

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 10, 2021

Come Let Us Adore Him

Matthew 2:1-12

"O come, let us adore him." I know that we're more than two weeks past Christmas Day, but those words from "O Come, All Ye Faithful" still summon us to do what we do year-round—we worship the Lord. In fact, the sign displaying those words is still hanging over our sanctuary entrance. And since we haven't gathered for in-person worship since December 20, our Christmas tree is still up here in the church, which is actually very appropriate for today's message. The Christmas ornaments include a star, which plays a key role in today's text from Matthew. And the magi are still in their spots on the communion table, humbly presenting their gifts to the Christ child.

In some parts of the Christian community, this past Wednesday was Epiphany, an occasion to remember how Christ was revealed or made known to Gentiles, represented by the magi. These magi are travelers from another region of the world. They have a reputation for being adept at astronomy, as well as occult arts such as astrology, interpretation of dreams, fortune telling, and magic. They're clearly not worshipers of Israel's God. And yet, these are the ones to whom the reign of God in Christ is revealed. They're a sign of something far greater than themselves. They enact the fulfillment of the promise that all nations will make the pilgrimage to come to Israel's light and worship Israel's God.

Last month, we began our annual international missions emphasis, including the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering. This time the theme was "A Great Multitude + You," drawn from Revelation 7:9-10: "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'"

That vision of the future is a reality already taking shape in the arrival of the magi. These are non-Jews asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (v. 2). The climax of God's redeeming purposes is underway. God's saving reach is global. His will stretches worldwide.

But not everybody in the story is on board with this global project. Herod pretends that he wants to join the magi in worshiping Jesus. But his piety is just a disguise for his real intentions. Herod doesn't really want to bow down before Jesus. On the contrary, he's accustomed to people bowing down before him. So rather than welcoming Jesus' sovereignty, Herod takes steps to protect his own sovereignty, to the point of slaughtering baby boys. What begins as a sacred scene fit for the front of a Christmas card turns into violent, bloody defiance of the reign of God.

The journey of the magi reminds us that the birth of Mary's baby isn't all sweetness, blessing, and light. There's a lot of darkness in this story too. Worldwide worship of the one true Lord isn't automatic. Powers collide. Kingdoms clash. Children die because a cruel tyrant refuses to yield to the world's true king. When the summons goes out, "O come, let us adore him," some say yes and some say no.

Today you've joined me in saying yes. Together, we come into the presence of God, who has revealed his glory to us in Christ. We're part of the great and growing multitude inaugurated by the magi, who bowed down and opened their treasures to the Messiah. Worship is at the heart of who we are and what we do. And we're called to do it consistently and faithfully, in all kinds of circumstances. Missionary Amy Carmichael wrote:

I believe that if we are to be and to do for others what God means us to be and to do, we must not let Adoration and Worship slip into second place, "For it is the central service asked by God of human souls; and its neglect is responsible for much lack of spiritual depth and power."

Perhaps we may find here the reason why we so often run dry. We do not give time enough to what makes for depth, and so we are shallow; a wind, quite a little wind, can ruffle our surface; a little hot sun, and all the moisture in us evaporates. It should not be so.¹

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, I trust that one of the things that has strengthened you and sustained you in your faith is our weekly gathering for worship. Even if you haven't been able to join us in person, or even recently when we haven't been able to gather in person, the word of God has still gone forth to you. You've been given ways to keep listening, to keep praying, to keep singing, to keep giving yourself to the God who has given us himself in Christ. COVID-19 has unleashed so much death and destruction, but it can't stop our daily and weekly journey into the presence of the Lord, whether virtual or face-to-face.

Last March, when we were first starting to practice social distancing and following stay-at-home orders, many Christian groups and organizations began providing resources to help their congregations adapt and continue to worship. On one worship website, it was remarkable to hear the insights coming from different parts of the country and the world. Contributions came in from a neighborhood in Chicago, from an indigenous people's reserve in Canada, from a tech savvy community in California, from Chinese-speaking congregations in British Columbia, and from megachurches in Hong Kong. These diverse perspectives are a reminder that though the coronavirus was, and is, a global event, so is the worship that God's people have continued during the past year, in many places, and many forms.

