

Intro (of service): There are many aspects of the Christmas holiday that make it special. Family, family traditions, carols, gift-giving, and so much more. But certainly, the meaning of Christmas is Christ. On this day, we celebrate the birth of the God-man, our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have designed this special Christmas, worship service to exalt Christ. Many of the Christmas carols we sing have a noteworthy background. Before we sing today, we'll take time to reflect on the history of the particular carols. Our aim is to appreciate more fully the significance this day has held for God's people throughout the past.

Then we will come to the Word of God for a special look at Christmas through the eyes of the magi. At this time, we are grateful to have the extended Baldwin family minister to us in music.

Intro (of message): When I was in Israel more than a decade ago, I went to a shop outside the old city of Jerusalem called "Bagdadi's." I had searched all over Israel for an olive-wood nativity set, but it was at Bagdadi's that I discovered just the right one (see the display). In a typical Christmas nativity scene, there are several figures--Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, the shepherds, some animals, a stable, and three characters we commonly refer to as "kings" or "wisemen."

Actually, most nativity scenes are based more on tradition than the Bible. For instance, take the three kings. The Bible doesn't say they were kings, but magi. The Bible doesn't say there were three of them, only that there were three gifts (gold, frankincense, and myrrh). And the Bible doesn't say they were even there the night of the Savior's birth. In fact, they weren't at the stable at all.

You say, "Now I'm really confused! Who were these 'magi,' and what part did they have, according to the Bible in the Christmas event?" We'll find out from the Word of God.

This morning, we want to take a look at a very familiar story from a not so familiar slant. We're going to consider the Christmas story through the eyes of the magi. The magi honored the Christ-child with two things, as recorded in Matthew 2:1-12. They can help us to understand the true meaning of Christmas.

Fill in the blank: Christmas is _ _ _ _ _ .

Proposition: In Matthew 2:1-12, by their example, the magi teach us that we can honor Christ in two ways.

- I. The magi honored Christ with their Presence (1-10).
 - A. They encountered obstacles (1-2).
 1. Distance
 2. Danger
 3. Directions
 - B. They encountered an opponent (3-8).
 - C. They encountered an opening (9-10).

II. The magi honored Christ with their Presents (11-12).

A. What did they do?

1. They saw.
2. They worshipped.
3. They gave.

B. What did they give?

Implications: What must we do?

1. We must honor Christ with our presence.
2. We must honor Christ with our presents.

I. The magi honored Christ with their Presence (1-10).

V 1 "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod, the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem." You'll notice no mention of shepherds in Matthew's birth account. They're in Luke's. But you'll find no mention of the wise men in Luke. They are here in Matthew's account.

Who were the "wise men"? The Greek word is "magoi," hence, they are called the magi. According to a tradition that goes back as far as Tertullian in the 3rd century A.D., the magi were Oriental kings. By the end of the sixth century, the wise men were named: Melkon, Balthasar, and Gasper (see Carson, 85). But that's tradition. The Bible merely calls them "magi."

Although there is speculation, most feel the "magi" were men who studied the stars (the English word "magician" comes from this Greek word). They were specialists in astrology. By the way, by placing them in the biblical record, God is not endorsing their practice of astrology (which is condemned elsewhere). He's not saying we should look to the stars for guidance--no, we have the more certain Word.

The fact that they were astrologers points to the grace of God. These men were Gentiles. They were pagan outsiders. Yet God, in His kindness, privileged them to behold His Son. We serve a God who takes people from where they ARE to where they SHOULD BE.

The magi honored Christ with their presence. It wasn't easy. Ponder the episode, and you'll see they encountered three things.

A. They encountered obstacles (1-2).

What kind of obstacles? At least three...

1. *Distance*

The text says they came "from the east" (1), possibly from Babylon, or from Persia, or from the Arabian desert. Distance was an obstacle. The magi didn't catch the next flight out of Bagdad, and fly to Tel Aviv! They traveled hundreds of miles. Their trip took many weeks, if not months. They left family and friends. Their trip cost them financially--there was the loss of income during this caravan trip, not to mention the travel expenses.

Why did they come? Here's what they said when they arrived in Jerusalem (2), "Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him."

2. *Danger*

Notice carefully they saw the star "in the east." That's not a reference to where the star was (in the "east"), or they would have traveled "west" to follow it. It's a reference to where they were when they saw it, and began their trip. It was a dangerous, long trip.

It was dangerous for another reason. These men were orientals. They were Gentile men who traveled to Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jewish people. I don't need to remind you that there was a great barrier between the Jews and Gentiles in the 1st century in Israel. An ethnic, social, even religious barrier.

3. Directions

Let me remind you that the magi took off on a trip, NOT knowing their destination, NOT knowing for sure where they were going. Apparently, they were familiar with the Old Testament, for they recognized this child to be the "King of the Jews." Numbers 24:17 says, "A star will come out of Jacob."

