

“We Have Come to Worship Him: #moreworship”

December 31, 2017

Angels Among Us series – New Year’s Eve Day/Epiphany of the Lord

*O Star of wonder, star of night
Star with royal beauty bright
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to thy Perfect Light*

“We have come to worship.” The magi are clear in their objective. They know why they’ve traveled. They are focused on their goal, but I wonder how they were changed when they encountered this new king.

“We have come to worship.” That’s what the magi say to Herod, but they’re looking for a new king. The magi are another line on the list of people who are involved in this birth story of Jesus, but it’s interesting because the contrast of the shepherds and the magi is a poignant one.

Shepherds - at the bottom of the social ladder - and magi - people with education and resources (at least enough to make a 1,000 mile journey) - both groups recorded by our Gospel writers as having been there at the beginning of Jesus’ life. The shepherds receive the message that a Savior has been born. The magi follow a star - a sure sign that a new king is here!

Now the magi don’t encounter angel-messengers, but they take the signs in their midst seriously. They have a goal in mind. They are persistent because I can’t imagine that the journey was an easy one to make. We’re told that when the star stopped, they were filled with joy! Finally, they had made it!

I can only imagine their long journey. We were caught in the midst of a long line of cars this past week as we travelled to Kalamazoo. You might have heard about the number of cars in the ditch. When we stopped on the highway, I saw a tanker truck on its side not too far behind us. It was so good to get to our destination!

And I wonder what the magi expected to find. They mention a child to Herod, but I wonder if they had expected that the child would be in Herod’s kingdom. Perhaps they are willing to believe in the unexpected, too - in this infant Jesus in a home with Mary - probably no place special. The magi kneel before him, and they worship. And they break out the gifts that tell us something about Jesus: gold fit for a king, incense that a priest might use in the temple, and myrrh that was used to anoint bodies for burial.

And thankfully, they pay attention! Though we don’t hear specifically about an angel coming to them, we do know that it was in a dream when they were warned to go home without stopping to tell Herod anything about this infant King Jesus. They go home another way.

Matthew is the writer who tells us about the magi without a lot of detail. But we know that they worshipped Jesus. Part of Matthew's focus is to connect Jesus to the Jewish tradition, so it's interesting that the magi are lifted up. The magi aren't Jewish, but Gentiles. And really, they are the first to worship Jesus.

Marcia McFee says, "Worship is as necessary to our lives as breathing." And she helps me to remember the connections. In worship we're inspired, which means "to breathe in." We're renewed, refreshed, and reminded who we are and whose we are. We also hope that we can breathe out (expire) those things that we don't need or want to carry to make room for God's love in our lives. And worship also encourages us to "conspire" (to breathe with) and connect to the Holy Spirit so that we're seeking God's reign and way in the world. The hope is always that worship sends us out to serve others in Christ's name.

But another interesting wrinkle here: the magi are Gentiles descended from the Babylonians. Their ancestors had taken the Israelites into exile. When we talked about the shepherds, we were reminded that Jesus comes for everyone - no one is left out. God's incarnation - God coming "in the flesh" isn't an exclusive cosmic happening, but an inclusive act of God who chooses to come that all would know God's love and grace. God welcomes all, and the magi offer one more affirmation of God's inclusive love.

Our focus has been on how we stand against the fear that is so prevalent in our world - how we experience more hope, more peace, more joy, and more love because of Jesus' birth AND how we offer more hope, more peace, more joy, and more love to the world because we believe that Jesus is God with us. Worship helps us to give back to God and to receive from God. Taking time to worship helps us remember that Jesus draws us to himself and helps us to focus on God's goodness and grace.

And worship isn't just something that happens when we gather here, though corporate worship is important and vital to our faith life. Perhaps you have a moment of feeling the presence of God in a powerful way.

One of my moments happened in Florida on an airboat ride. We were looking for gators, and in one moment when we were speeding along in the boat, I looked out and all I saw was water and sky. It was breathtaking - and a moment of awe and wonder at how big God's universe is.

