quite a public stir. Does that mean three, five, a dozen or more? Only God knows.

But not everything about these magi is a mystery. What we DON'T know about them pales in significance to what we actually DO. As I studied the Scriptures this week, four particular attributes of these Magi suddenly became very luminous to me. I'd like to unpack each of these in turn with you and then draw out the implications of these insights for your life and mine.

The Manner of the Magi

FIRST of all, we can say with absolute certainty that the Magi were actively searching for the truth. If you think about it, most of us discover truth in one of two ways. Sometimes truth finds us. For example, our family was just sitting there among the frozen chosen in Soldier Field this past Monday night, when the truth suddenly found us: The Chicago Bears CAN play football! They can play offense and defense and perform in the clutch! We frankly didn't go to the game expecting that discovery, but the truth found us. That's the way it worked for most of the people in the Christmas story. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, Herod – they all got found by God's truth. It just dropped in on them when they were otherwise occupied.

But not so with the Magi. These people were actively searching for truth. They had been scouring the scriptures. They had been studying the stars. They had left other pursuits behind to go off on a very expensive and exhausting journey because they wanted desperately to know the truth. They might have held some crazy beliefs. They might not practice spirituality the way that you and I do. But you have to admire the commitment these people showed to discovering more of God. And there is a profound irony in this part of the story.

You see, the Jewish people "had" the truth in their hands. They had the most reliable scriptures and prophecies. They had the most decisive revelation of God and the most dramatic experience of God of any people on earth thus far. But when the **"people's chief priests and teachers of the law"** received the news that the ultimate **"King of the Jews"** had been born **"in Bethlehem in Judea"** – not five miles down the road from Jerusalem – what did they do? They just sat there. They obviously figured that they knew enough of God or had enough of God that they didn't need to do anything more. Only the pagan Magi possessed the passionate zeal for truth to **"go and make a careful search for the child."** Yes, sometimes the truth finds you right where you're sitting. It's wonderful when that happens. Sometimes, however, you have to get up and go out in search of it or you'll miss out on the more that God wants to show you of Himself. How ironic is it that it was the pagans and not the pious people who got this?

But there's a SECOND characteristic of the Magi worth noting too. It's right here in the story at the point that the Wise Men get to Bethlehem. The Bible says that **"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him."** As I said earlier, there's no evidence to suggest that these men were actual kings, but their response reminds me of what the wisest royals have always kept clear in their minds. Dean Frederic Farrar was a personal friend of Queen Victoria of England. On one occasion he told of a conversation he had with Her Majesty after she had heard one of her chaplains preach on Christ's coming. Victoria said, "Oh, Dean Farrar, how I wish that the Lord would come during my lifetime!" When he asked why, the Queen's face brightened, and with profound emotion she answered, "Because I would love to lay my crown at His blessed feet in reverent adoration!"

Do you know how you spot greatness in people? They get very excited when they find themselves in the presence of Someone greater. They are not threatened or insecure or blasé in the presence of greatness. They are energized and enthralled by it. They consider it pure JOY to behold the One who is greater and to place themselves at the Great One's disposal. At the absolute height of his power and fame, John the Baptist beheld Jesus going by and the very sight of Him filled John with more joy than he knew how to contain. Don't worship me," he said to his followers. Worship Him!" **"He must become greater and I must become less"** (John 3:30). And so, when these brilliant scholars arrived at the house and saw the child, what is their response? They lay down whatever earthly credentials they had and, with absolute joy, they bowed down and worshiped him. They laid their crowns at his blessed feet in reverent adoration.

And then they did a THIRD thing worth noting. The Bible says: **"They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh."** Much has been made of the prophetic significance of these three particular gifts. Some say that GOLD (the royal substance) was given because the Magi were greeting the King of Kings. FRANKINCENSE (the priestly substance burned in Temple prayers) was given because they were meeting the One who would become humanity's ultimate High Priest. And MYRRH (the burial substance used in preserving the dead), was given as a sign that this King and Priest would offer his life as the Supreme Sacrifice for the preservation of the life of all mankind. All these things were true of the Christ Child. Was that what motivated this particular choice of gifts? Only God knows. But this we can say for sure: These three items were precious to their owners and costly to give. They were a way of saying: "You deserve the best we have." In other words, they gave gifts worthy of Jesus.