How do the magi fit into the time-frame of our Lord's birth? Were the magi at the stable the night of Jesus' birth? Did they meet the shepherds? No. How do we know? First, v 11 says they came to the "house," not the stable. Second, Herod calls Jesus a "young child" (8), not a baby (Luke uses a different Greek word, "brephos" which means newborn infant). Third, when Herod tried to kill Jesus, he ordered the murder of all male children under the age of two years (16).

Apparently, there is a time lapse between Mt 1:25 and Mt 2:1. The magi saw the star (the night of Jesus' birth). They made journey preparations, and traveled for many weeks, if not months. Then they came to Jerusalem, and spent time with Herod (long enough for him to call his counselors together). Then the star reappeared, and they traveled another 5 miles to Bethlehem. By this time, Mary, Joseph, and the young child were living in a house in Jerusalem (sorry about the nativity scenes!).

To honor Christ with their presence, the magi overcame several obstacles.

B. They encountered an opponent (3-8).

The star led the magi to Israel. They believed something big had happened, that a King had been born. But where they did not know for sure. So they went to Jerusalem and started asking. Word reached Herod. How did Herod respond?

Notice that Herod connected this "king" with the "Messiah." In v 4 he demanded his religious counselors tell him where the "Christ" (the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "Messiah") would be born. There was a great messianic expectation by the Jewish people in Herod's day. In fact, throughout their history many false Messiahs have come and gone. In the past 1900 years, over two dozen individuals have claimed to be the Messiah of the House of Israel (men like Simon ben Kozeba, called Bar Kochba, in 132 A.D.; David Alroy in 1147 A.D.; Abraham Abulafia in 1284; article, "Who Is The True Messiah?", Israel My Glory, Apr/May 90).

V 3 says Herod was "troubled" (3). The word means "to stir up." Why was Herod so troubled? He had good reason. Herod was not the rightful king of the Jews. He was half Jew and half Idumean.

There were actually six Herods, and this one is Herod the Great. Herod the Great was a descendant of Esau, not Jacob. He cooperated with the Romans, and in 47 B.C. he was appointed governor of Israel. In 40 B.C., he received the title "king," and

he reigned as "king" until his death in 4 B.C. (see Barclay, 28-9). After his death, Israel was divided up between his sons who were known as "Tetrarchs" and "Ethnarchs." But Herod the Great alone was called "king."

In some respects, Herod the Great was indeed "great." He was a great builder. He is the one who built the massive, ornate temple in Jerusalem. At times, he was generous. In the famine of 25 B.C., he actually melted down his own gold plate to buy corn for the starving people.

But don't get the idea Herod was a liked man. He was not. He had one chief flaw in his life. He was insanely suspicious. He was paranoid, and the older he became, the worse his paranoia grew. He trusted noone. He was a hated tyrant. He also, apparently, had some diseases that added to his mistrust (hardening of the arteries, sexual diseases). Any threat to his power could turn him into a madman.

He suspected anyone as a potential threat. He murdered his wife Mariamne and her mother Alexandra. He assassinated his oldest son, Antipater, and two other sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. Augustus, the Roman Emperor has said that it was safer to be Herod's pig than Herod's son (Barclay, 29).

Just how corrupt Herod was is seen in what he did at the end of his life. When he knew he was going to die, he went to the lovely city of Jericho. He gave orders that the most distinguished citizens of Jerusalem be arrested on trumped up charges. Then he gave the order that when he died, they should be killed. He said that he knew that noone would mourn at his death, but was determined that some tears be shed when he died (Barclay, 29). Such was the man known as Herod the Great.

Standing between the magi and their desire to be in the presence of the newborn King was the opponent Herod.

You know the story. In vv 3-8, Herod called in the priests and scribes (4), discovered where the Messiah was to be born (5-6), met privately with the magi (7, see his paranoi?), and then pretended to be interested in worshiping the child (8). But it was all a sham.

Herod had no such intent. When he said to the magi (8), "Go and search for the young child...that I may come and worship him also," it was an idle promise. Like we make when we bargain with God, "Oh God, if you help me, I'll..."

By the way, nowhere in this text does Matthew call Jesus "king." He doesn't want anyone to misconstrue Jesus by comparing Him to Herod! Just the opposite. Micah 5:2, the passage Matthew highlights (6), refers to Him as "Prince," a "Governor," one who will "rule" His people (the word means "to act as a shepherd"). Jesus is not a king who beats His people into submission, like Herod did, but a Shepherd who helps His people. He is One who will give His life for His sheep.

We can learn something from Herod. Frederick Bruner made this observation (51), "Herod is what I am deep down inside." He's what we are, too. Herod teaches us that one of the first reactions we have to Jesus is rebellion. Why? Because if Jesus is King, we are not. If Jesus is Lord, we are not.

