

January 6, 2019

Matthew 2:1-12:

“And They Fell Down and Worshiped Him!”

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Our Gospel lesson begins: "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'" One thing's for sure, the Magi were driven! If only we would be so eager to seek after the Lord in the means of grace!

King Herod was also driven! When he heard the Magi . . . well, I like the way in which Paul L. Maier puts it in his book, *In the Fullness of Time*:

His eyes crinkling with suspicion even as his face wore a mask of affability, Herod directed his guest to David's city: "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so I may also go and pay him homage . . ." ". . . in mockery and then kill!" Herod's mind completed the thought.

Herod "was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." We know from history that Herod was constantly worried about losing his power and so it makes sense that he was greatly troubled, but why was Jerusalem also troubled? In one of his homilies on *The Gospel of Matthew* (6.4), John Chrysostom (d. 407) insightfully answers:

But Jerusalem remained troubled by the same idolatrous affections that had previously caused them to turn from God precisely when God was pouring out his greatest benefits on them. While God was offering them new freedom, they were once again mindful only of the fleshpots of bondage in Egypt . . . Although troubled, they nevertheless did not try to understand what was happening. They did not follow the wise men or even take any particular notice. To this extent were they . . . contentious and careless.

Isn't it incredible? God uses a star for the Magi, pointing them to the Savior of the world in order that they may know that the Savior is seeking after them. God then uses the Magi, as well as the star, so that Herod and all Jerusalem might also know that the Savior is seeking after them too! What have been the many stars in your life that have been sent by God? The prophet Isaiah writes (Isaiah 55:6-7): "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

Returning now to the account, our text says that the Magi came to "worship." There is quite a debate around the word "worship." It can mean religious worship (Matt. 14:33; 4:9-10), but it can also mean to simply bow or kneel to pay respect to a superior (Matt. 18:26), such as an earthly king. But, the Magi ask where is "the king of the Jews?" Herod knew exactly what they were asking, for he assembled the chief priests and scribes of the people to ask about the birthplace of "the Christ." That word "Christ" means "anointed" or "set apart." One might debate as to how much the Magi knew, but they did not view the one that they called "the king of the Jews," as a "run-of-the-mill" king. They are looking for the one who has

been set apart to save and rule forever. Lest we forget, the trial and crucifixion of Jesus brings all of this terminology together (Luke 23:25-28; Matthew 27:11-44):

And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

In the star, the Magi are seeing the finger of God pointing to the Savior - the only one who is good in essence and gives all good things. Herod pretends to believe, but he does so in order to destroy the child. And then there is the city of Jerusalem, utterly steeped in spiritual lethargy. It's as if the categories are still the same to this day. Choose your group: Magi, Herod, or the city of Jerusalem.

The search of the Magi, as God had led them on their search, was not in vain. God even uses Herod and the religious leaders to set before the Magi the words of the prophet Micah which led them to the town of Bethlehem. They were not disappointed. Can you imagine it? They entered the house, "where they saw the child with Mary his mother, and **They Fell Down and Worshipped Him.**"

Our Lutheran Confessions explain that worship is to receive God's gifts. In the words of the *Apology to the Augsburg Confession*: "The service and worship of the Gospel is to receive good things from God (Article IV. 310)." The plural "gifts" are all within the one (singular) gift of Jesus Christ our Savior. From Jesus, and from Jesus alone comes all that we might call gifts. There is nothing greater than to be in the presence of the King of the Jews, and that is exactly where the Magi find themselves when they enter the house and see the child (who has yet to be crowned). They fall down, and by doing so, they symbolically incapacitate themselves and thereby acknowledge that there is nothing that they have that has not been given to them in the child. True worship removes one's focus away from the self, and from anyone or anything else, to the only one who can give all good things. And the gifts that the Magi give are reflections of what the child will do for them.

Like the Magi, we follow the star, but with such a statement we ask: where are we to find Jesus? What we might call "the star" are all those things that God places into our lives that finally lead us into the presence of Jesus. Whatever the star has been in your life, the Lord is seeking you that you may seek and find him, and has led you to his presence as if you are Magi entering into the house. The difference in our day and age is that we do have a word from our Lord that says this: "if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false christs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. See, I have told you beforehand (Matthew 24:23-25)." Again, where are we to find Jesus?

To seek Christ for our salvation implies that we are to seek him in the proper place. As I stated, "the star" are all those things that God places into our lives to finally lead us into the presence of Jesus. As the wise men found him through the pages of Scripture, so do we find him there and are led into his gracious presence. Like the Magi, may we follow the guidance of what is written in the testimony. In the words of

the sainted Dr. A. L. Barry (*Lutheran Worship: 2000 and Beyond*):

Our worship focuses on Christ, who is present for us and with us in His Word and Sacraments. He is truly among us. We are not contemplating a far-off Christ, or meditating on abstract ideas . . . We are worshiping the One who is very near - as close as the preaching of the Word. We are worshiping the One who is actually present under the bread and wine of Holy Communion . . . Thanks be to God that this is true!

We have the Son of God. As he has promised, he is with us always to the very end of the age. If you would then live like the Magi and find Christ, “the stars” of life, so to speak, always leads us to the Word of God in its truth and purity and the right administration of the sacraments. Here we come to the heavenly Jerusalem, to angels, to the assembly of the firstborn, to God the judge, and most importantly to Jesus our mediator, as it says in Hebrews 12. If you would be like the Magi and find Jesus, “the stars” in life always lead us to the Word of God in its truth and purity and the right administration of the Sacraments, as the apostle John helps us to understand:

For there are three that testify: the Spirit [the word] and the water [baptism] and the blood [holy communion]; and these three agree . . . Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself . . . And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.

And They Fell Down and Worshiped Him! “Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:28).”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott