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Scripture Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Sermon Title: *Worshipping the Savior: The Example of the Magi*

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Worshipping the Savior: The Example of the Magi

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Matthew 2:1-12, as we continue to look at Christmas as a Celebration of the Savior. We've looked at the Need for a Savior (Isaiah 9:1-7) and the Birth of the Savior (Matthew 1:18-25): and now today we will consider what Matthew says about Worshipping the Savior, as we examine the worship of the Magi as our example.

We depend on Luke and Matthew for all that we know about the birth and infancy of Jesus. After telling us about the angel's explanation to Joseph about the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb of his betrothed wife-to-be, Mary, Matthew omits the details of the setting of Jesus' birth. Matthew says Joseph simply believed the angel's explanation; then he became legally married to his wife, and yet they did not sexually consummate their union until after the birth of Jesus. (The implication is clear that after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph produced subsequent naturally born children, contrary to the claims of Catholic [Roman and Eastern] tradition for Mary's perpetual virginity. Scriptures also attest to Jesus' half brothers and sisters. Mark 6:3. See page 71 in article by B Witherington III, below).

Matthew gives us the account of the unlikely worship of the Magi, who were learned scholars (as *The Message* paraphrase identifies these astronomers/astrologers), possibly from Persia, today's Iran. They had a scientific interest in an amazing star, or terrestrial body of light, and also had somehow learned Scriptural prophecy from Jews in their country. These phenomena combined to draw them on the 900 mile, several month-long journey to Jerusalem and Bethlehem to see the child king. Contrary to our popular nativity manger scenes, the Magi were not present with the shepherds on the night Jesus was born. By the time they arrived, Mary and Joseph were residing in a home in Bethlehem and Jesus was a small child, between one and two years of age. What Matthew wants us to see is the contrasting response to the birth of Jesus on the part of these pagan Magi and the reigning monarch, Herod, and the religious scholars whom Herod consulted about this important birth. The Magi give us an unexpected yet vivid example of worshiping the young King Jesus.

Follow as I read **Matthew 2:1-12**.

For a number of years Nancy and I have enjoyed collecting various manger scenes from different parts of the world, such as Africa, the Holy Land, Europe and America. Today I'm doing a lot of damage to the image portrayed in these manger scenes that almost always include three Wise Men. But these scholars, these Magi, were not present with the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. We also enjoy the Christmas carol, "We Three Kings." I have no desire to be a Christmas iconoclast, but desire only to help us understand the biblical Christmas story.

The idea that they were kings was perpetrated in early church tradition by coupling this account of the worship of the Magi with the prophecies of Isaiah 60:1ff and Psalm 72:10f that speak of the worship of kings, who will do obeisance to the Messiah (See France, page 84, below). The assumption that there were three kings is based solely on the fact that there were three gifts presented to Jesus. But a journey of this magnitude would probably have required a much larger delegation. Tradition has even supplied us with names of these so-called three wise men—Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar, or Casper (See Wilkins, page 94, below), which is simply conjecture.

All of this tradition and myth aside, there is something very important we can learn from these Magi. From the reliable Scripture text, we see in these Magi an amazing and challenging example for our worship of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ. The worship and homage paid the child Jesus by these pagan scholars is in sharp contradistinction from the response of King Herod and the scholars of biblical Judaism. And as we review our text we will have to identify ourselves as either worshipers of Jesus or as those, like Herod, who are threatened by what Jesus represents, or as those like the religious scholars, who met with the news of the birth of the child Jesus with indifference.

Let's note first of all that the Magi are an example to us in worshipping the Savior...

➤ **By recognizing the Savior**

These Persian Magi were unlikely worshipers. Nevertheless they worshiped the child Jesus because they, by the grace of God, recognized the revelation that God gave to them in their faraway and unlikely land. These wise men came to recognize the Savior because of...

