

Southport Presbyterian Church
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Experiencing God: The Wise Men Meet Jesus
Matthew 2:1-12

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi 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 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.

Today, January 6, is called The Feast of Epiphany. Epiphany means “revelation” [Gregory Wilbur and George Grant, *Christmas Spirit*, p. 465]. It is the day on which the Christian church remembers and celebrates the visit of the Magi or Wise Men, who were Gentiles, to see Jesus, which revealed that Jesus came for all people, not just the Jews. Contrary to what most Christmas cards show regarding nativity scenes, the Wise Men did not arrive on the night of Jesus’ birth but about two years later or less based on Matthew 2:16, when we read that Herod “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.” Also by this time Mary, Joseph and Jesus, as we see in Matthew 2:11, were living in a house.

Today as a church family we are starting a sermon series based on the book, *Experiencing God*. The basic premise of the book, *Experiencing God*, is that discovering God’s will is not done by following a formula or method or following certain steps. “. . . We do not find God’s will, it is revealed. God always takes the initiative.” And it is based on our relationship with God. (Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King, *Experiencing God*, p. 3)

In many ways it is fitting that we start the series today on the Feast of Epiphany, the day of revelation, celebrated for the visit of the Wise Men to see Jesus. We will look at the passage in Matthew, and we’ll see the following about the experiences of the Wise Men with God.

First, the Wise Men had experienced God's revelation of His will for them and all humanity, which is again why today is called Epiphany. One Christian writer said, "The Wise Men followed the star, and they found the Christ. They were not sure of their destination. But they believed the star, for to them the star represented God's guiding hand. . . . If we believe in God, He will lead us" (*Christmas*, by Charles L. Allen and Charles L. Wallis, p. 82).

The discovery that the Wise Men made was for all humanity. "The magi were thus the first to comprehend that Jesus was not merely the prophetic fulfillment of Jewish aspirations since the beginning of time. Instead, He was the hope of the world, the light of the world, and the joy of every man's desiring . . . as a result, Epiphany is the celebration of the ultimate proclamation of good news" (*Christmas Spirit*, by Gregory Wilbur and George Grant, p. 165).

Indeed, even the Wise men themselves symbolized that Jesus came for all people – not just the Jewish people. Why? Because the Wise Men were Gentiles – not Jewish leaders or kings. In fact, none of the Jewish religious establishment came to see Jesus even though He was only a few miles away from their headquarters in Jerusalem.

We are not sure what countries these Wise Men came from. All we know is they came from somewhere in the East. Some think they were "probably astrologers, perhaps from Persia or southern Arabia, both of which are east of Palestine." (*NIV Study Bible*, p. 1442.) Some even think they were ancestors of the Kurdish people in northern Iraq. We also know they were Gentiles because they used the term "king of the Jews" not "the king of our people" when they spoke of Jesus to Herod. And, "since they were looking for the "king of the Jews," they naturally came to the Jewish capital city of Jerusalem" (*NIV Study Bible*, p. 1442).

Matthew is the most Jewish of the Gospels since he consistently cites Old Testament passages, most of them Messianic, 47 times, to show Jesus is the Messiah. It is Matthew who records the visit of the Wise Men to show "that people of all nations acknowledged Jesus as "king of the Jews" and came to worship him as Lord." (*NIV Study Bible*, p. 1441). He shows by citing the Magi that Jesus came for all people even the Gentiles and that the Gentiles recognized Jesus as Lord, as Yahweh, or God, even before His own people and the Jewish leaders did.

Even the three gifts brought by the Wise Men have powerful symbolism and say something about who Jesus is. The gift of gold recognizes Jesus' royalty – a descendant of the royal line of David as well as the King of Kings. Frankincense is incense used in worship and represents that Jesus is God in the flesh. He is divine. He is fully God and fully human. Finally, the gift of myrrh which is used in embalming symbolized the death of Jesus on the cross later in His life. He is the sacrificial Passover Lamb once and for all for all people. (*Christmas Spirit*, by Gregory Wilbur and George Grant, p. 38.)

We don't know how many Wise Men there were. The number three is based on the three gifts given to Jesus by the Wise Men. But the Bible lists no number.

