

“THE VISIT OF THE MAGI”

Communion Sunday

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

January 2, 2005

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This morning I would like to share with you from the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, the visit of the Magi.

Chapter 2: 1 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."

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 Christ 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 be the shepherd of my people Israel."

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 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."

9 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. 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 and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Andy Lambert and Lowell McNaney in their book, *Fuel for the Journey*, talk about the perfect gift:

You spent great quantities of time, energy, and money finding the perfect Christmas gift for your closest and dearest friend. This is the friend that took you to the emergency room when you sustained the deep gash on your forehead from the rabid gopher - ok, this is also the friend who double dogged dared you to stick your head in the gopher hole to begin with, but that is beside the point. Because of your close relationship, you are keenly aware of the joy that this perfect gift will bring to him, as well as the difference that it will make in his life. Christmas finally arrives. Early in the morning you take off running to your friend's house to bestow this thought filled present as quickly as possible. In your crazed zeal to deliver the goods, you leap over your neighbor's outdoor Christ-

mas decorations, knocking down two shepherds, decapitating Blitzen. You are unphased; you are on a mission. You can't wait to see his face as he opens the gift, and with one final superhuman effort, you hurtle Fang, your friend's toy poodle, and spring up his steps in a single bound. In your anxiousness, you ring the door bell approximately twenty times a second, and at last your friend appears at the door and thrusts, well you thrust the gift into his hand with the speed of a person's head emerging from an enraged gopher's hole as you exclaim, "This is my special gift for you." You stand gazing in anticipation with a silly smile pasted on your face as you wait for your friend to rip into the present. But to your utter disappointment, your friend puts the gift on the dresser, and says, "I think I'll open it later." The following summer you spy the package peeking out from under your chum's bed still unopened. How would you feel?

For he shares that story as reminder that sometimes when we remember that our Lord has given us the gift of Jesus Christ at Christmas, what would it be like if we just simply, "I think I'll put it on the dresser, or maybe I'll stick it under the bed," for we ignore the greatest gift of all time.

I have looked at several lists of New Year's resolutions. Seems to be, losing weight's at the top of a lot of lists. Getting out of debt. Maybe, getting a new job. But you rarely see a resolve to do the will of God.

Epiphany, this is Epiphany Sunday, in the season of Epiphany. It is called Ordinary Time, because it is between the celebration of Christ's birth, Advent, and also the celebration of the Resurrection, the empty tomb and Easter. It is especially a time for Christians to resolve to know and to do the will of God - to take the time to pray - to be reminded that God put us on this planet for a purpose. And what really gives meaning to our lives, especially in 2005, will be we discover that purpose, and we fulfill His will.

What's your reaction to the gift of Jesus Christ? There were three reactions on that first Christmas. First there was Herod's reaction. And that was a reaction of simply being hostile. Herod was called Herod the great. He was Governor of Judea from 47 BC for almost four decades, and he became King Herod in 40 BC, and the nickname Herod the Great because, well, he was great at keeping the peace; he kept revolts down, the Romans liked that. He was a great builder, building the Temple. He could actually be compassionate. I mean he actually, during the famine of 25 BC, he melted some of his gold to buy bread for the people. But he had a flaw, and a pretty serious flaw. He could just absolutely not stand any rival to his throne. So much so that he killed his wife, one of his wives, killed his mother, killed three of his sons, so much that Caesar said, "It is safer to be Herod's pig than to be Herod's son."

And so this murderous man, this man that didn't allow any rivals to his throne, when the Wise Men started talking about, "We have followed a star, and we want to know where the King of the Jews will be born." He's troubled. He summons his wise men, the teachers of the Law, and they tell him, "Well, in Bethlehem is where it will be born." So he tells these wise men, "Go and search for this child, and when you find him, tell me, for I want to worship him too." Well he doesn't want to worship Him. He wants to kill Him.

Today, to the gift of Christ, some people are not quite as hostile as Herod. But the principle is still there: they don't want any rival to the throne of their lives. They do not want Christ to be Lord of their lives; they want to be in charge. They want to be in charge of their calendars. They want to be in charge of their goals and priorities, but when Christ enters our lives, He takes control of our time. He takes control of our priorities. He changes us. Henry Blackaby, in his excellent book on *Experiencing God* talks about when God leads us in his will, there is a crisis of belief, that is, and what that crisis is: we need to adjust our way of thinking and our way of believing to God's. There was Herod's reaction. He was hostile. He didn't want anyone coming on his throne.