One of the churches that added its voice to this online conversation is located in Clarkston, Georgia, part of metro Atlanta. This multicultural congregation, which places an emphasis on embodied worship, is called Proskuneo Ministries. In this case, the name is telling. *Proskuneo* is a Greek word that means to worship, to kneel before God and pay homage. This congregation takes its name from the same term used in today's text from Matthew, in which the magi arrive, see the child Jesus, and bow down and worship him (v. 11).

As you join me in bowing before the Lord, remember that you're not alone in your worship. Yes, individual worship is significant. It's a critical part of your life with God. But your life in Christ is joined to the lives of all others who are in Christ. You're part of a worldwide community of worship. As Paul says to the Corinthians, you are "sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2). Even though you're presently within your four walls, remember that you're still part of a global household that honors and offers obedience to our Lord and Savior.

The Lord has been, is, and always will be the center and focus of our adoration. He is the journey's destination. As the magi said, "We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him" (v. 2). I heard a couple of commentators rightly note that when the magi arrived at the palace, maybe Herod initially thought that the gold, incense, and myrrh were for him. But no, he would have been wrong. The magi only opened up their treasures for Jesus. No other human leader, or institution, or cause, or ideology, is worthy of our

deepest love and highest loyalty. And that includes the self. More than we often realize, our lives are shaped and defined by who or what we worship. And every Christmas season is an opportunity for turning from our idols and recentering our lives on the Lord, the world's true ruler.

I once worked in a bookstore where some members of the staff had sort of informally gathered around a conversation going on between a manager and another employee. I don't remember the subject of the conversation, but I do remember that at one point, the manager started walking in circles around the employee, over and over. "What are you doing?" asked the employee. To which the manager replied, "Oh, I'm just revolving around you, since you think you're the center of the universe."

As one person has pointed out, worship is so important because it's the weekly, and daily, decentering of yourself. It's "the act of constantly ... putting God back at the center of both your universe and the universe in such a way then that you turn then to your neighbor, knowing that you're free to love the neighbor."² This is why it's essential that you and I are doing what we're doing today. We're worshiping the Lord. We're realigning our lives with the reality of Christ's reign. This brings praise to God, and promotes what's good for us and for our neighbor.

In his book, *On the Road with Charles Kuralt*, he tells about a time when he and his television crew visited the chapel of Maria Angelorum in La Crosse, Wisconsin. There the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration

have been praying *without interruption* for a hundred years! Every hour of every day and night for a century, two sisters have been on their knees, side by side, always praying for the same things—for an end to sickness and hunger, for an end to social injustice, for wisdom in high places, for their city and their country, for their friends, for their enemies, for all people, including you and me—always ending, "Bring peace to the world."

Kuralt spoke to Sister Mileta, who first took her place in this chain of prayer in 1915. He asked her, "So you're just going to go on praying for another hundred years?" And Sister Mileta answered, "Hopefully, yes. Hopefully we can go on for another hundred years, and perhaps another hundred years, till the end of time."³

I understand that about a year ago, after a dozen years of study and reflection, the sisters changed the way they practice their prayers. They began praying daily from 6:00 am to 10:00 p.m. According to the community's president, "Our thoughtful study over the years has included a growing understanding of a modern way to live in adoration through our prayer lives and actions, no matter where we are."⁴ I'm not sure what changes the sisters have made during this pandemic, but their history tells me that they've probably figured out ways to adapt and still adore.

Come let us adore him. You've come again today. And we'll keep coming to adore him, one way or another, in some form or another. The magi had the star to guide them. As we ourselves navigate through this uncertain and fearful time, let's stay focused on Christ, knowing that at the end of this long journey through life and history, there awaits the fullness of God's reign, and the radiance of Christ's glory, where we'll adore him forever.

¹ Amy Carmichael, in *Edges of His Ways*. Quoted in *Christianity Today* (Vol. 39, No. 13).

² Rolf Jacobson, in Sermon Brainwave #701-Day of Epiphany. Working Preacher website. December 29, 2019. Accessed January 7, 2021 <<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts/sermon-brainwave-701-day-of-epiphany>>.

³ Charles Kuralt, *On the Road with Charles Kuralt* (n.p.: Fawcett, 1985) n.p.

⁴ "Franciscan sisters changing adoration practice." WXOW website. January 24, 2020. Accessed January 7, 2021 <<https://wxow.com/2020/01/24/franciscan-sisters-changing-adoration-practice/>>.