So, we see that God revealed to the Wise Men through the star which was "not an ordinary star, planet, or comet" that something special had happened [*NIV Study Bible*, p. 1442]. They received revelation from God Himself. He showed them. They didn't have to find it. All they had to do was obey and follow the star. And when they eventually got

to Bethlehem, God revealed his Son to them and in doing so, revealed that Jesus was for all people – Gentiles included.

Second, we see in Matthew that when God acts and reveals, be prepared for spiritual warfare. You and I will discover this as we wait on God to reveal His will to us and as we obey, the evil one will try to thwart God's plans.

We see this spiritual warfare in Herod's response to the Wise Men's inquiry in 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." Herod's response in verse 3 is, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." Herod felt threatened by the possibility of a king being born who would threaten his rule and power. And when Herod was disturbed, so was the rest of Jerusalem. In other words, "If Herod isn't happy, ain't nobody's happy." To understand Herod and his response, listen to this information about him: King Herod or Herod the Great, ruled from 37-4 B.C. He is "to be distinguished from the other Herods in the Bible. Herod was a non-Jew, an Idumean, who was appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 B.C. and gained control in 37. Like most rulers of the day, he was ruthless, murdering his wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncles and many others – not to mention the babies in Bethlehem" (v. 16) [*NIV Study Bible*, p. 1442].

His slyness is seen in first, his inquiry from the religious leaders in Matthew 2:4. "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." And then we read in Matthew 2:7. "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared." (Emphasis mine) Note that he called them secretly – which is certainly a sign of a conspirator.

Next, he lies. Listen to Matthew 2:8. "He sent [the wise men] 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." His real motive was anything but to worship Jesus. He wanted to kill Him – as we see in Matthew 2:16 when he ordered all male children two years old and under to be killed.

The evil one was after Jesus, and he was using his evil puppet, Herod, to kill our Lord.

In his book, *Cosmic Christmas*, Max Lucado talks about the spiritual warfare in the Christmas story which became the basis for his book. He writes: "Christmas is full of cozy thoughts: a sleeping Jesus, wide-eyed shepherds, a soft-faced Mary. The nativity sentiment is warm, the emotion is joy, and the feeling is peace... In John's Book of Revelation, however, he offers another perspective. From his perspective, the birth of Jesus stirs more than excitement; it stirs evil. Pulling back the curtain of the skies, he reveals a bloody war in the heavens. John sees a woman, ready to give birth. He sees a dragon, ready to bring death. The woman is beautiful and the dragon ugly. The dragon lunges at the newborn child, but he is too late. The child and the mother are granted safety and then "there was a war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back" (Rev. 12:7 NIV).

"A war in heaven..." (*Cosmic Christmas*, by Max Lucado, pp 103-104).

The evil one loves to do spiritual warfare at Christmas even today. People are so tired and exhausted from shopping, parties, activities, and having continual Christmas music everywhere they go since Thanksgiving, and for 93 days, if they listened to 93.1

FM, that by the time Christmas night arrives, they are glad Christmas is over. They can't wait to take down the tree and the decorations that night or the next day. They put on CD's of anything including opera so they don't hear any more Christmas music. And what happens is instead of being joyful and triumphant on Christmas when we celebrate Jesus' birthday, we are worn out, frazzled, and anything but joyful and focused on our Lord.

Our culture has flip-flopped Christmas. We put on the front end of it the celebration rather than the preparation spiritually. We feel we need to get all the parties and the gift giving and celebrating in before Christmas Day. I once calculated that depending on what stores you go to and when Christmas decorations and Christmas items show up on shelves, and when it all goes away, that we have exposure to Christmas from 3 ½ to 6 months out of the year. That's overkill wouldn't you say? And that is one way the evil one desensitizes us to the meaning of Jesus' birth. When Christmas finally gets here, we want to move on.

