WE HAVE COME TO WORSHIP HIM

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 worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”

This Christmas season, to think about what Jesus’ birth means to us today, we’ve been studying the first two chapters in Matthew’s Gospel. Through the genealogy in chapter 1 we found that there’s grace and hope even for sinners like us, if only we learn the faith of Abraham and David. In the second half of chapter 1 we found a special name of Jesus, “Immanuel,” God with us. This name of Jesus mainly means that God never gives up on us; Immanuel Jesus is still with us today. He wants to forgive all our sins and heal us spiritually. In today’s passage the author Matthew reveals even more about who Jesus is. For a few minutes let’s really think about who Jesus is. And let’s try to learn from the Magi how to truly worship him. May God help us come to know Jesus more personally this Christmas, worship him, and experience the joy the Magi had.

Verse 1a says, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea…” Through the genealogy Matthew has already proven Jesus was a direct descendant of David. Now he adds that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. Bethlehem was the hometown of David. The prophets had predicted the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (5–6). Actually, Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth in Galilee. But Luke’s Gospel tells us that right near Mary’s due date, they were forced to go to Bethlehem because of a census decreed by the Roman Emperor. Mysteriously God was working to fulfill his own will. The next bit of information Matthew gives us is in the phrase, “…during the time of King Herod…” This was the first Herod, Herod the Great. He actually was not Jewish; he was an Idumean. But his ambition was to become king of the Jews, so he traveled to Rome, begged Caesar, and got his way. Many Jews considered Herod an illegitimate king. So he was always trying to prove himself. He ruled from 37 B.C. to 4 B.C. and married several women. He was famous for his great building projects. He built his own grand palace residence south of Jerusalem, called Herodium. He built a place called “Cave of the Patriarchs,” as well as his crowning achievement, the Jerusalem Temple, to get the Jews to like him. But his achievements couldn’t solve the inferiority complex in his heart. He became more and more paranoid about his position. He had one of his wives killed, as well as three of his sons, some in-laws, and others of whom he became suspicious. So the phrase “during the time of King Herod” points to a dark time in Israel’s history. But often it’s in the darkest times and places that God chooses to do his greatest work. The last part of verse 1 says, “…Magi from the east came to Jerusalem...” Who were these men? First of all, the word “Magi” is plural. It doesn’t actually say there were three; they could’ve been an entourage with many servants. Later they were called “three,” probably because of the three gifts mentioned later. Next, it says they were “from the east.” It’s believed the Magi originated with a people called the Medes, with a famous mystic named Zoroaster. The Magi became part of the Persian Empire and later were influential in ancient Babylonia—basically modern-day Iraq/Iran. They were also called “wise men.” They studied astrology, astronomy, math, chemistry, and various ancient religious texts. People began calling them “magicians,” and they became royal court advisors to kings. They were rivals to Daniel in Babylon. It’s likely that during the 70 years of Jewish exile there the Magi were exposed to the Old Testament. They studied the Pentateuch and found a great hope: God had promised to send the Jews a King who would be for all people. Though they were Gentiles, the Magi accepted this hope as their own.

So they come to Jerusalem with a burning question. Let’s read verse 2. In Greek the emphasis is on the word “born.” It’s a contrast to Herod, who grasped his position through political manipulation. Jesus, on the other hand, was “born” king of the Jews. It says they “saw his star when it rose.” In the ancient world people believed the birth of a great leader was accompanied by the appearance of a special star. In this case, there was the prophecy of Numbers 24:17a: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel.” To the Magi this prophecy was foretelling the birth of the king of the Jews. As they observed the stars in the sky each night, they’d been looking for that star, and one day, it finally appeared! Probably some of them were skeptical. But finally they were all persuaded to make the long journey as a team. It meant traveling at least a thousand miles, spending many months, a lot of money and putting everything else in their lives on hold. They couldn’t be completely sure about it, but they were willing to take a chance on this star and go and see. Finally they said we “have come to worship him.” The word “worship” originally meant to kiss someone’s hand as an expression of honor; later it came to mean to fall prostrate before a superior. It’s surprising that these Magi publicly said they’d come to “worship” the king of the Jews. It reveals what they really thought of him—they considered him worthy of their worship, their full devotion. They were high-class, highly educated men, but they’d come to humble themselves before a newborn child and worship him as their own king.

What effect did they have? Look at verse 3. Unintentionally, the Magi were disturbing. How could these men from a far-off land know about the birth of the king of the Jews, when the Jews themselves didn’t? Their coming exposed the Jews’ shameful lack of interest. It particularly disturbed Herod, who thought he was king and that he could pick any of his sons to be his successor. It’s interesting that it says when Herod was disturbed all Jerusalem was disturbed with him. After living under his rule for over 30 years, the people came to know what kind of man he really was; when he was upset he was capable of doing anything with his power. Under Herod people were terrorized and traumatized.

