

THE WORSHIP OF THE MAGI

Matthew 2:1-23

Key verses 2:10,11

"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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, incense and myrrh."

Merry and blessed Christmas! Today, the 4th of Advent, we celebrate our Christmas service. Who would have thought a year ago that we would no longer be able to celebrate in the Lengsdorf clubhouse and that we would have to celebrate with safety distance and mouth guards. Much unfamiliarity. A lot of new things. For the first time, we are experiencing a Christmas service with live streaming today. In the midst of so many changes, however, there is something that is and remains unchanging: the love of God for this world and for each individual here, that he gave his only begotten Son, Jesus, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. In this lesson, based on Matthew chapter 2, we want to know who this Jesus, the newborn King of the Jews, is. Let us, like the wise men in those days, set out to seek this promised Messiah, Jesus, find him personally and worship him with our best. May God grant you the overflowing joy of the wise men, which comes from the personal encounter with Jesus and from true worship.

1. The newborn King of the Jews (1-11)

Let's look at verse 1: "After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem". At the beginning of the Christmas story, the evangelist Matthew gives some very important details about the birth of Jesus: in Bethlehem in Judea; in the time of King Herod. Bethlehem is about 10 km south of Jerusalem; King Herod was the

vassal king of Rome appointed by the Roman Emperor Augustus. Although there was a three-decade period of peace under Herod, with numerous building projects, Herod himself had countless intrigues attached to him and was considered a bloodthirsty and vengeful tyrant. Although he was called "King of the Jews" by Rome, Herod was an Edomite and thus a descendant of Esau, while all Jews were descendants of Jacob, Esau's brother. Herod married his second wife at the age of thirty, Mariamne, a Haemonite only 12 years old. Subsequently, Herod disowned his first wife Doris. Later he had Mariamne executed in cold blood, as well as their common sons, because he feared for their revenge. Herod married a total of ten times. But he never became happy, so he was always full of suspicion, envy and obsession with power. Israel was also in a dark time spiritually. There had been no prophet for about 400 years. Many religious leaders were spiritually corrupt and lived for their belly and own glory. When Jesus was born, none of the superiors took notice of the fulfillment of God's promises. The people agonized in those dark times, waiting for the Messiah. Today, in our play, we will see a dance of the waiting people. This scene expresses the darkness and despair of the people and shows their deep longing for the promised Messiah, Immanuel.

But today's text also teaches us that there were some wise men in the far East. Scripture does not tell us how many there were, although we always say "the three wise

men." So there could have been 4, 5, or 10! Maybe five, like our five baptized (Samuel Abr., Peter Joseph, Sarah, Sarah Grace and Joshua) who set out this year, despite obstacles and temptations, to meet Jesus and develop a very personal relationship with Jesus. Our baptized children embarked on a very exciting pilgrimage by having intense Bible study, receiving God's Word into their hearts, and by writing their testimonies to receive Jesus as a true object of worship and Savior. God richly blessed their pilgrimage through the baptism service on Advent 1. God will continue to accompany and bless their pilgrimage based on His word from 1 Peter 4:13 and use them precious as God's children and God's holy people for Germany, Europe and for the whole world.

The wise men are called "magoi" in the original Greek text. This is not a Greek word at all, but comes from the old Persian and means "scholars" or "astronomers". I.e. they were educated people. Scientists, researching people who diligently explored and observed the starry sky. We can assume that these scholars were knowledgeable even in the writings of the Old Testament. Because after the Babylonian captivity many Jews had stayed behind in the Great Persian Empire. They spread the Jewish teachings there. So it probably came that also these "magoi" knew about a promised Messiah. One day, when they saw a new star in the firmament, they found out that there is a promise in the Word of God about the coming Messiah. Deuteronomy 24:17 says, "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not from near. There shall arise a star from Jacob, and a scepter out of Israel, and shall bruise the temples of Moab, and the crown of all the sons of Set." "A scepter from Israel" clearly indicated a king, the Messiah. The wise men did not hesitate, but immediately took special leave and set out on the long arduous journey that took at least 3 months.

What can we learn from the wise men? We see that they were deeply truth-seeking people, that is, they had great spiritual desire to worship the newborn King. When they saw the new star, they acted consist-

ently. They remembered a word of God and went to find the promised Messiah. For these wise men, one word of God, Deuteronomy 24:17, was enough to leave everything behind, begin a pilgrimage, and thus find out the truth about the newborn King of the Jews. A word of God (John 5:6) "Do you want to get well?" made a freshman start Bible study. Thus, he could find out the truth about Jesus Christ in the Word of God and accept Jesus as his Savior and Lord. The sin-forgiving grace of Jesus brought about a turning point in his life. God called this young man to be a shepherd and Bible teacher and raised him to be a determined disciple of Jesus and spiritual leader. What word of God do you follow, or what word do you want to follow? Psalm 119 is entitled "The Glory of the Word of God." It is the longest of all the Psalms and it is worth reading it in its entirety. It states, for example: "How shall a young man go his way blamelessly? If he keep thy words" (9); "Before I was humbled, I erred; but now I keep thy word" (67); "Thy word is sweeter to my mouth than honey. Your word makes me wise; therefore I hate all false ways. Thy word is a lamp unto my foot, and a light unto my path" (103-105).