I wonder if the magi felt awe and wonder when they encountered Jesus. Honestly, the magi had much to fear. They were up against the mighty King Herod who knew that they were seeking this new king and wanted them to help him do away with any new threat to his power. How much did they have to believe in what they saw? How much they risked to avoid Herod and go home another way!

The magi remind us that faith means taking the risk to follow Jesus. Their journey to Bethlehem and back home was probably arduous. Scholars figure that they traveled up to two years to worship Jesus. Consider their journey, their perseverance, their commitment. Even traveling this week has been arduous enough!

But I see perseverance and commitment when people face their circumstances and continue to speak God's name with thanksgiving and grace. I see it we give God glory for the blessings of life. I see it when people forgive others and find healing. I see it when we serve in ministry for the sake of Jesus Christ.

But with the journey, perseverance, and commitment comes discomfort and risk. Living as a disciple of Jesus doesn't mean that it all goes our way – or that answers and understanding always come quickly. Much of the time, we are uncomfortable, or we're taking risks to be faithful. Sometimes it's plain scary.

But then we have the words of the angel throughout the account of Jesus' birth: "Do not be afraid." From the beginning, being a part of Jesus' story wasn't without fear and trembling. Following Jesus and worshipping Jesus isn't a casual thing either.

One thing we must ask about worship is: who receives our worship? Who is worthy of it? Many times, we may find ourselves struggling to worship God rather than ourselves. But God is the One who alone is worthy. And through worship, God draws us closer.

The magi overcame fear of earthly power to worship Jesus and protect him from Herod. As we stand at the beginning of a new year, how can we learn from them and focus on offering more worship?

Frederick Buechner says this about worship: To worship God means to serve him. Basically there are two ways to do it. One way is to do things for him that he needs to have done – run errands for him, carry messages for him, fight on his side, feed his lambs, and so on. The other way is to do things for him that you need to do – sing songs for him, create beautiful things for him, give things up for him, tell him what's on your mind and in your heart, in general rejoice in him and make a fool of yourself for him the way lovers have always made fools of themselves for the one they love.

And then Buechner says, "unless there is an element of joy and foolishness (in our worship), the time would be better spent doing something useful.

How does our worship show our love for God and God's love for the world? God uses all of us to share Good News, and all of us can be messengers. God calls us all to be messengers of more love to the world, and worship is a part of that.

We are called to fly in the face of fear—to be angels among us. The call is to worship that shows our love and loyalty to God in Christ above everything else. Worship is not a service on Sunday, but a way of life that shows where we put our hope and trust - and where we've learned to love. Worship invites us into God's loving presence, and when we've experienced God's presence, we have something to say. We have much to offer, much to give, much to share.

In our Methodist heritage, John Wesley began a tradition of a covenant renewal each year in the mid 1700's. It was a time when people would commit to God, and usually it was offered at the beginning a new year. And it's a powerful as we worship on New Year's Eve Day.

Let's pray this together:
*I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,
Praised for you or criticized for you.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.
And now, O wonderful and holy God,
Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,
you are mine, and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.*

I believe there are angels among us. We can be messengers who worship - doing God's work and offering ourselves for the sake of Christ's message of hope, peace, joy, and love. Worship helps us to be messengers - flying in the face of fear - to show others the gift of worshipping God and not ourselves.

May God help us. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Blessing

Look again at the Christ candle shining brightly. Let's proclaim the message we must take to the world:

Do not be afraid (repeat 3 times)

Mission to the Messengers - SHOW SLIDE

So I'm inviting you to share our quote meme for the week from our church Facebook page to your Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat accounts and hashtag it #morejoy. If you're not into social media, I invite you to share these words with someone: write it down and mail it to someone, give it to someone, take a photo of it and send it in a message—whatever you can do in whatever channels of communication are available to you:

"tweet" - #moreworship #donotbeafraid

"Isn't it a comfort to worship a God we cannot exaggerate?" (Francis Chan)

"I need to worship because without it, I lose a sense of wonder and gratitude and plod through life with blinders on." (John Ortberg)