

***“Obediently Follow”***

Just two weeks ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus, and the Angels appearing to the Shepherds. Last Sunday, on New Year's Day, we celebrated The Holy Name of Jesus and the circumcision of Jesus – following the Law of Moses as commanded by God that every male must be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth and it is then that He was named with the name of Jesus just as the angel had told Mary and Joseph. Then Jesus was taken by Joseph and Mary to be presented before the Lord in the Temple in Jerusalem. Remember that Bethlehem is only about 6-8 miles from Jerusalem, so that was not too long a trek for the family. Last week we talked about Simeon and Anna and the blessings they bestowed upon the infant Jesus. God had given to Simeon eyes to see the Savior – whom Simeon had prayed for his whole life – and to see Him before he passed into eternity. The word “*Christ*” comes from the Greek word “*Christos*” - **χριστός** - which means “Messiah.”

In today's Holy Gospel from Matthew chapter 2 we read of a group of men who are described as “Magi.” These men are often named Wise Men, Magi, or Three Kings – as we sang about in the opening hymn this morning. In Matthew 2:1 we read “*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem*” “*and asked, ‘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.’*” Sometime after the birth of Jesus these “wise men” entered Jerusalem – while following the star.

The term Magi – which we have let morph into “Wise Men and Kings” comes from the Greek **μάγος** “*magos*” which means *a Magician, or an astrologer; a class of wise men specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural sciences*. Because of this the King James Version refers to the Magi as “Wise Men” maybe to lessen negative view of the occult that could be drawn from the word “magic.”

Many times we hear these men referred to as “The Three Wise Men.” But actually there really is no evidence to support just how many there were. There were 3 wonderful gifts that were offered - but there could have been 2, 20, 200 or 7 wise men – no one knows for sure! There are some who believe that the “Wise Men” were a group of astronomers from the Mesopotamia area. The names of these men cannot be found anywhere in the Holy Scriptures, but religious tradition names them as Melchior – believed to be a Persian scholar; Caspar – an Indian scholar; and Balthazar – an Arabian scholar. Their names and countries come from churches in Syria, Armenia and Eastern Orthodox churches.

It was the custom for visiting dignitaries to go and see the King of the region they were in, and so these foreigners visited Herod and asked for information regarding “*The King of the Jews.*” Can you imagine how this must have lit Herod's torch? He must have been honked! Because it was HE who had been appointed as “king of the Jews” by the Romans and these foreigners are asking to see “the King of the Jews.” How utterly rude! (not really.)

When these men came to meet the Lord Jesus - they did not find as is sometimes pictured in Christmas cards – the baby in the manger. They did not find the “*the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes.*” In the Gospel, Jesus is mentioned as “*the child.*” “*After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was.*” (Matthew 2:9) These visitors from the East were miraculously led to the place where the young Jesus was. This was a miracle in itself – these gentiles “traversed afar” and they came to the place where the child was. “*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 and of incense and of myrrh.*” (Matthew 2:11) They didn’t go to the stable – but they went to a house.

There is also some more evidence regarding the length of time that passed from His birth, found in Herod’s attempt to destroy the young Christ. Herod had all male children, in Bethlehem, who were under 2 years old murdered. Matthew 2:16-18 clearly states “*When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: ‘A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more.’*” (Going back into the Old Testament - Jacob, the son of Isaac and the father of the twelve tribes – his wife was Rachel and her tomb is in Bethlehem – and it is still there for you to visit today.)

What we have here is a vicious King who was bent on destroying all of these young male children. “*When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. And so they spoke right from the Scriptures saying: ‘In Bethlehem in Judea,’ they replied, for this is what the prophet has written: ‘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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.’*” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out just when the star appeared – in Bethlehem. Then comes the most remarkable line when he says “*Go and make a careful search for the child; as soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.*”” (Matthew 2:3-8) What an out and out lie – and what evil intent – he did not want to go and worship the Child, to worship the Lord, the King of the Jews – but instead he wanted to slaughter Him – so that he could keep his job security! That’s it, plain and simple!