What did Herod do? He realized the Magi were talking about not just any king but the Messiah, the special one God had promised and everybody had been waiting for, for so long. So Herod, who generally was not interested in the Bible, suddenly called for an official state Bible study. But he wasn’t like the Magi; he wasn’t interested in truth; he wanted to use the information he got from the Bible for his own selfish agenda. Look at verses 7–8. It was a lie; according to verses 13 and 16 what he was really doing was trying to kill the newborn child. Herod was arrogant enough to think he could stop God from accomplishing his will and sending the Messiah.

But what’s most important here is the answer Herod got from the chief priests and teachers of the law. Let’s read verses 4–6. Here we should note where Bethlehem was. It was about six miles south of Jerusalem, less than a two-hour walk. It’s sad that these religious experts had the perfectly correct answer but were not in the least interested in going to Bethlehem to see if what the Magi said was true. They had the prophecy of Micah, which the Magi clearly didn’t, but they weren’t motivated to do anything. In fact, they had all God’s revelation at their fingertips, and the Messiah born virtually in their backyard. But because they weren’t interested, it did them absolutely no good. It’s just like Christians today who have the whole Bible and all kinds of religious knowledge but who never really do anything with it, who never take any action. And it’s like some people whose only interest is to use what they learn from the Bible for their own purpose. In light of this, why do we go to church, why do we study the Bible?

In verse 6 we learn more about who Jesus is. Let’s read verse 6 again. This verse predicts that the Messiah would be a shepherd of God’s people. What a contrast! Herod was obsessed with his own vanity and power and viciously used and abused his people. But the Messiah, like a good shepherd, would sacrifice himself to care for his people. This concept of a shepherd started with David. David grew up as a shepherd boy. He risked his life to protect his father’s sheep. When he became a man, he applied those same lessons as a leader for his people. David embraced all those in Israel who were distressed or in debt or discontented and cared for them dearly. He embraced not just his own tribe but all the people of all the tribes of Israel. Because David was a real shepherd, people dearly loved him as their king. David was nothing but a flawed human being, just a shadow. But Jesus was born to be our true Shepherd.

How was Jesus our Shepherd? First of all, we see it during his earthly ministry in the way he treated people. He healed the sick, even late into the night. Out of his compassion he fed the hungry. He made friends with the lonely and the outcasts. He spent time with people nobody else wanted to bother with. He treated women and children with real respect. There was no one too messed up for Jesus. He truly cared for each person. Ultimately he proved he was our real shepherd when he became the Lamb of God for us on the cross (Jn10:11; 1:29). A prophet described him: “He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem. Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa53:3–6). No one else would do it, but Jesus the sinless Son of God willingly did it. He bore all our ugly, dirty sins in his own body on the cross (1Pe2:24). Because this Jesus is our Shepherd, he’s worthy of our worship, and we *want* to worship him as our King, we *want* to love and serve him with all our hearts and souls and strength.

Now let’s finish the story of the Magi. Look at verse 9. It’s amazing that only when they left Herod in Jerusalem did the star reappear. And not only did the star reappear—it led them to the house where Jesus was. It was nothing less than a miracle. How did they respond? Read verse 10. It literally says, “…they shouted with very great joy.” They were Magi, but they threw away their dignity and started dancing. They were so filled with joy because now they had the prophecy of Micah confirmed by the leading of the same star. It meant it all was true. Their great joy came not from money, food or pleasure, but from discovering the truth. The real joy of Christmas comes not just from spending time with family and friends, with traditions and relaxing; it comes from discovering the truth in Jesus and meeting him personally. Finally, what did the Magi do? Read verses 11–12. First of all, they did what they set out to do; though he was just a little child, they bowed down and worshiped him as their true King. Next, they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts. They gave him not cheap stuff as afterthoughts, but their costliest, most thoughtful gifts, fit for a king. Probably unbeknownst to them, their gifts predicted what Jesus would do—gold meant he was king; frankincense meant he was a priest; myrrh meant he would die. And after their worshiping and giving, protected by God, the Magi just went home. They didn’t *get* **anything**—they only **gave**. Matthew, the former tax collector, was especially moved. Their worship was very pure. Getting doesn’t make us joyful. Worshipping Jesus and giving him our best makes us truly joyful. Because he’s worthy of our hearts, when we worship him, we’re deeply satisfied.