

## I. Introduction

Merry Christmas! Two thousand years ago, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, two or three hours walk from Jerusalem. Joseph and Mary had travelled to Bethlehem for the Roman census, but when they arrived, they took shelter in a stable, because there was no room at the inn. So baby Jesus was laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. And shepherds, who were told by an angel, came to see Jesus.

But, actually, the Christmas story begins long before the birth of Jesus. The coming of the Messiah was foretold by many prophets hundreds of years before His birth. The prophecies gave many details of His coming. The time and place of Jesus' birth and the lineage of His parents were announced hundreds of years before He was born. The prophecies also said that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. And that He would give His life as a sacrifice in order to gain healing and forgiveness of sins for the world. And that then, three days later, He would rise from the dead to new life. Most amazing of all, the prophecies revealed that the baby to be born is God Himself, come to His people in the form of a man.

As human beings, when we want to tell someone something, we talk to them. Without words, it is very difficult for us to understand each other; we need words. God created us and He understands our needs. So God sent the prophets to proclaim His Words. And, through the prophets He gave us His written Word, the Bible. But there are also some things that spoken and written words cannot communicate very well. One of these things is love. We can tell someone that we love them. We can even send them a love letter. But to really communicate love we have to spend time with the one we love and show them our love through our lives. And, so, when God wanted to tell us about His love, He came to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

The Gospel of John emphasizes that Jesus is God, come to us in human form. **John 1:1 and 1:14** tell us, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”** **“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”** The Word was God and the Word became flesh. When Jesus was born, it was not the beginning of His life. Jesus is eternal God, Creator and Lord. And yet, He chose to humble Himself and come to us in the form of a man, a little baby born to humble parents in a small town, in a stable where animals were kept.

This morning we are celebrating the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have good reason to celebrate, because God has clearly expressed His love for us and He has given us wonderful grace and mercy through Jesus. How do we respond to this Good News? I want to talk about that, but first, let's take a look at the story of the Magi, the wise men that came to worship Jesus after He was born. Let's read Matthew 2:1-12.

## II. Scripture Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 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 be the shepherd of my people Israel.' "

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." 9 After they had heard the king, they went on their



way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 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 and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

### III. Teaching

Matthew does not tell us many details about the Magi, probably because they were well-known in his time and no explanation was needed. In our time, the Magi are less well-known, but if we do a bit of research, we can learn some things. In English, the word Magi reminds us of the words magistrate and magician, which come from the same root. A magistrate is a kind of judge, and a magician amazes people with clever tricks. So it should not surprise us to learn that the Magi were men of authority and that they were thought to possess special powers. And, if we look at history, we find that the word Magi comes from ancient Babylon and Persia where it referred to wise men and magicians, and especially to those who interpreted dreams and studied the stars. In our time, this is the same area as Iraq and Iran.



If we look to the Old Testament, we find that the prophet Daniel was appointed to be the chief of the wise men and the magicians at the time of the Babylonian captivity. **Daniel 2:48, “Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men.”** It is likely that Daniel left copies of the Old Testament Scriptures, including and his own book of prophecy, with these wise men. If so, then the Magi did not just happen to look up at the sky one night and see a new star and decide to follow it for hundreds of miles away. Rather, the Magi probably knew from the Scriptures about the time when the Messiah was to be born and they were searching the night sky, waiting and watching, for a sign from God that the birth had occurred. And, when God graciously provided the sign they expected, they headed out quickly to follow the star.

It is a long way from Babylon to Israel and in those days you did not lightly set out on a journey of nearly a thousand miles. It is obvious that this mission was very important to them. Why would the Magi be so anxious to see the newborn King? Well, the history of Persia tells us that the Magi not only had the responsibility of advising the king, but they also had a role in selecting new kings. They were supposed to use their wisdom and arts to foresee who should become king and then designate that person as the next king. Usually that job might have been limited to identifying kings in Persia, but in this case they were searching for the King of kings who would rule over all nations, including Persia.

As is so often the case with human experts, much of the wisdom of the Magi was probably false wisdom. But their storehouse of knowledge also included much truth, including knowledge about the Creator God and the Messiah that He would send. The ancient prophecies told them when they should be looking for the birth of the Messiah. According to their understanding, the birth of a king should be revealed in the stars, and so they searched the skies for a sign, and God gave them a star because that is what they needed for their faith. God does not always give us the signs that we want, but He does give us what we really need for our faith.