Here is a suggestion. Celebrate after Christmas instead of before. Celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas. It's not a song. It's a season. "Every day, from December 25 to January 6, was traditionally a part of the Yuletide celebration. Dedicated to mercy and compassion – in light of the incarnation of Heaven's own mercy and compassion – each of those twelve days between Christmas and Epiphany was to be noted by selfless giving and tender charity. In many cultures, gift giving is not concentrated on a single day, but rather, as in the famous folk song, spread out through the entire season" (*Christmas Spirit*, by Gregory Wilbur and George Grant, p. 202). Centuries ago when the Council of Tours made up the church year and church seasons such as Advent and Lent, the Council realized that a birthday celebration on the magnitude of the birth of Jesus could not be contained in one day. So the period from December 25, Christmas Day, until January 6, The Feast of Epiphany, the day the Wise Men saw Jesus, would be the period of celebration.

Now we cannot change our culture or the attitudes of people around us but we can make choices in celebrating Christmas so that it takes a more spiritual tone.

Here are some suggestions. We can choose what we want to do before Christmas. We don't need to take on every event in the city or other places. We can choose not to exhaust ourselves. I suggest going to Sabbath moments during Advent. It can be a way that God puts the brakes on our hurriedness.

We can choose to have family Christmas parties and gatherings with friends, see special Christian exhibits, or read books about Jesus and Christmas after Christmas instead of before.

We can choose to put our Christmas tree up later and keep it up longer.

We do not need to play all our Christmas CD's before Christmas. We can keep some, especially Christmas hymns, for shortly before Christmas and for the Twelve Days of Christmas so the Christmas music is fresh and not boring.

We can make this a time to recharge spiritually for the New Year, looking back and thanking God for all He has done in the year past.

We can make Christmas a spiritual celebration of 12 days instead of a tired, exhausted "celebration" for a whole month preceding it. We may not be able to do or make all the changes we'd like, but we can start where we can.

We can counter the evil one's warfare at Christmas.

Finally, we see that the Wise Men obeyed God when He revealed things to them. They obeyed when He revealed to them the star that would lead them to His Son. They obeyed His command in Matthew 2:12: “And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.” They didn’t debate with God or each other about not going back to Herod and whether this would make Herod mad. It did. Nor did they debate about going home via another route. Rather when God spoke, they acted on what He told them. They obeyed. As one Christian author wrote: “. . . they again depended on God to lead them back to their homes “by another way. . . God often makes known His will to men, but only those who are wise respond to His guidance” (*Christmas*, by Charles L. Allen and Charles L. Wallis, p. 39).

Their obedience did several things. First, by not returning immediately to Herod, it gave Joseph time to pack up, leave and get some distance to Egypt when God said in Matthew 2:13-15: “When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.” Get up, “he said, “take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: “Out of Egypt I called my son.”

As a result, Jesus’ life was spared.

Second, by going home a different route, Herod could not hunt the wise men down and get the information on Jesus’ location from them nor could Herod kill the Wise Men for not obeying his command to return to him with the location of the baby.

Their obedience spared the life of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Their obedience impacted you and me and all history – because Jesus was not killed as a baby, which would have ended our only hope of salvation and hope for a new world. Jesus would now grow up and die on the cross by His own will and choosing, for the sins of all people including you and me.

When God reveals, we must obey. Several years ago, the act of obedience in response to the prompting of God impacted a young girl at a McDonalds. She was not attractive or very intelligent. She was slow but she had a kind heart.

One day a mother and her daughter had lunch at that McDonalds. The girl waited on them. Though she had these problems, her kindness showed through.

After eating lunch, the mother and daughter felt God put on their heart to do something special for the girl. They thought, “She probably never gets flowers. So, let’s go out and get her some.”

They did. When they returned the daughter gave the girl the flowers. When the girl received them, her face lit up and with excitement in her voice she exclaimed to all her fellow employees, “I got flowers! I got flowers! This little girl gave me flowers!”

The mother and daughter never saw the girl again. Never got her name. But their obedience to the voice of God to minister to that girl with the gift of flowers would not be forgotten by her.

And so we begin our journey of experiencing God. May we like the Wise Men be open to His revelation to us. May we be aware of the warfare that may result. And may we like the Wise Men obey the voice of God and, as a result, impact lives and history because we obeyed Him.

Amen.