

The Gift of the Wisemen
Matthew 2:1-12
HUMC January 3, 2021

After the collapse of the old Soviet Union in 1989, two Christian missionaries were invited by the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics to about 100 Russian boys and girls at a large orphanage.

Since it was close to the time of Christmas, the missionaries decided to tell them the story of the birth of the Christ child. For many of the children, this would be the first time to hear this wonderful story.

The children were told about how there was no room in the inn for Mary and Joseph and how baby Jesus was born in the stable.

After the Christmas story, the children were given instructions for small craft project. Each child was given three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger and some tan felt to make the baby Jesus.

As the children worked diligently on their project, one of the missionaries noticed the manger scene that 6-year-old Misha made. Instead of one baby, there were two. And this was Misha's explanation.

"And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay? I told him, I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else.

But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I could give as a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift.

So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift? And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anyone ever gave me." So I got into the manger and then Jesus looked at me and told me, I could stay with him always."

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes were full of tears and realized that he found someone who would never abandon him and would stay with him forever. And that my friends, is the real spirit of Christmas.

My scripture text is about the Wise Men who came and visited the Christ child. It is more than a story meant to entertain us. It is about worship. Neil will read Matthew 2:1-12.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."^[b]

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place

where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

To get a glimpse of what we just read, we need to look at King Herod. There was one event in Herod's life that shaped his personality.

When he was about thirty years of age, a political enemy of his father, had the cupbearer put poison in father's wine and his father died.

Ever since that tragic event, young Herod had become so paranoid that in his lifetime he had 10 emergency fortresses constructed all over the country in the event that he needed to hide from some would-be assassin.

And as a backup plan, he organized an elaborate network of spies to root out any would-be challenges to his rule. Herod's paranoia was so extreme that he had his wife Mariamne, his three sons Alexander, Aristobulus, Antipater, his brother in law, Costobar, his mother in law Alexandra and his uncle Joseph were executed for suspicion of treason.

At the time of this Gospel story, Herod was in very poor health and had less than a year to live. His body racked with convulsions, difficulty in breathing. His breath was foul and his skin was covered with open sores and gangrene in the genital region. It is believed also he had chronic kidney disease and dementia.

Because of these physical problems, Herod knew the end was near and he planned to have his favored son Archelaus to succeed him.

Then something else shook the king to the core. Distinguished visitors who had arrived from the East had a strange question.

Matthew 2:2 "Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

In reaction to this news, Herod committed one more act of cruelty before he died. It was the murder of the baby boys in Bethlehem.

From the perspective of the Magi, their purpose was to honor and worship the baby king. Verse 7 tells "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshipped."

To an outside observer, the boy did not look like a king nor did his home did not look like a royal palace. If anything, boy Jesus looked like a peasant child born into poverty.

To the Magi, God had confirmed in their hearts that this child was indeed the Messiah, the Savior of the world. In response they worshipped.

- When we worship, we see who God is in the midst of our lives.
- When we worship, we feel what is in our hearts.
- When we worship, we renew our spiritual lives just as sleep renews our physical bodies.

It is not enough to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, we need to go the extra step and worship; it is vital to our spiritual survival.

In 1988 three gray whales had become icebound or trapped off Point Barrow, Alaska. By the way, it was also the year that Ronald Reagan was president and I pastored my first church.

In regard the whales, these three gray whales needed open holes in the ice to survive and breathe. The problem was they were 5 miles from the open sea and they had become disoriented and could not find their way. How many of you remember that?

It was on network news for about a week. The rescuers cut a string of breathing holes about 20 yards apart in the thick ice. And for eight days, they slowly encouraged the whales to move from one hole to the next. It was mile after mile. Along the way, one of the three whales vanished and was presumed dead. But with the help of a Russian icebreaker which broke up the ice, the remaining whales, which were named Putu and Siku, swam to freedom.

In a way, worship is like a string of breathing holes that the Lord provides for his people. Whenever we "rise for air" in our personal devotions and church worship it nurtures our spirits, encourages our souls and helps us to live right until the day the Lord figuratively shatters the ice cap and we see God face to face.

All of us need that connection with the Lord. I know if I do not nurture my faith, I will feel distant and become dry in my spirit. And when a person begins to stay away from church or stops having devotions, it becomes easier and easier to get out of the habit.

Instead of worship, Sunday becomes "Fun day". If we are not diligent in this area, we could drift off. Worship doesn't make us better than others, but it keeps us tender towards God.

What the Magi did was totally give themselves to worship.

The gold they presented pointed to Jesus' majesty – a king.
Frankincense a symbol of prayer for pointed to Jesus deity --
God.

Myrrh pointed to Jesus' humanity ... a person.

This is the mystery of the incarnation or the Christmas birth.
Jesus is a combination of king, God, and person. He is all of
these things. That is what sets him apart from all religious
leaders.

Intellectually the three aspects of Jesus: God, king, person of
Jesus is problematic to many in this postmodern era and what
they try to do is diminish who Jesus was. But Jesus is God, king
and person.

Another aspect of worship is demonstrated by the magi was the
presentation of gifts. In Bible times, whenever we read of
someone who came to the temple or another place to worship
God, they never appeared empty handed. They always gave
something in gratitude towards God's blessing. This is what the
Magi did.

I find it curious that the Magi traveled hundreds of miles in 3-4
months to find the Christ child. But when the religious officials
heard that the messiah was only 6 miles away, they didn't make
any effort.

For us it does take some effort to find the Lord. When we put
time and sacrifice in our relationship with God, it will be worth it.

In closing, let's remember 6 year old Russian boy Misha. In his
worship, he gave everything to include himself to the Lord. May
God help us in 2021 to be like those wise men of old when they
worshipped.