And then there was also a reaction to the chief priests and teachers of the Law. And their reaction, well it was one of apathy. When Herod came to them and asked them about where the child was to be born, they knew the scriptures right offhand,

*Micah 5:2, "And you, Oh Bethlehem Ephrathah,
you are no means least among the rulers of Judah,
For from you shall come a ruler who govern my people Israel.*

They knew the Bible; they knew the scriptures, but do you notice them wanting to go with the Wise Men to search for the Child? No, they're comfortable. They're complacent. They like being in the palace, they like advising King Herod. They are simply apathetic. They have no intention of becoming any deeper in their faith.

In a spiritual classic of William Law, *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, there is a chapter that talks about the danger of not intending to do your best. There is a young man, he is thirty-five years old, who has been a very successful business man, a man that goes to church, but he has become very ill, and he is gathering with friends as to say goodbye. He begins to change his way of thinking. He says it this way:

“When you consider, that I have lived free from scandal in the communion of the church, you perhaps wonder to see me so full of remorse and self condemnation at the approach of death, but alas, what a poor thing it is to have lived only free from murder, theft and adultery, which is all I can say for myself. It is true that I have lived in the communion of the church and generally frequented its worship and service on Sundays, when I was neither too idle nor otherwise occupied with a business and pleasures, but my conformity to the public worship has been more of a matter of course than any real intention of doing which the church requires. Had it not been so, I would have been oftener at church.”

But listen to what he says:

“But the thing that now surprises me, as I come to the close of my life, is that I never intended to live up to the gospel; this never so much as entered my mind or heart. I never once considered whether I was living as the laws of religion directs, or whether my way of life was such as would procure the mercy of God at this hour. What is the reason that I, who have so often talked of the necessity of rules and methods and diligence in worldly business, have all this while never once thought of any rules, methods, or managements to carry me in this life of devotion?”

A man come to the end of his life — considering what's really important — and grieving that, "I never intended to take this gift of Christ seriously."

But there is a third reaction here, and it is the reaction of the Wise Men. It is a great example for us in starting a new year, and that is reaction to the Christ Child of adoring worship. These Wise Men were men of great learning . They had been following the star — we don 't know which star it was — but they were on a journey, a spiritual journey, and they were searching for the Christ Child, and when they find him in, verse eleven it says,

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 and of incense and of myrrh.

Think of these gifts that they brought: the gift of gold to the Lord Jesus. Gold is a gift for a king, and that Jesus Christ, as it says in Revelations, is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. And we will especially know that, when he returns. But he was not just *a* king, he was *the* King of All Time.

They also brought the gift of incense, or frankincense, and this is the gift for a priest. That Christ reveals to us what our Heavenly Father is like. Jesus said to Thomas, "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." And in Hebrews it talks about the High Priest that will live forever. Christ is our mediator of the new covenant by faith in Him. Gifts for a High Priest is frankincense, and myrrh is a gift for one who is to die. For we remember one today who gave his life upon a cross, and myrrh is a gift for one that is to die. The Wise Men, being warned in a dream were not deceived by Herod, and they to went another place. Herod sent forth an edict to kill all the boys two years and younger in that town, and we are reminded that Jesus came into fallen world, and still comes today in a fallen world.

But as we come today to celebrate the Lord's Supper, and Christ invites all to come to his supper, and we once again partake in the Covenant Service which John Wesley thought was so great, borrowed it from Puritans and thought it was a great time to renew our covenant with Christ, then we, once again are allowing Christ to visit our lives, We're welcoming Him into our hearts. We are celebrating the gift of the Christ Child and we are willing to be used by our Lord.

Last Sunday a very large man, great, great football player by the name of Reggie White went home to be with the Lord. A great athlete — All-Pro and just about everything you could achieve athletically, he did. But what do you hear about him? Not just about his talent, you hear about his Christianity. You hear about his work with intercity children. You hear about his unashamed love for Christ, and not only how it impacted other people but impacted his family. Today as we make this commitment we are heading in the direction of leaving behind the legacy of a good witness for Jesus Christ.

Let us pray:

Prepare our hearts, O God, to come to Your table, to know of Your love and forgiveness

anew, and Lord, to go forth with thanksgiving and joy, that You will show us Your plan for this new year; You will guide us in Your will; and Lord, You will empower by the Holy Spirit to do Your will. We thank You for this in Jesus' name. Amen