**Matthew 2:1-2, “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.’”** The Magi probably possessed copies of the Scriptures that had been written up to the time of Daniel. But they did not have the Book of Micah, because it was written at a later time, after Israel had returned from the Babylonian captivity. So they did not know the prophecy that said that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So they went to the capital city of Israel and asked after the newborn king.

Let’s stop and imagine the scene for a moment. The Magi are often represented as three men because there were three gifts, but actually Matthew does not say how large their group was. It is likely that it was a large caravan with Magi, servants, and guards. Such caravans might include hundreds of men. The Magi were rich and powerful; they probably would not travel alone, especially on a long journey to take gifts to a new king. So we should imagine a large caravan arriving in Jerusalem and creating a commotion as they ask, **“Where is the one who has been born king of**

**the Jews?”** “King of the Jews,” was one of King Herod’s titles. The Magi were basically announcing that Herod was going to be replaced by a new king.

King Herod was infamous for his cruelty and his willingness to kill anyone who got in his way. He must have been furious that the king-maker Magi had come to his city and announced that a new king had been born. But King Herod was as cunning as he was vicious. He probably wanted to kill the Magi immediately, but that would have left the new king alive. So King Herod devised a plot to try to get the Magi to reveal the new king to him so that he could have him killed. But God warned the Magi and Joseph of the danger. So the Magi avoided returning through Jerusalem on their way home and Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt with Jesus and remained there until after King Herod died.

Let’s take a look at what happened when the Magi arrived in Bethlehem. **Matthew 2:11, “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 and of incense and of myrrh.”**

The Magi brought three gifts, gold, incense, and myrrh. We don’t know anything about the quantities of the gifts, so we cannot estimate the value, but these are expensive gifts. More importantly, each gift symbolizes something about the Christ Child. The gold speaks of His royalty; gold was the gift given to kings. The incense speaks of His deity; incense was used in worship and, offered as a gift, it recognizes the deity of Christ. The myrrh speaks of His humanity and of His death to come, because it was the spice used in embalming. These gifts tell us much about Jesus, King of kings, God in the flesh, and yet human, born into this world so that He could die on the cross for our sins so that we might have eternal life.



#### IV. Conclusion

There are several journeys in the Christmas story. The greatest journey of all is the journey of Christ Jesus. Jesus left the throne of God, set aside His glory and power, and came into this world in perfect humility as a baby, born to a virgin in an obscure little town. The journey of Jesus is a journey of love. Jesus came because He loves us so much that He was willing to give up everything and die on the cross to provide salvation for us.



In the Christmas story, there is also the journey of Joseph and Mary. They left their home in Nazareth to journey to Bethlehem. The journey of Joseph and Mary was a journey of obedience. They were obedient to the Roman decree that ordered Joseph to travel to Bethlehem for the census. More importantly, they were obedient to the plan of God, going to Bethlehem to fulfill the prophecy that the Messiah would be born there.



And, of course, there is the journey of the wise men. The Magi traveled hundreds of miles because they believed the prophecies of Scripture and the sign of the star. In other words, they believed God. It is important to notice that the Magi did not go to Bethlehem just to name a new king and present gifts; they were very clear about the purpose of their journey. Take a look at their question in **Matthew 2:2, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”** They travelled to Israel to worship Jesus. The journey of the Magi was a journey of faith.



Like the Magi, we also are on a journey of faith. Two thousand years ago, the Magi went to Bethlehem to worship Jesus. We came to church this morning to worship Jesus. Their journey took months; it was hundreds of miles long, travelling on roads that were sometimes rough and dangerous. Most of us came by train, travelling less than an hour to get here. The physical journey of the Magi was quite different than our physical journey.

But the important part of the journey of faith is not the external effort of moving our bodies. The important part of the journey of faith takes place inside, in the heart. The journey of faith is not a journey from one country or town to another, although faith is sometimes expressed by such journeys. The true and essential meaning of the journey of faith is the journey from unbelief to belief, from doubt to faith.



Why did the wise men go to Bethlehem? Because God spoke to them and they believed. God speaks to us also. God speaks through nature. God speaks through the Bible. God speaks through miracles and signs. God speaks through brothers and sisters in the church. But most of all, God speaks His love for us through the person and life of Jesus Christ, Savior and Messiah. It is my prayer that all of us, and also all of our families, friends, and neighbors, would hear and believe.

Let's pray.

## **V. Closing Prayer**