The wise men were profound seekers of truth. Based on the Word of God, they simply had to find out what it was about this star that had appeared and God's promise about the Messiah had been fulfilled. Their souls thirsted to worship the newborn King, the Messiah. The wise men were actually doing very well in the Orient. They were recognized, materially prosperous and they could live a secure life. But in their hearts they were searching for the truth. They realized that all their good conditions were ultimately of no value if they did not find the truth and the meaning of their lives. When they saw the star and remembered the promise of God's Word, they were able to leave everything behind to begin a long pilgrimage based on God's Word of Deuteronomy 24:17 to personally meet Jesus, the newborn King of the Jews.

God had given many promises about the Messiah to His people Israel. But especially the Jewish leaders were spiritually asleep and took no notice of the birth of Jesus. But those wise men in the far East, who did not know much at all: they saw the star and had an irrepressible longing for the Messiah and followed the star of the Messiah. Let us ask ourselves personally: "With which heart am I looking for the Messiah today? Do I already know everything and am I full and complacent? Or do I have a deep longing in my heart to meet Jesus, to know him more deeply and to develop a personal love relationship with him? Many young people today seek their happiness and joy through other people, through money or career. But such happiness and joy is fleeting and leaves their innermost being empty and unfulfilled. However, if they set out like the wise men to find Jesus, the true King and Messiah in the Word of God, then they will meet Jesus personally and experience true peace, true happiness and lasting joy through worshiping Jesus. When I worshipped money and career and wanted to make a big name for myself, I was so empty and desperate inside that I cried out, "I wretched man, who will deliver me from this death-devastated body?" Jesus heard my heart cry by inviting me to Bible study and revealing Himself to me through His Word (Mark 8:29) as Christ, King and LORD. He also let me personally receive His unconditional and forgiving love on the cross through the word of Luke 23:34a: "Father, forgive Jochen, for he does not know what he does!" The encounter with Jesus and his grace of forgiveness of sins gave me the overflowing joy of new life with the mission of God. Now, as a holy pilgrim, I may follow Jesus every day by serving intellectual young people as a shepherd, Bible teacher and spiritual director. In this time I may continue my pilgrimage based on the Word of God (Genesis 15:5,6) to serve the work of God in Bonn and Rhein-Sieg, in East Germany, Europe and as far as the Muslim world.

Just like the wise men who found the true object of their devotion and worship in Je-

sus, through Bible study we too can find the newborn King Jesus, and come to know deeply who this Jesus is: not just a little baby in a manger. He is the true King. He is the eternal Creator who became man to redeem us. He is the good shepherd who feeds his people and finally gave his life to death on the cross for our redemption. He is also the Victor who rose from the dead on the third day as promised. He is the eternal ruler who ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is the Eternal One whose kingdom has no end. This Jesus is worthy of all our worship. All believers from all peoples and nations will one day stand before His throne and fall down before Jesus and worship Him. Revelation 5:9, 10a says, "And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth."

The wise men came to Jerusalem and entered the palace of King Herod. Let's look at verse 2: "and asked, "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." But there was no newborn king of the Jews in the royal palace! Their coming now caught the attention of King Herod. When he realized that this foreign delegation was not asking for him at all, but was looking for the newborn King of the Jews, Herod raged. Let's look at verse 3: "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him." "What, another king of the Jews?" All his envy, craving for prestige and recognition came out and frightened the whole city of Jerusalem. Immediately Herod called a commission to investigate what the newborn king of the Jews was all about. The commission con-

cluded that the birth should take place in Bethlehem in Judea. Let us read verse 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 shepherd my people Israel." Once God, through the prophet Micah, gave his people this great and very concrete promise about the Messiah. He would not be born anywhere, not even in the capital city, but in the small town of Bethlehem. This already indicates that the Messiah would not come as a worldly king. Jesus is the spiritual king. He rules the hearts of the people with love and peace. He is the good shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep and leads them to green pastures and fresh water. Bethlehem literally means "bread house." In fact, Jesus came from heaven and became the bread of life for all people. John 6:33 says, "For God's bread is that which comes from heaven and gives life to the world." In verse 41b, Jesus says, "I am the bread that came down from heaven."

Let's read verses 7 and 8: "Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." Herod pretended. He pretended to be nice and friendly, although he had evil in mind. He was like the devil who is a liar from the beginning. Never would Herod tolerate another king of the Jews next to him, even if he was only a little child. For Herod to say that he would go and worship the little child as well was an outright lie.