- *The revelation from God*

Somehow the Magi learned that a special star that had risen (ESV's more literal translation, "it rose," c.f. NIV's "in the east" in verses 2 and 9) to lead their way to Jerusalem, the city of the kings of the Jews. Perhaps dispersed, exiled Jews living in Persia had taught them Scriptures such as Isaiah 60:1ff, Psalm 72:1, and the prophecy of the semi-pagan Balaam in Numbers 24:17 (See Turner, page 87, below). In any case, they understood that the birth of the King of the Jews would be heralded by a special star. The star may have been the alignment of Jupiter and Saturn recorded about this time (7/6 BC). Or it may have been a star, a special light in the sky which God may well have provided as their guide to the Savior, something which the God who created this galaxy and millions of others is certainly capable of doing (See page 110 in Nolland, below).

19th Century English preacher FW Robertson (1816-53), known as "the father of the two point sermon" (Notice how many main points to *this* sermon!), made a helpful observation about these wise men in his sermon, "The Star in the East." These Magi were experts in an interesting combination of science and pagan speculation, being astronomers in the scientific sense and astrologers in the ancient speculative, superstitious sense. Perhaps their search for truth in the stars arose from their need and yearning for the infinite, noted Robertson. As Paul noted in Romans 1:18ff, God makes himself known in part through his creation. Perhaps through their study of the stars God began to arouse in their minds and hearts a yearning for fuller truth that would eventually lead them to worshipping Christ (See Roberts, below).

I thought about this in light of the astrologers, fortune-tellers ("sterren wichelaren") and palm readers I glimpse as I channel search through the Belgian television programs. In this nation, which has essentially turned its back on traditional Roman Catholicism, is there not a yearning for life's meaning and for answers about one's purpose and destiny related to the stars, to the transcendent, to one's horoscope? In this culture of spiritual darkness we must pray for and relate the truth of Christ to these who are searching for light, that they might find God's light in the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6). This is what God did for these pagan astrologers. He

met their search for the transcendent and their study of the stars with the truth of the Word of God about the Savior.

And we have the full revelation of God's Word written, which is "a light shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19). We know the full story of God's great salvation through the incarnation, sinless life, suffering death and triumphant resurrection of his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Now "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men," Paul writes (Titus 2:11). As Paul told the Athenians, "In the past God overlooked" the ignorance of superstitious worship, but now that Jesus has come and we know the way of salvation through faith in him, God "commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

God took the initiative with these wise men. Salvation is always by God's gracious initiative, and apart from the breakthrough that comes by his Word and Spirit we remain dead in our transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1). God came to these unlike "prospects," in a land of deep spiritual darkness, and broke through that darkness with the revelation of his light and truth. God's revelation to the Magi shows us that the message of salvation through Jesus Christ is indeed for the whole world. This is "good news of great joy that (is) for all the people," as the angel announced to the shepherds (Luke 2:10).

Just this past Sunday, during the fellowship following the worship service, a couple from the UK who had visited us on a few occasions while in Brussels on business, noted to me their delight in worship and fellowship with us because of the great diversity of our people from so many different nations. "It's a foretaste of what heaven will be like," she said. Indeed, that's a Scriptural assessment, because we know from The Apocalypse that God will be worshiped by a great multitude "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Revelation 7:9). We need to be reminded that we are called to join in God's work of seeking worshipers from every culture and subculture (John 4:23). The message of the Savior is for all people, and all people are called to worship him.

And the Magi seized the truth that God gave them and followed the star he provided and did so with...

- *The openness of faith*

I find these Magi are an amazing example of the openness of faith. Matthew presents their openness of faith in sharp contrast with the closed-ness and indifference of those who had greater access to God's truth, namely King Herod and the scholars of biblical Judaism. Herod was a convert to Judaism, who should have been familiar with the prophecies to which the Magi referred (2). And when Herod heard about the birth of a potential rival to his throne, which he had designated for his offspring, he was more than disturbed, as the NIV says (3). He was "terrified," says *The Message*.

King Herod led the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, “a major feat of ancient architecture,” but also was known as a cruel and ruthless tyrant (see Nolland, page 108, below). He was also paranoid, and always fearful of betrayal, even by his own family. He had numerous wives and sons put to death because of his fear of plots to dethrone him. Thus, when he heard about the birth of a rival king, he was more than disturbed. He was in turmoil (See Blomberg, pages 61ff, below). And of course, there are those yet today who meet the message of Jesus with hostility and antagonism, perceiving Jesus as a potential rival to their control of their own lives. They see the message of Jesus as a threat to their personal autonomy.

