

Magi: Adoration and Worship

It's easy to feel in difficult times that life is out of control. When we look at the world around us, things seem to be increasingly out of control – whether it's a financial crisis, global warming or health scare. Nothing seems to be able to fix the brokenness that we see in the world around us.

But this is not true of God as Creator of the universe, as the Lord of history, as the One who is Sovereign over all things, no person and no situation will ever thwart His plans. So let's take a look at the next group of people in our Christmas Story – the Wise Men or Magi; Herod; The Priests and the Teachers of the Law.

Powerpoint – 3 slides – Mona Lisa; the Scream and Impression Sunrise.

I think all of you can recognize this image - the Mona Lisa. It was painted by Leonardo da Vinci in the 16th century. In 1911 a museum worker walked out of the Louvre with the Mona Lisa under his smock. He later expressed that he thought the masterpiece belonged in Italy instead of France. Two years later he was caught trying to sell it.

What about this one – the Scream. It was painted by Edvard Munch in the early 1900s. In 2004 this picture 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 stole the painting. It was recovered by French police 5 years later.

These are all famous paintings, tremendously valuable and each one was stolen at some point in time. What do they have to do with Christmas and the Magi?

The first Christmas is an amazing and precious treasure and I don't want you to let your planning, preparation, and commitments to steal Christmas out from under you. The point of Christmas is that God came to dwell with us so that we could dwell with Him forever. As John reminds us in his 1st chapter – The Word was God and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

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 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 Christmas by looking at the account of the Magi.

Matthew 2 centers 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 events of Jesus's birth.

The meaning and the power of the event are lost and stolen from Herod and the teachers of the law, but the Magi's approach of worship is the proper 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 us, 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'll find that the power, wonder, and meaning of Christmas will not be wasted on us or stolen from us! If you've heard the account of the Magi—or the wise men—many times, the image in your mind may not line up with the Bible. Before we begin looking at these different responses, let's consider what our Scripture reading told us this morning and the 3 reactions to the amazing events of Christmas:

Enter the Wise Men

The Bible does not state how many wise men were there – it is just assumed because of 3 gifts there would be three but this is unlikely. The Bible does not state that they were kings – just wise men or magi from the east. The magi were probably Persian or Arabian astrologers who charted the stars and attached religious significance to their movements. It was widely believed in the ancient world that the stars heralded the birth of great people and Roman historians spoke of an expected world ruler who would come from Judea.

We don't know what the star was. Some suggest it could have been a sign in the heavens like the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn that took place around 7 BC. Some think it was 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. We don't really need to know the specifics – it was a guiding star from God.

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

Although most nativity scenes now include Wise men at Jesus' manger, they in fact saw Jesus when He was a toddler, around 2 years of age in a house.

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

What about the Teachers of the Law and the Priests?

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 shared the answer by quoting the prophet Micah.

Micah was a minor prophet who spoke of a small town, Bethlehem. It had had a brief moment of glory as the place where King David was born, but it had shrunk back into obscurity. Now some 6 or 700 years before the event, Micah told of the birth of another ruler of Israel. This Ruler would be utterly unique, for His existence was settled long before His human birth – in fact, in eternity.

What I find strange is that the teachers of the Law and the priests had just heard that the Messiah has been born; they had dedicated their lives to God and the Scriptures, they quoted the prophecies, they stated that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem in Judea and then what did they do – nothing. They don't investigate; they don't search Him out.

Now I am a big fan of Neil Diamond and have seen all of his Australian concerts, Imagine if I was the president of his fan club and he contacted me to say he needed me to recommend a nice hotel for his next performance. So I tell him where to stay and then what – well I just return to my normal life. Not likely, I would be the first one there!

But we see that the priests and teachers of the law, who had been waiting and teaching about the Messiah, just respond to Herod's question and then return to their life of studying and teaching. It seems like they didn't really care about the Messiah Himself—the One they knew so much about. They were more interested in what they knew about the Messiah than about the opportunity they had to come to know, receive, and worship the Messiah.

Now you may know a fair bit about the Magi and the Christmas story – more than perhaps 80% of the population, but don't let this knowledge and familiarity with the events of Christmas steal away the wonder of it! It's important to learn about God, study His word and His commands, but don't make the mistake the teachers and priest made where they figure they knew all about God instead of 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).

God reveals Himself through His Word, but the whole point is to draw close to Him in order to know Him more and to become more like Him in His love. As **1 Corinthians 8:1 says: "*Knowledge puffs up while love builds up*"**,

God showed up on Christmas so we can know Him and have a relationship with Him. Don't let your familiarity with the story or your focus on new knowledge steal the treasure of Christmas from your heart.

What about Herod?

In our reading we learn that when King Herod heard that the Magi had come to worship the One who had been born King of the Jews, he was disturbed. Herod was paranoid and power hungry. History tells us that he killed his own two sons because he was jealous and threatened by their power. True to form, Herod pretended that he

wanted to worship Jesus, but we see later in the chapter that his plan was to try 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. Herod treats the news of Christmas in the same way he responds to any threats of his power—he tries to eliminate it. He even feigns interest in worship so that he can maneuver for the upper hand.

While few of us would actively fight against the Messiah, there is a little Herod in most of us that we need to guard against. It's the part of us that takes from the glory of Jesus in this season by putting our traditions above our worship. It's the part of us that elevates our expectations above the needs of others. Whenever we demand that things go our way above what God might be doing or what others need, we make a similar mistake to the one King Herod made on the first Christmas.

I love Christmas traditions, but we all need to allow God to adjust our plans however He'd like. Many followers of Jesus start their celebration on Christmas Day by serving others through a variety of ways. I want to encourage us all to allow God to interrupt our 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 not only missed the greatest blessing in history, but he fought directly against it.

A Wise Example

As we consider our preparation and response to the wonder of Christmas, let's consider the example of the Magi. When they saw the child with his mother, they 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 we do know that in light of what God had done, their response is the only one that makes sense.

If we want to guard the meaning and wonder of Christmas, we need to start with our worship. There is nothing that centers our hearts and minds on what really matters like worship. We don't worship God because He's in need of it. We worship God because *we* are in need of it. Giving Him the praise He's due reminds us of who He really is. Our worship fuels and feeds our gratitude. Our worship brings us back to the grandeur, the grace, and the greatness of God. 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 should have known better. They knew about God, but they didn't seek to know Him personally.

We can easily tell that Herod chose the wrong thing. How ironic that as Herod tried to prop up his greatness, he chose the lesser thing. His own power could never match the power of God. His own place and position could never compare with the presence of God.

The Magi show us the way to make the most of Christmas—through worship! The Magi worshipped through their gifts and offerings. The shepherds worshipped through proclaiming the good news. The angels worshipped through song. 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.

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? T**

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. They encountered the Word who became flesh, God with us, and they were never the same again.

Father, thank You that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Please reveal the areas in our lives that reflect the heart of Herod. Please protect us from a familiarity with You and Your Word that circumvents our hearts. Give us hearts like the Magi, who sought You and worshipped You when they found You. Be present in our Christmas and be glorified in our lives. In Jesus's name, amen.