Herod had a chance to respond to Christ. He could have personally gone to Bethlehem to see the new king. But he didn't. He rejected the Christ-king. He chose to try to eliminate Him. What have you done with Christ?

Notice what happened when the magi left Herod.

C. They encountered an opening (9-10).

It was a star. V 9 "When they had heard the king, they departed; and lo the star..." What kind of "star" did the magi see? The explanations are plentiful. About 11 B.C. Halley's comet shot across the sky. About 7 B.C., there was a brilliant conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter. In the years 5 to 2 B.C., there was an unusual astronomical phenomenon in which Sirius, the dog star rose at sunrise (Barclay, 26). Those are interesting facts, but Matthew's text indicates that this star was unusual, even miraculous.

The text says (9) the star went before them and led them to the King-child. One commentator (B.K.C.) pointed out the fact that stars naturally travel East to West across the heavens, not north to south. When the magi left Jerusalem, they traveled south, following the star 5 miles to Bethlehem. Could it be that the "star" that led them was the "shekinah" glory of God, the same as led the Israelites for forty years in the Sinai desert?

What kind of impact did the reappearing star have on the magi? V 10 says, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy." By the way, God could have used the "first" star to guide the magi directly to Jesus in Bethlehem. He could have by-passed Jerusalem altogether. But God had a plan in mind. He wanted the magi to meet Herod. He wanted Herod to know "THE King" had arrived.

How do we honor Christ at Christmas? As did the magi, with our presence.

I find it intriguing to see how the different people in this story responded to Jesus. Herod thought of himself, and tried to eliminate the king. The scribes and priests played intellectual games with the king. They knew where the Son of God was, only 5 miles away, yet they didn't go to see Him. They pointed others to Him, but would not worship Him themselves (Wiersbe, 14-15). But the magi honored Christ with their presence. They came to Him. Have you?

It doesn't stop there.

II. The magi honored Christ with their Presents (11-12).

A. What did they do?

Notice three activities in v 11, "And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary, his mother, and fell down, and worshiped Him.

1. *They saw.*
2. *They worshipped.*
3. *They gave.*

Jon Murray, the president of "American Atheists" said this about Jesus (Life, Dec 94), "There was no such person in the history of the world as Jesus Christ. There was no historical, living, breathing, sentient human being by that name. Ever. [The Bible] is a fictional, nonhistoric narrative. The myth is good for business."

Some people, like Murray, mock and ignore Jesus. Not the magi. They saw Him, worshiped Him, and gave to Him. How do you worship a "baby"? You realize that this is more than a baby!

B. What did they give?

V 11 "And when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh." Some have suggested that these gifts may be symbolic, the gold representing Christ's deity, the incense pointing to the fragrance of His perfect life, and the myrrh looking ahead to His sacrifice and death (B.K.C.).

That may be. But this we know for sure. The gifts the magi gave were costly, not cheap. They were gifts worthy of a king. By the way, it's quite possible that God provided these gifts as the means by which Joseph would take his family to Egypt and live during the time of Herod's plot.

The magi gave Jesus the best from their lives. What have you given Him?

You say, "What does He want from me? He already owns it all!" True, yet He tells us what He wants from us. First, He wants our love, our first love (Rev 2:4). Second, He wants our abiding fellowship. "Abide in Me, and I in you (Jn 15:4)." Third, He wants our obedience. "If you keep my commandments, you shall abide in My love (Jn 15:10)."

Remember the story of Huck Finn? Huck missed the point. One day Widow Douglass tried to teach him from the Old Testament, and here's what he said, "After supper she got out her book and learned me about Moses and the Bulrushers, and I was in a sweat to find out all about him; but by and by she let it out that Moses had been dead a considerable long time; so then I didn't care no more about him, because I don't take no stock in dead people." (from Bruner, The Christbook, 51)

Perhaps you're wondering, "What can we learn from some men who lived and died 20 centuries ago?" We can let them teach us. We can learn how to respond to the Christ of Christmas.

Implications: What must we do?

Two weeks ago (12/19/94) in U.S. News & World Report, there was an interesting story entitled, "The Christmas Covenant." The article compares people's attitude towards Jesus' first coming with His second coming. Listen to these staggering statistics. 61% of Americans believe that Jesus Christ will return to earth. Nearly 60% of Americans think the world will end sometime in the future.

But if we really believe Jesus is coming again, what must we do? The same thing the magi did at His first coming.

1. We must honor Christ with our presence.

We must worship Him. We must open our lives to Him. We must serve Him as King. We must surrender our allegiance to Him. We must make it our #1 priority to be close to Him.

2. We must honor Christ with our presents.

We must lay our all before Him, our treasures, our talents, our time.

Are you honoring Christ with the presence and presents of your life? I call you to follow the exhortation of John Francis Wade, to whom these familiar words are ascribed, "O come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem! Come and behold Him, born the King of angels! O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord!"