For all of the good that Herod throughout all of Israel in rebuilding and refinishing the Temple and many other projects like building Masada and other fortresses – he was a real madman! He wanted to know where the King was born as foretold in God’s Word - Micah 5:2 “*But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.*” So let me ask you - how can a baby be from “ancient time?” The answer is plain and simple - only God can do that! I find it interesting that the Jewish leaders knew the prophecies but they

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weren't going to go and see for themselves. Instead we have a group of Gentiles who were willing to cross a desert, to follow a star, to offer gifts, and to offer worship! After speaking with the Scribes and Chief Priests, Herod sent these 'visitors from the east, these magi, these wise men, these 3 kings – if you will' to Bethlehem to search for the child. Herod pretends that he wants to worship Him.

The "magi" go to visit Jesus: *"After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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 and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route."* - (Matthew 2:9-12)

God led these men with this star - directly to where Jesus was. They fell down before the Lord and offered Him - Gold, incense and Myrrh. God warns them of the perils that lie ahead of them if they go back through Jerusalem, that Herod wants to do away with the Christ Child, and so the magi leave another way. God was trying to show these magi something special, and they were blessed like Simeon and Anna to meet the Savior firsthand - and you know as well as I do that the world NEEDS a savior! Today God is doing the very same thing. God wants all people to see His Son for who He is ...THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD! God opened their eyes and He opened their hearts! These men fell down when they saw Jesus and these gentiles worshipped Him. If these men were kings it would not be in their practice to worship anyone else – for they were at the “top of the food chain” where they lived. Even if they were scientists – you know how scientists don't like to look at anything other than what they are working on.

Unfortunately, there are many people today who see God at work all around them and actually know that it is God who is working, but they are either indifferent or they just don't care; they are so wrapped up in themselves and what they have got ahead of them. And then there are many who really DO believe that Jesus is Savior and that ONLY way to heaven is through Him... but they refuse to open their hearts! And then there are those who completely deny that Jesus is the ONLY WAY. Thank God, we stood on the fact that Jesus is “*the way, the truth and the life*” (John 14:6) and we were not going to be convinced to think otherwise. It is tragic that people cannot open their hearts to understand who Jesus Christ REALLY is – and what He brings! We need to pray; that is how we can help those people. We need to pray for those who do not think Jesus is “*the way, the truth and the life,*” or they think that Jesus is something else entirely. The best way that we can help them is by praying for them. We need pray for their hearts to be opened and transformed; that the Holy Spirit will reveal Himself to them and change their hearts and their lives forever – just like God sent a star to change the hearts of these magi – no matter how many there were. They worshipped a child!

What a picture of humility in these men - “*they fell down, and worshipped him.*” There is something that is very special about humbling yourself and bowing before almighty God! These

men humbly bowed and offered some valuable, precious gifts to a young child and Jesus was completely worthy to receive these gifts.

- They gave Him gold for He is the King of Kings.
- They gave Him incense, or as we have commonly have referred to it as frankincense which represented Him being the High Priest of High Priests.
- Lastly, they gave Him myrrh, which represented the extreme sacrifice that Jesus would make on our behalf. Myrrh was a spice that was used to preserve and prepare a human body for burial. A remarkable act that Jesus made, dying on the cross – taking our punishment.

They gave Him gold, frankincense and myrrh. All three were expensive gifts that they gave to this young King, willingly, humbly, gratefully as an act of faith!

There are some accounts that have these men followed the star for approximately 2 years. You want to talk about a road trip and what a picture of faith! They didn't have Yetis to fill up and preserve their drinks and keep it cold or hot, or to keep their lamb or anything else that they were carrying with them. They did not have any of these modern conveniences and they probably didn't have sleeping bags, but they had tents and they roughed it for quite a while. They obediently followed a light in the sky without even knowing how long a trip they would be going on; not knowing what they would encounter along the way. They did not know exactly what they would find when they reached what the star was pointing to. No matter what the journey held, they followed God, relying on Him. And that is exactly what we must do! We need to be following a God given direction for our lives; not knowing how long our journey will be; not knowing what we will encounter along the way; but asking for His guidance, His love, His provision and His protection. We need to trust God! Like these wise men and Mary and Joseph, we must, as a church and as a people of God – must listen to the direction God has given to us. We **MUST** follow him! Sometimes when He gives us direction - it may not be so easy to listen, and to obediently follow. Like these very wise men, we need to do one thing; to obediently follow.