

Christmas is in a mere seven days. Some of us are probably anticipating it more than others... to uncover the gifts that are waiting for us, or that Santa and his helpers will place under the tree on Christmas Eve. Some of us already have our presents and won't unwrap much on the day, but we look forward to enjoying rest, time with family and reflecting on the goodness of God with Us, Immanuel. To feast and celebrate!

Among the things I most enjoy about how we celebrate is the reaction of others when they receive a gift. The suspense is over, the surprise experienced and emotions unleashed. It is best when the littlest of kids dances around because he got something like pajamas! He knows he is supposed to be excited, so he is!

I think our response to Christmas is part of the point of it.

We have waited a year for it, to rejoice anew in the king and his arrival. And it is an ongoing reminder of God's love for outsiders and how he works to save us in unexpected ways. We respond with knowing thankfulness. As all of the stories are told and the Scriptures read, **Christmas is an invitation to worship.**

But what if we had to wait longer? Maybe whole lifetimes, hundreds of years... That was Israel, God's people, waiting on the promise to come, the redemption they saw on the horizon. Generations, fourteen from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to exile, fourteen from exile to Christ. How would we respond then at this arrival?

We return to Matthew's Gospel for an account of the response from a couple groups of people to this birth of a Savior, and maybe we will even recognize ourselves in the ways they react to Jesus - and think through how we can get in on the right response.

Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas is an invitation to worship.

Matthew is writing his Gospel to bridge the Old Testament to the new, to show how Jesus is the long promised Messiah and how the generations waiting could rejoice that he has finally come. God had spoken through his prophets telling how he was going to keep his word and deliver a king that would reign forever. Jesus would come to a people that had been given hints and signs to look for, events and places that would usher in the king. On the forefront of their memories would have been the victory and freedom promised in the new king, and the star that would reveal his arrival.

Number 24:17 "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab and break down all the sons of Sheth."

Our text is an account of this star that is born and how those who saw it and heard of it responded. Christmas is an invitation to worship, but that is not how we all respond - when the signs are seen, when the stories are read and the songs are sung. Just as in our response to Jesus today, here there is **indifference** and **hostility**, but there is also **worship**, and my hope is that God would make us worshipers this Christmas.

How did those that heard of the star respond? The magi, wise men, have come into Jerusalem, the provincial capital of Roman Judea, and their entourage makes quite the commotion in the city as they inquired where the

new king of the Jews is, having seen his star. This must be the same star we have been waiting for! The religious leaders are called to answer the wise men and we see our first response to Jesus.

1) Indifference

Herod didn't have the biblical wisdom to answer the question of where this new king was, but he would certainly like to know for himself, so he assembles the chief priests and the scribes. The priests were the ones responsible for the activities of the temple, the functions of religion in Jerusalem and the scribes were the interpreters of the Old Testament - they could tell you what the Bible meant. These were the people you wanted answering Bible trivia; they knew the Scriptures, so of course should know where the king of the Jews would be.

Now the title "King of the Jews" was not a title to be taken lightly as it would have been associated with the Messiah, the Christ - the One prophesied to come and save his people, to rule and reign forever. And that is exactly who the priests and scribes say the star would indicate as they recite the promise from Micah that from Bethlehem shall come a ruler who will shepherd his people Israel... So Bethlehem, go there to find the king.

Knowing the anticipation of generations, how these religious leaders would have studied and talked often about this promised One... we would expect everyone to grab their nicest clothes and hurry to Bethlehem to see the Christ for themselves. But once the priests and scribes have answered the Bible trivia question, we don't hear from them again.

There is no excitement - no celebration that finally the Messiah has come. Where we would expect them to join the wise men and journey to see where the star leads them, the religious leaders quote Scripture then go back about their regular duties completely missing the point. They are indifferent to Jesus' arrival. They could care less.

They knew of Jesus on paper but they refused to know him in person.