Time is short, so let me summarize what we've learned thus far and then move us toward a close. There are four attributes, four manners of the Magi, that are worth our attention. First, they went in active search of the truth. Secondly, they joyfully bowed

their lives before the Greatest One. Thirdly, they gave Jesus gifts worthy of who He was. And, FINALLY, they let their journey be redirected by their encounter with Christ. Remember, to be a Magi meant that you were a scholar in the court of some King. These people understood royal protocols. They knew that the orders of kings were to be respected. They had strict orders from the King of Judea to report back to Jerusalem. But when you've met the King of Kings, you become an ambassador of a higher Kingdom than the one from which you may have previously taken instructions. And so the Magi exercised their diplomatic privilege and responsibility here. The Scriptures say that **"having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."** They chose to ignore Herod and travel by the way of God instead.

Worship Is the Way of the Wise

As I said earlier, there is much mystery about these Magi. We don't know where they came from, who they were, how many or what their names were. On one level, we also don't know what became of them after this story. But, on another level, maybe we do. They became us – or perhaps – it is we who are called to become them in our time. You see, if you have truly been to Bethlehem this Christmas, then the Way of the Magi will be your way this year. Their manner of living will be your manner. What would that look like in practice?

First of all, resolve that you will actively SEARCH for the Truth in this year ahead. Don't be content with what you already know or think you know. Don't just sit in your Jerusalem or armchair and wait for truth to find you. Bear down Chicago. Read your Bible daily. Set aside more time to pray. Attend a church weekly. Go to the *Start Here* class we'll be offering next Sunday. Come back for the series my colleague Greg Ogden will start next week on *Growing Intentionally* in Christlikeness. In other words, get up and go on the journey of active discipleship and you'll be blessed by the "more of God" that He allows you to discover.

Secondly, resolve that this will be the year that you BOW your life before the Great God to an extent you may not have done before. Stop behaving as if it is God's job to arrange life for your pleasure – if you have been doing that -- and start arranging your life for His pleasure. Lay down the crown of pride or entitlement in your home, workplace, or civic life and become more of a servant there. Give God glory and praise for the blessings you have and reverent adoration for who He is.

Thirdly, resolve to GIVE God gifts that are truly worthy of Him. It's too easy to get accustomed to giving God the leftovers in our life – our leftover time, money, or energies. But if He is truly God – and He is -- then giving him our best gifts and firstfruits isn't charity; it's rationality. It's the wise and good way to be living.

And finally, resolve to REDIRECT your journey by God's orders and not some lesser authority. Herod is going to issue you all kinds of instructions this year. He's going to say: "Look after number one. Get even. Climb over others. Go faster. Spend more. Become like *those* people." But God is going to give you instructions from a different Kingdom. He is going to say things like: "Look after the weak. Forgive people. Encourage others. Slow down. Spend wisely. Become like Jesus." It will sometimes seem very difficult to follow that route instead of the one Herod is demanding, but the only way to get Home to the life worth living is by choosing this other way.

Let me say in closing that there is single word that describes the way that we've been talking about. There is one word for the lifestyle of seeking truth, bowing before God, giving our best, and following God's directions. That word is "WORSHIP." It is what we've been practicing this morning. And it is the great game, the divine journey, that by God's grace we are called to be about every day and everywhere we go in this wonderful year ahead. Fellow Magi, what a privilege it will be to travel that way with you.

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Handling Christmas (Part 7)

Questions for Reflection & Discussion

1. What ideas expressed in the quotation below particularly intrigue or stir you?

"Worship is the submission of my nature to God's being; the quickening of my conscience by his holiness; the nourishment of my mind with his truth; the purifying of my imagination by his beauty; the opening of my heart to his love; the surrender of my will to his purpose; and all of this, gathered up in adoration." (William Temple)

2. How will you more actively search for the Truth in this year ahead?

- a. Read the Bible more regularly
- b. Set aside time for prayer more consistently
- c. Practice some other kind of "training for the spirit" (spiritual disciplines)
- d. Join a scripture-centric Bible study, class, or small group
- e. Attend the *Start Here* class
- f. Listen carefully to the January sermon series on *Growing Intentionally*
- g. Other...

3. In what ways can you bow your life more fully before the Greatest One?

- a. Stop asking God to arrange life for me and start arranging more of my life for his purposes
- b. Be more of a servant in my home, school, workplace, or community
- c. Give God more heartfelt praise
- d. Other...

4. What would it look like for you to give Jesus gifts that are truly worthy of him?

- a. Establish a Quiet Time first thing in the day
- b. Take a further step toward really tithing or moving beyond it
- c. Truly worship (vs. merely attend a worship service)
- d. Start giving the first-fruits of my blessing (vs. the left-overs)
- e. Other...

5. What orders has God given that you need to redirect your route to follow?