

## Who Will You Seek This Year?

Happy New Year! Today is the first day of 2017, and for many people it is an opportunity for resolutions, for do-overs, and for fresh starts. We like the New Year because it feels like a natural new beginning, especially if we didn't accomplish what we had hoped to accomplish or if we weren't the people we wanted to be the previous year. It is also the Sunday before Epiphany, which is the twelfth day of the Christmas season and the day that we remember Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist and His visit by the wise men, or Magi.

This morning, we are going to combine the reality of the new year ahead with the celebration of the visit by the wise men by considering what it would mean for us to seek Jesus the Messiah in the year 2017, just like the Magi did some 2,000 years ago.

**Transition: Let us then try to answer this question: What did the Magi have to do in order to seek and worship the Messiah? If we look closely at this, then maybe we can discover what we might need to do in order to seek and worship Jesus in this same way. As I read through the story this week, I came across six particular things that the Magi did when preparing to worship Jesus and as they worshipped him.**

**1) Looked: They looked for signs of God working around them. (vv. 1-2);**

"In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.""

We really don't get much information in this passage about the background and context of the Magi. Magi, during the time of Jesus, were from the priestly class of Medes out of Persia and were known for studying the stars, philosophy, and skills in medicine. In history, we have stories of Magi seeking out other "Messiah" such as the Roman emperor Augustus. What we know is that they were a group of men who had dedicated a part of their lives to studying and charting the stars. They didn't have the luxury of satellites, the Hubble telescope, or the internet to track star and weather patterns. Because the path of stars and planets is something that is constant and unchanging, these men noticed when this new star appeared, and they discerned that this sign was placed there by God to mark the birth of the savior. Now, we don't have in the Biblical records an extensive list of people who visited baby Jesus. In fact, the only people who knew about this miracle were his parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah, and the shepherds. And the only reason they had this knowledge was because it was revealed to them by angels. The Magi are unique in this then; it was their attentiveness to the signs that let them know about the Messiah's birth.

**Transition:** Not only did they pay attention to the sign, but when they finally saw it, they trusted that it was from God, and they were willing to act on that trust.

**2) Trusted: They trusted the sign God was placing in their lives. (vv.1-2, 9);**

<sup>9</sup>“When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.”

There is a huge difference between knowing something important and acting on that thing, and that difference lies simply in trust. You have to have enough trust in that thing in order to act upon it. I think that I’ve said this before, but I’ll say it again, I’m not a very big fan of “trust fall” exercises from platforms. I know that as long as I keep my body stiff, if I fall backwards then those below will be able to catch me in their arms. I know that this is true because I’ve seen other people do it. But I don’t trust that it is true for myself, which is why I won’t do a trust fall.

The Magi, on the other hand, knew that the star they saw was a sign from God, and they trusted in this sign enough to travel to find the Messiah it was leading them to. Trust brought them from knowledge to action, and because of that trust, they were blessed to be able to worship the newborn Messiah.

### **3) Sacrificed: The Magi sought Jesus at great personal cost. (v.1,11)**

As was said earlier, the Magi were most likely Medes from Persia who traveled to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem in order to worship the Messiah as shown to them by the appearance of this star. The journey from Persia to Jerusalem alone was about 1,000 miles. If they were riding camels, they could’ve gone, at a maximum, 100 miles per day, which means it would’ve taken them, without resting at least 10 days to get to Jerusalem. However, it is more likely that they traveled in a larger group, which means their rate of travel would have slowed down significantly. In any case, they went an exceptionally long distance, by any standards, in order to see the sign God was giving them. Along with cost of time, there would have also been a great financial cost to get to Bethlehem. They would need money for supplies, transportation, let alone the expensive gifts, which we will talk about in a moment. The Magi incurred significant cost in order to follow the sign they trusted came from God.

### **4) Subverted: They Subverted those who were against Jesus. (vv. 7-8, 12)**

<sup>7</sup>Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup>Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” <sup>12</sup>And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Herod the Great was half Jewish and because of his part in the various Palestinian civil wars was appointed governor and eventually king of Palestine by the Roman government over 40 years before the birth of Jesus. He managed to bring peace to the region and even helped to expand and remodel the temple in Jerusalem. From a purely political standpoint, Herod was not a bad leader. But he had a reputation of jealousy when it came to the throne and was known to murder even his family members in order to keep the power.

The Magi surely knew of Herod’s reputation and when called by Herod to give an account of why they were traveling to the region, probably had a good idea that the news of a “new king” did not make Herod happy. They were under official order of the ruler of the region to return and reveal where the

Messiah was born. But because of what was told to them in a dream, they went home a different way and defied direct orders from the king. I would imagine that there was some personal risk to disobeying the king, even though they were from a different country. And yet they knew that their call from God was more important than what Herod wanted from them.

#### **5) Gave Generously: The magi brought their best gifts. (v. 11)**

<sup>11</sup> On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

These valuable items were standard gifts to honor a king or deity in the ancient world: gold as a precious metal, frankincense as perfume or incense, and myrrh as anointing oil. Biblical Archaeology Magazine online notes that a certain king offered these very same gifts to the God Apollo in 243 BCE, so it was an established tradition to already give these gifts to important persons.

But why, exactly, were these gifts so valuable? The understood value of gold hasn't changed much since Jesus' time. Some people have said that gold was probably the least costly of all of the gifts.

Frankincense was an especially important fragrant resin that came from trees in Northern Africa. Egyptians used hundreds of pounds of it for funerals of their kings. Greeks used it to honor their heroes and Romans used it on soldiers for skin diseases. It was also burned by Israelites to worship God.