Imagine someone came into your neighborhood saying that today all the pizza and games at Chucky Cheese are free - and you give them directions to Chucky Cheese but you don't go yourself. Crazy!

Like having a vast library of religious books, degrees in Bible and yet acting as if the things you have studied, that Jesus has no real impact on your life - that he is just a fact rather than a king come to rule.

2 Timothy 3:7 "always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth."

This is indifference, and we know it well. We have endless learning but we have little experience. We know Jesus on paper but we refuse to know him in person.

Christmas is meant to rid us of our indifference, the arrival and reminder that the king of the universe has come and his kingdom is unfolding - that he would bear our burden and be a substitute for us taking on the punishment of our sin so that we would have forgiveness and life. Oh that it would shake us out of our nonchalance and upend the status quo.

But indifference was not the only response.

2) Hostility

Herod and all of Jerusalem were troubled by the magi's claim that the star has appeared. They knew it would mean the status quo, life as it was, would be over.

Herod is the Roman appointed "king" who would keep peace by oppressing the people and ruling with violence - killing those that made him mad or got in his way. But even with evil leaders, some people benefit. He was a master builder and Jerusalem benefited with a restored temple, theaters, fortresses, infrastructure.

So news of a new "king" would have troubled them, that things were going to change and that their privileged status might be in danger. And for Herod himself, who claimed his own right to be king of the Jews, this was a threat to his government.

Today if you went to the President and said that they future president has just been born, let's go celebrate her... He would look at you like you were crazy. Of course the future president is alive - there are 2 or 3 year-olds alive now that will one day be president - it wouldn't change things.

But for Herod this is an attack on his throne, it is not he nor his children whom the wise men come to worship. And it makes him mad. He tries to get as much information out of the wise men as he can then when they don't come back to tell him where Jesus is it says that he "[16] became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under..." The Messiah has arrived and his response is violent.

Jesus had been taken away to Egypt to protect him but Herod was hoping that he had been killed - that his reign would go unchallenged.

Kings don't like being told there is a new king in the kingdom. They don't like it when you approach their throne and tell them it is no longer their seat. They will get hostile.

Christmas does this, the babe in the manger is the true king who will reign forever - but it is not merely a political reality for Israel... this king is meant to rule in our lives in our hearts as well. And that can be unsettling for those of us that enjoy ruling our own lives. Think even how we respond to our spouses, our parents, or other people we love when they tell us hard things or require us to face something hard.

We are Herod - we like the throne of our lives and our little kingdoms and the moment they are in jeopardy we get hostile. We might go through the motions and give the appearance of following this new king but when he wants our favorite territory, we can become aggressive in rejecting it.

Romans 8:7 "For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot."

Christmas declares that there is a new king who desires to rule all things, and while hostility is better than indifference in that at least we recognize that things need to be different now that this new king has arrived, it leads to death because there is no standing against this king - every knee will bow to him alone.

Jesus didn't come to make you hostile though... Christmas invites us into another way of living.

3) Worship

The wise men are our example. We don't know much about them or really how many of them there were. The Magi - a wide range of people whose practices included astrology, dream interpretation, study of sacred writings, the pursuit of wisdom, and magic. I like to think of them as wizards.

They knew that a king was to come and a star would rise to reveal him. So they journeyed to find him, not to subdue him, not to establish trade with him, but to worship him. They are met with an indifferent and even hostile response in Jerusalem, but they are determined. The star appears and they follow it.

Before they have even met Jesus, just at the word of his birth they journey at great expense to find him and worship him. This worship, is done with joy, humility and sacrifice.

When they see the star, the indication of the Messiah, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. They are not just pleased, they were overflowing with excitement at meeting this mighty king.

Going into the house where Jesus was, seeing the child and his mother, they fell down and worshiped him. They humbled themselves, these men of wealth, wisdom, got low before this child. The child without an army, the king without a crown... just because they know the promise of his arrival and who he was.

And they open presents for him; gold, frankincense and myrrh, expensive gifts, a sacrifice of things that they would enjoy themselves, for this child, born king of the Jews.

Notice, the Wise Men did not worship in the hopes of gaining something, they made no requests of Jesus or his family, they have joy, are humble before him and give sacrificial gifts just because of who he is.

It is as if the Wise Men are saying; "By giving to you what you do not need, and what I might enjoy, I am saying more earnestly and more authentically, 'You are my treasure, not these things.'" Piper

What an example this is, that we might worship like the Magi, with a joy that is unmatched, with humility recognizing our need of a Savior and finding the king, with sacrifice, giving our prize our treasure and favorite things to him for his glory, because of who he is.

This is what Christmas invites us to... all the tradition, all of the feasting, gifts, songs are all about knowing this king, finding our joy in him, humbling ourselves before his authority and giving all of our gifts to him in worship. This is what the gospel invites us into, the good news of Jesus' life, death and resurrection for us.

I read this story of the visit of the wise men and I wonder who I am in the story... honestly I am more often than not the indifferent scribe... and even the hostile wanna be king... Maybe that is you today too. You see yourself here. Tons of knowledge of the facts of the faith, but little experience of the king and it doesn't change your life. Refusing to submit or surrender territory to Jesus - he can save you but he can't have those emotions you have been harboring, that hurt, the sin you cherish.

What is our hope at this invitation of Christmas?

Hope is found where the star points. This story really isn't about the long journey of the Magi, which is cool, but it is about the long-awaited arrival of the king, the joy that has come to us in Jesus. Because he has come, everything changes.

Jesus has come into our indifference and hostility to free us to worship, to empower us to live this real life with him. He would suffer at the hands of hostile kings, the violence, the opposition to bear the weight of our indifference and hostility toward God. This star of Jacob would come to be bruised that he would crush his enemy.

Each and every time we declare this truth and find comfort in it, we move closer to the way of the Magi, we find joy, humility and the freedom to sacrifice for his glory.

Response? Christmas is the declaration of a king that brings peace with God. Embrace it.

“Come to Christ now, as the Magi did at his incarnation, and submit your life to his lordship. Ask for his forgiveness to cover your sins; receive his righteousness to clothe your spiritual nakedness. The door is open today for everyone who will come in and bow the knee willingly to the Lord to receive his blessing. So come, enter into his people. As you do so, you will receive his blessing, find peace in the midst of a tumultuous world, and be able look forward with joy to the day when his final victory will be accomplished.” Iain Duguid

And worship, set aside the things you have been clinging to for hope and embrace hope himself. Let Christmas and the Wise Men’s pursuit of Jesus awaken in you a desire for Christ himself. See Jesus, ask him for more than mere knowledge but true experience with him by his Spirit. Bow before him, joyfully ascribe to him authority and dignity. Bring your gifts to him that he alone would satisfy your heart.

“Worship is war. We are declaring war against all of our own and this world's idolatries and reaffirming our loyalty to the King. True worship restores our sanity, realigns our willpower, lightens our burdens, cheers our souls, unites our diversities. Miracles all.”

Christmas is an invitation to worship, this week may we see the star, know Jesus and may we rejoice exceedingly with great joy! May we sing with the Magi and the Shepherds of this king.

“Look there at the star!
I, among the least,
Will arise and take
A journey to the East.
But what shall I bring
As a present for the King?
What shall I bring to the Manger?
I will bring a song,
A song that I will sing,
A song for the King
In the Manager.
Watch out for my flocks,
Do not let them stray.
I am going on a journey
Far, far away.
But what shall I bring
As a present for the Child?
What shall I bring to the Manger?
I will bring a lamb,
Gentle, meek, and mild,

A lamb for the Child
In the Manger.
I'm just a shepherd boy,
Very poor I am—
But I know there is
A King in Bethlehem.
But what shall I bring
As a present for him?
What shall I bring to the Manger?
I will bring my heart
And give my heart to him.
I will bring my heart
To the Manger” - Langston Hughes, Shepherd’s Song at Christmas