The chief priests and teachers of the law, the religious scholars of Judaism, the biblical faith of Jesus’ time, met the announcement of the birth of the Christ child with indifference. They were able to supply an answer to the question of Messianic prophecy (quoting Micah 5:2 in verse 6), but they had no interest in seeking the child for themselves. What a contrast to the eager receptivity of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-36) and to these Magi! No amount of religious or biblical knowledge can produce faith. It’s a work of grace from God that prompts the response of the openness of faith.

And how amazing was the faith of these Magi, who were open from the very beginning and who followed God’s leading till they made their personal discovery of Christ at the home of Mary and Joseph. As Michael Green says, “Is it not perfectly astonishing that men with so little to go on should venture so far, endure such hardship in travel, and face such uncertainties of finding the One the star betokened?” He continues, “I find (the wise men’s) faith, their insight, their wholehearted search and adoring worship, utterly amazing” (page 66, below).

Faith that God gives is faith that perseveres, which is what we see from...

- *The beginning of a journey*

As I noted above, the Magi journeyed about 900 miles, a huge undertaking of several months, replete with dangers and difficulties. But that is what faith is, a pilgrimage, a journey through uncertain territory, and territory that is certain to contain difficulties and disappointments along the way. The fact that these Magi were able to take this faith journey that led to discovery and worship is a rebuke to those of us who have much greater access to truth and opportunity to hear the message and join the journey. And by staying focused on the journey and persisting in faith, these wise men finally arrived at the house where the child Jesus was. There they saw his face and their faith was rewarded and confirmed.

Worship begins with faith in Jesus, and is an encounter with him as he reveals himself to us by the Spirit and the Word. When we seek to know the Savior, he makes himself known to us by giving us faith to believe his Word. And what he calls us to is not an intellectual understanding, but rather a personal relationship

with God. Faith then becomes a life-long journey wherein we grow in that relationship of love, trust and obedience. And I find that we must keep on “going hard” after our relationship with God and our capacity to worship him as we should.

Worship begins by recognizing that Jesus Christ is the Savior and then continues...

➤ **By responding to the Savior**

As the Magi show us with their example, worship is our response to God’s revelation. This means that if we are not worshipping, we’re not listening or watching, since God’s purpose and desire is to be worshiped. He seeks to make himself known to us day by day and throughout the day as well as in our worshipping together on the Lord’s Day. The Magi received God’s revelation from the star that was given and from the Scriptures that were told to them, and as they followed with openness and obedience, the star resumed leading them and led them to some back street in Bethlehem, to the house where Mary, Joseph and the baby were staying. And when they realized that the star had led them successfully, they responded...

- *With a joyful discovery*

One note that should always characterize our worship, regardless of the setting, the music styles or even the content of Scripture and sermon, should be joy. Even in our personal worship, if we are seeking God and if we wait upon him to once again reveal himself and his truth and fill us with his Spirit, we will be renewed in joy. Joy is the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22f), and in the words of CS Lewis (1898-1963), is “the serious business of heaven” (See below). And when we are worship in Spirit and in truth, we will experience the fullness of joy in the presence of God (John 4:24; Psalm 16:11). Joy is not the giddy happiness that flees as easily as it comes, but is the steady sense of God’s presence and the deep gusto of the Holy Spirit who gives us a sense of being complete in God and delighted in him alone.

But there is also an underlying sense of excited suspense with our joy, as these Magi experienced when they saw the star and realized they were on the verge of seeing the Savior. It was the excited anticipation of seeing the fulfillment of their 900-mile, months-long, danger-and-difficulty-filled journey reaching its successful conclusion. This was the joy that Andrew experienced when he first met the Savior and went to tell his brother, Simon Peter: “We have found the Messiah (that is, the Christ)” (John 1:41). “Eureka! The search is successful!” Again as the angel announced to the shepherds, this is “good news of great joy” (Luke 2:10).

We are all different and meet life's experiences with different levels of emotion. Some are secretive and controlled with their emotions and others are more naturally exuberant. Yet unless there is some level of joy in that first encounter with Christ, there is reason to examine oneself, to make sure one is in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5). And if our worship before God each day and certainly in the midst of God's people on the Lord's Day doesn't give some joy in meeting the God of Creation and the Savior of the world, we should wonder if we are not missing out on the reality of true worship. Changing the styles of music worship is not the solution. Rather it's indicative of the need to change the heart of the worshiper. The Magi were overjoyed (10). The more literal translations captures the redundancy and extravagance of their joy: "They *rejoiced exceedingly* with *great joy*" (ESV, verse 10, italics mine).

That joy in the presence of the child Jesus led the Magi to worship...

- *With adoration and giving*

Seeing the child Jesus with his mother Mary, "they bowed down and worshiped him" (11). They prostrated themselves before this child in the arms of his young peasant mother surrounded, not by the accouterments of royalty and power, but by the evidence of poverty and human weakness. In fact, when an infuriated King Herod was to soon discover that the Magi had not informed them where the child was, he would issue an order to kill all the male children under age 2. So, this child and his parents were soon to be hunted fugitives. Yet the Magi, with their very limited understanding, adored this weak, so unlikely child Jesus, and worshiped him as the Savior King.

A lot has been made of the symbolic significance of the gifts of the Magi to the child Jesus. But what we do know is these gifts were simply expensive items befitting one who would fulfill the role of king (Nolland, page 117, below). In presenting these gifts, the Magi fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah 60:6, which refers to gifts of gold and incense being brought from far away nations to the King in Zion. Again, the worship and adoration of the Magi is, in the words of Michael Green, "perfectly astonishing" and "utterly amazing" (page 66, below).

And we are called to worship one who was born in weakness, lived in poverty and was crucified in utter weakness, humility and shame. He is the crucified Lamb of God whom we worship and adore. It was through his weakness, suffering and death that he accomplished our salvation and provided for our forgiveness and his free gift of eternal life. In a world that worships power and human strength and institutional authority, it takes grace for faith to trust in a crucified Servant King. Jesus is known and received as Savior only by faith. Without faith, Jesus continues to be rejected by the mighty and the self-directed and even the religious leadership of the day.

The Christ of the Cross is an offense to the mighty of this world, represented by King Herod. They will do all they can to eliminate any influence or invasion from the message of the cross. This is why all world religions and ideologies will be tolerated except faith in the crucified Savior. To believe, worship and adore him means that he, the crucified, must be Lord, and to follow him is also to take the way of the cross, the way of self-denial and suffering love. To worship and adore Jesus is not to become religious. The religious teachers who advised King Herod had all the right head knowledge and knew all the biblical answers, but had no heart to worship, to seek, or to adore the child Jesus (4ff).

By grace through faith we join the Magi in adoring Jesus, the Lamb of God, crucified in weakness and raised by the power of God (Revelation 5:12; 2 Corinthians 13:4). We worship the King of kings, whose kingdom is forever, raised above the wrecks of Herod's crumbled kingdom and towering above all the wrecks of the kingdoms and nations and economies of this world.

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).

And to adore him is to acknowledge his worth, which is why the Magi gave him gifts fit for a king. And our worship (a word from the Old English "weorthscipe") is a response that should be worthy of his worth to us. Our gifts to him should be a grateful expression of his worth and our debt to his life and grace.

I suppose this is the origin of our tradition of gift-giving at Christmas. We give to loved ones as a reminder of his great gift to us, the gift of himself. But what greater gift can we give to him than the gift of ourselves, which are symbolized by the offerings that we give to him? John says that we love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). And Paul says that God's grace, that motivated his great Gift to us, is our motivation to give to him and to one another (2 Corinthians 8:8ff). That's why the offering is an important part of our corporate worship. We haven't given worthy worship if we haven't offered ourselves anew to Christ and given him his tithes and our grace-inspired offerings of gratitude. The most worthy and grace-inspired offering by any worshiper is that of the poor widow, who gave all she had to live on (Luke 21:1-4). Only grace could inspire such giving and enable her to trust that God would supply all of her needs.

The worship of the Magi changed their lives, as they continued to listen to the voice of God and followed...