Myrrh was even more costly and rare than frankincense. It was used by some as a cure for baldness, was used in India as a cure for obesity, and was used in China as a cure for diaper rash.

Because the resin from both frankincense and myrrh were used by so many ancient cultures, some scholars say the two resins were probably at their height of value around the time of Jesus' birth. Many estimate that at that time, translated into modern money, frankincense would have cost \$500 per pound. Myrrh would have cost \$4,000 per pound. The Magi spared no expense, both in significance and in monetary value, with what they brought as gifts for Jesus.

#### **6) Worshiped Joyfully; (v. 10)**

<sup>10</sup> When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. (NRSV)

#### **Matthew 2:9-10 (The Message)**

<sup>9-10</sup> Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time!

After all of their work in studying the stars, to finally seeing a sign from God, to their preparation for travel, to the long thousand mile road to Jerusalem and even farther to Bethlehem, to their run in with jealous authorities, the Magi were now finally at the feet of the Messiah. And these men, who were probably very wealthy and well respected in their own country, bowed and worshiped at the feet of a poor baby born to a poor family in a small town in a foreign county. In some ways, the end to this story

reminds me of how I feel whenever Erin and I go on vacation to the Outer Banks. It takes us somewhere between 12-13 hours of driving until we finally cross over to the small strip of land next to the ocean in North Carolina, and by that point I'm tired of sitting, tired of focusing on the road, tired of changing radio stations, and tired of being in the car. By that point in the trip, it hardly ever seems worthwhile to go there on vacation, until we see the ocean. And then, when I see the ocean, the joy of that sight makes all of the heartache of getting there worthwhile. I imagine the joy that the Magi experienced at the sight of Jesus was a million times greater than how I feel going to the Outer Banks. And they humbled their own prestige in order to worship one who, in physical appearance was meek and lowly, but in reality was the king of the universe.

**Transition:** Now that we've considered what it took for the Magi to seek and worship the Messiah, let us ask the same questions of ourselves: What will it take for us to seek and worship the Messiah this year?

1) Are we looking for signs of God at work in our lives? Are we on the lookout for ways that God is at work in the everyday minutia of life? Remember that the Magi were the only ones who understood the significance of this star, even though it was available for anyone to see. What important thing might God be trying to tell you this year through even a small sign that nobody else may notice?

2) Do we trust that God is at work enough to take action? It's not enough to just see God at work, but we also have to respond to what He is calling us to do. This part might even be more difficult than the first because it requires us to take action on faith that God is at work, even if it's not clear to everyone else.

3) Are we willing to sacrifice in order to follow after Jesus? What might we be asked to give up in order to follow Jesus? New resolutions aren't promised to be easy, and if we want to truly follow after the Messiah then we might be asked to sacrifice something significant.

4) Are we willing to subvert and persons, authorities, or things that stand in the way of us following after Jesus? We don't live in the same religiously restricted environment that the Magi were working in during Jesus day, and we are blessed to be able to practice our faith without fear of real physical persecution. But there are still many things that stand in the way of following after Jesus the way God is calling us to. For us it might be a person, or a work policy, or a cultural reality like our busyness and overcommitted natures.

**Matthew 6:33 (NIV)** <sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

5) Do we bring our best gifts to Jesus?

Most of us are not wealthy, like the Magi. And the point of their story isn't necessarily to highlight the extravagant nature of their gifts. Rather, it is to highlight the Kingly nature of Jesus, and to remind us to give out of our abundance. For these seekers, they were clearly wealthy enough to give gifts fitting an earthly king. But then we see the story of Jesus and the widow in Luke 21:1-4. "As Jesus looked up, he

saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. <sup>2</sup> He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> “Truly I tell you,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. <sup>4</sup> All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” It’s not about the amount of the gift you bring but the heart behind the gift.

6) Do we worship the Messiah with great joy?

How much time each week do we spend in awe and worship of Jesus? Do we find ways to worship Him every day, or only on Sundays? And when we do come to church, do we come joyfully expecting to meet Jesus and ready to give him our worship? Or do we come burdened by the stresses of the morning and the realities of the week ahead? What would it mean for you to worship Jesus with great joy this season?

### **How will you seek and worship the Messiah this coming year?**

The weeks and months following Christmas can often be a depressing time for many. We spend so much time preparing to celebrate the season by decorating, buying gifts, making food, and trying to cram in as much family time as possible that when it is all over, it can often feel like a letdown. What if this year, instead of just ending Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>, we worked at continuing to celebrate Jesus by challenging ourselves to seek and follow after Him like the Magi did all year long? When preparing for the message this week, I came across a poem called “In the Bleak Midwinter” which was written by Christina Rossetti in 1872 as a response to a newspaper call for Christmas poems. In the poem, the author reflects on what it meant for the original players in the nativity story to worship baby Jesus and what it means for her now, in the bleakness of winter, to worship the same Messiah. The picture she draws of worship in her poem really spoke to me in the way I oftentimes experience the post-Christmas blues. And the lines that she writes at the end of the poem speak to what we might be able to offer Jesus in worship this coming year. I’m going to close by reading the final stanza of the poem, and then as a response we are going to watch a video of the poem set to music and arranged by Jacob Collier. While watching this video, I want you to write down at least one resolution that you might make in order to seek and worship Jesus in 2017.

What can I give Him,  
Poor as I am?  
If I were a shepherd  
I would bring a lamb;  
If I were a wise man  
I would do my part;  
Yet what I can, I give Him -  
Give my heart.