Let's look at verses 9 through 11: "After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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, frankincense and myrrh." On the way

to Bethlehem, the star went before them and led them to the place where the little child was. The wise men rejoiced greatly and went into the house and found Mary with the baby Jesus. Luther translated, "they were greatly rejoiced." The Elberfelder Bible says, "and rejoiced with very great joy!" Have you also experienced this very great joy? This joy is only available through the personal encounter and true worship of Jesus as King and Lord.

The wise men had only one desire: to find the promised Messiah and worship Him. For this they had invested everything. And they were not disappointed. When they found Jesus and worshiped him, they rejoiced with very great joy! The source of their joy was the child in the manger. He is the Messiah, the newborn King and the Good Shepherd. Let's read verses 10 and 11 again, "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, frankincense and myrrh."

In their joy they fell down and worshipped the little child and gave him gold, frankincense and myrrh. Why these gifts for a little child? These three gifts speak very clearly about who Jesus is and already point to his later death on the cross. Gold is a symbol of a king. So it shows something of Jesus' deity and is a reflection for the glory of God. Frankincense is white and was offered by priests at sacrifice; it points to the purity of the Savior and the true High Priest, Jesus. Myrrh has a very bitter taste - a reference to Jesus' later bitter death on the cross. From the wise men from the east we learn their deep longing for the Messiah. Also, their exuberant joy when they found him and their sincere worship when they fell down before Jesus and opened their precious treasures to him.

During this Christmas service, we too want to find Jesus in a whole new way, to establish or renew and deepen a personal love relationship with Jesus. When we encounter and worship this Jesus, we can experience

for ourselves the overflowing joy of the wise men. Some young people, like Simon and Patrick, have come from far away to worship Jesus today. Dasom, Lukas, Olaf worship Jesus through their participation in the Christmas theater and are witnesses to the overflowing joy in Jesus. Some attend this Christmas service despite pandemic and health problems over Zoom to seek and worship Jesus like the wise men. Many staff members gather in the morning for early prayer to seek Jesus and worship him. They too are wise men who experience the overflowing joy of worshiping Jesus. A mission house church has been serving the work of God in Germany for 40 years now. They are blessed sages because they completely surrender their lives as holy pilgrims for the mission of God in spite of opposition and persecution. Through them, many young people have been able to encounter Jesus through Bible study and life fellowship and grow into disciples of Jesus and teachers of the Bible and servants of the Word.

May God grant each of us a personal encounter with Jesus, the newborn King and Messiah. May He fill our hearts with the highest joy as we worship Jesus, consecrate our whole life to Him and develop the deep love relationship with Jesus.

2. The Infancy of Jesus (12-23)

Let's look at verse 12: "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." God now intervened in a very specific way so that the wise men received direction not to go back to Herod. The wise men returned to the morning country after their worship. We are told nothing more about them. But we can be sure that they lived a new life, changed and witnessing the Messiah. Certainly they did not keep the good news of Jesus' birth to themselves. Perhaps they served the pioneering work in the Orient and established three bases in Mosul, Baghdad and Basra.

God also sent an angel to Joseph in a dream, warning him of Herod's plans to murder him and instructing him to flee to Egypt with his mother and child. Verse 14 says, "So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt." Joseph immediately obeyed and set out. Let's look at verses 16-18. Now the true face of Herod came out. He realized that the wise men had not returned to him. He became so angry that he gave orders to kill all the children in Bethlehem who were two years old and under. This fulfilled what had already been promised by the prophet Jeremiah.

Let's look at verses 19 and 20: "After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." Joseph did not hesitate, but obeyed God's instruction. God gave Joseph direction to go to the Galilean country to the city of Nazareth. Jesus' life as a refugee child looked so pitiful. Yet none of the incidents happened by chance. Matthew emphasizes that all things happened in fulfillment of Scripture.

These verses teach us that Jesus was persecuted from his birth, even becoming a refugee child when his parents had to flee with him to Egypt. But despite these outwardly adverse circumstances, God remained in control at all times and fulfilled His plan. Herod had so much innocent blood on his conscience. But in the end, he too had to die. But God preserved the life of Jesus and through him fulfilled his plan of salvation for all mankind. We too may know that our lives are not arbitrarily at the mercy of fate - even in the midst of this Corona pandemic. God has everything under control. He will be with us in the new year as well. He will bless our prayers and the formation of the 10,000 one-on-one Bible study teams to spiritually reawaken Germany and Europe and raise up three bases in the Muslim world.

Today we were greatly encouraged by the wise men from the east. Based on a word from God, they set out on a long pilgrimage. With deep longing for the Messiah, they followed the star to the end. When they found Jesus and worshipped Him, their hearts were filled with overflowing joy. Let us pray that this Christmas season we may deeply develop our love relationship with Jesus and experience the overflowing joy of the wise men as holy pilgrims and true worshipers of Jesus.