- *With obedience "by another way"*

Worship is an end in itself, as Jesus said. The Father is always seeking worshipers to be gathered around his throne (John 4:23), and worship is our highest calling and will be our everlasting obsession (Revelation 7:9ff). Thus, worship is not simply a spiritual Sunday morning pep rally to motivate us to live

for God during the week. But indeed worship is essential for renewing our heavenly, Kingdom-of-God perspective and bringing life back into its proper focus. Isaiah's worship in the temple was the context for his receiving his call (6:1-8) and the worship of the disciples in the Upper Room was a time to prepare for the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Luke 24:49; Acts 2:1ff).

The worship of the Magi was life changing. We can assume that they were never to be the same again. Now they were in a position to hear the voice of God and were of a disposition to obey. Even though King Herod had commanded them to report to him about the location of the child (for his murderous purpose), the Magi were now under a higher authority. They now embarked on the long, arduous journey homeward "by another route."

That's what worship does. It redirects us in a different direction, from the way of self and the fallen world and its social pressure, to the way and will of God, which is a different direction. Often it's a difficult way and one the world doesn't understand or accept. Sometimes it's a dangerous way, a lonely and an inexplicable way. But when we worship the living Lord and give him our allegiance, it's the only way. Just as the disciples responded to the threat of persecution with the explanation, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29)! Worship as a real encounter with the living God leaves us as different people.

Conclusion:

We have seen once again from the gospels a "how much more" argument. If these pagan scholars and pseudo scientists would take limited biblical revelation and follow this star across such a distance to worship a child in a humble Palestinian setting, how much more should we be stirred to worship the now crucified, risen and glorified Savior, who is King of kings and Lord of lords?

Is our worship from hearts of adoration and with undivided devotion to him who is worthy of our best, even our all? Do we worship him with joy at the privilege of being at his feet and belonging to his heavenly chorus of worshipers from every nation, tribe, people and language (Revelation 7:9)? Does our worship carry over from the sanctuary to the workplace and venues of everyday life? And do we continue to offer our bodies as living sacrifices as our daily spiritual service of worship (Romans 12:1)?

I can't help but think of those religious scholars whom Herod summoned to find out where the Messiah was to be born. They made no effort to worship the child King, even though they knew much more about the promised One. I take this as a warning to people like me who can know so much about the message and even the person and work of Christ that I become jaded to the real message and

our familiarity breeds indifference. That's true regarding our familiarity with the Christmas story.

Our theologian son wrote me an e-mail asking what fresh approach I'm giving to the Christmas message this year. Indeed, it should be a fresh message and an up-to-date report on what Jesus means to us today and how his birth and our worship of him continues to impact us. I realize from the Magi that worship must become the passion and the relentless pursuit of my life. And I must bring everything else in my life under the overarching purpose of worshipping Christ.

Just this past week I received an e-mail message from missionary friends who after less than a year must return from Taiwan to the US because of recently discovered medical problems with one of their children. The long pilgrimage Mike and Dawn Husnick have taken in the past few years seems now to be rendered meaningless by this sudden truncation of their dream and sense of calling to be missionaries in Asia. All seems so senseless to them. Yet, I was heartened by Dawn's reply to my e-mail in which she asserted her confidence that they were still in the Lord Jesus' "grip," as she words it. I believe also our missionary friends and IBC members, Ron and Renee McLain, have the same confidence and continue to worship the Lord, even while he leads them through a time of horrible grief and sorrow. Only in the context of surrendered worship are we enabled to move beyond these unimaginable, unjust and senseless twists and turns in our lives (Psalm 73:16f). Worship of the Lord Jesus reminds us that we indeed are "in his grip."

Let's take these Magi, these misidentified figures misplaced in our manger scenes, and let them have their rightful place as examples to us of how we ought to offer ourselves this Christmas in the heartfelt worship of our Lord Jesus.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. After studying the text, what is your image of the Magi and how does your concept differ from the traditional Wise Men of many manger scenes?
2. How did God make himself known to these pagan Magi so that they knew the special star would lead them to find a new-born king of the Jews?
3. What does this say about how God continues to reveal himself to pagans, i.e. those outside of biblical faith and culture?
4. How much do you think a person needs to understand before he/she can worship and believe in Christ?

5. How does worship increase our understanding of Christ?
6. What place should worship have in the life of a believer?
7. In what ways do you think worshipping Christ changes a person's life?

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