

Jesus' Kingdom Movement

The Gospel of Matthew

Recognizing Who Jesus Is

Matthew 2:1 – 11

Last modified: January 1, 2023 for Neighborhood Church of Dorchester

Introduction: The Day of Adoration

Today on the church calendar is still one of the twelve days of Christmas. Did you know Christmas has twelve days? It's because it is so amazing that God became incarnate as one of us that it takes more than one day to let that sink in. Today is the Day of Adoration, then day the magi came from the east to give gifts to the baby Jesus. It is a wonderful way to start of the new year, too! What better way to bring in 2023 than to adore Jesus?!? Let's read that Scripture together. Here is Matthew 2:1 – 11:

^{2:1} Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, ² 'Where is he who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.' ³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They said to him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet: ⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, [in the] land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.' ⁷ Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared. ⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and search carefully for the child; and when you have found him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship him.' ⁹ After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹ After coming into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The Magi

Who were the magi? We don't know for certain, other than they were from the Persian Empire. Were they stargazers? It seems like it. Were they wise men at a school? Maybe. Christian traditions sometimes call the three leaders Melchior, Balthazar, and Gaspar. There were probably more in the caravan, because three men would not have traveled alone. In the Eastern Christian traditions, they are regarded as saints. Because they worshiped Jesus. They gave to Jesus what people should give to God alone: worship. And they worshiped Jesus even before Mary and Joseph. That's pretty stunning. They came all that way – in a journey that took weeks – to fall to the ground and worship this baby as God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth. It must have been especially tough for Melchior because he was supposedly an old man. Gotta make those knees bend.

And, the magi also gave three gifts. And each gift represented not Jesus' divinity but his human roles. Jesus fulfilled three human roles from the Old Testament: king, priest, and prophet. Each of the three gifts matched one of those roles. So as we worship Jesus, we reveal to the world around us who he is.

Gold: Jesus is King

Gold was the most valuable thing in the ancient world. It represented beauty and worth. So if you gave someone gold, you were saying to that person that they were more beautiful than you and more worthy than you to have this gold. You are beautiful and worthy in your own way. Don't get me wrong. But Jesus is more so. That's why the magi gave gold to the baby Jesus. Jesus is king.

Now we live in a democracy, at least in theory, so we need some help about understanding what it means to have a king. In the Old Testament, King David was "a man after God's own heart." And although he was not a perfect or perfected person, he did show us in many ways how to acknowledge that God is the divine king, including how to repent. In other ancient cultures, the king represented God. So you couldn't challenge the king. But in Israel in the Old Testament, the king represented a human bowing down to God as the greater king, the heavenly King. Jesus is

king in the sense that he is 100% faithful to God the Father as his heavenly King. So we bring our gifts of gold to Jesus because Jesus as God the Son always gives himself to God the Father, by the Spirit.

Illus: One of the ways we encourage you to do that here at Neighborhood Church is to have a spiritual rhythm of life. We began this practice in 2019 when we as a church read Emotionally Healthy Spirituality together. Jesus had a spiritual rhythm, so we do, too. Basically, it's a plan that you pray about with the Lord, and write down. It includes what spiritual practices you do daily, weekly, monthly, and annually. I find that it fits on one page of paper. In the same way that you might have a physical fitness plan if you have a fitness goal, or a meal plan if you have a goal about your diet, a spiritual fitness plan or rhythm of life to chase a spiritual goal. But it's also a way of saying to Jesus that he is the king. He is the priority in your life. One of your goals might be to go to bed at night by praying the Examen, the two questions, "Where did I sense God's presence today, and where did I miss God's presence today?" And if it is, then carve out the time to do it. One of your goals might be to study and meditate on Scripture once a week. Let's say that you're a parent of young kids and doing it once a day isn't realistic. That's fine. Find a way to do it once a week, and carry that Scripture in your heart the rest of the week. If you need a way to feel more peace from Jesus, then take a walk with Jesus once a month, and put it in your calendar. If someone else asks you to do something in that time block, however well-meaning, say no!!! You can call it self-care if that helps you. But ultimately, what we are practicing is proclaiming reality in a broken world and to a broken world. Jesus is king. He has come to renew God's shalom on this planet through his reign. Even when the Herods of the world want to stop you from proclaiming Jesus as king. Giving your gold to Jesus is an act of resistance to Empire, and an act of truth-telling. Jesus is king. How then do we give Jesus our gifts of gold, the signs of our allegiance?

Application: Take a moment of silence to schedule an hour of your life where you are going to work on your rhythm of life.

Frankincense: Jesus is Priest

Frankincense was a form of incense used by the priests of Israel. It is mentioned five times in the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures – in how God set up a rhythm for the Israelites to approach him in the sanctuary (Exodus 30:34, Leviticus 2:1, 2; 24:7; Numbers 11:15). Frankincense was what you, if you were an Israelite, would bring with you to the priests in the tabernacle or temple, to light as you worship. It smelled sweet. Why? Because the worship of God gave off a sweet fragrance, to God and to us.

Jesus is the ultimate priest for us because he is the ultimate bridge person between God and us. As Paul says in 1 Timothy, Jesus Christ is the one mediator between God and humanity. In the Old Testament, the priests would help express the Israelites' desire to approach God and be cleansed by God, forgiven by God, and devoted to God. So the priests retold the story of Moses going up Mount Sinai to meet with God face to face and make the covenant. The priests represented the people to God, and went up to give thanks to God, give sacrifices to God, and so on. The priests also represented God to the people, and gave back honored meals and purified life -- in the blood of the animals -- from God to the people.

So how can you honor Jesus as our priest? Think about the emotion you feel that is the most unlike Jesus. What is it? Jealousy, unforgiveness, bitterness, lust, greed, defensiveness. When you read about Jesus in the Gospels, compare his emotions with your emotions. Then know that all sinful emotions and desires are the result of a distortion of something good in you. If you desire to possess someone or something, that is a distortion of your desire to possess the beauty of God that comes from God and is only reflected in people and things. It's like the light of the sun being reflected by the moon. The moon does not give its own light. And people and things do not give off their own beauty. They reflect beauty from God. So when Jesus calls you to bring your emotional life before him as you worship, it's because all things are from him, and for him, and to him, and again, because he has an even deeper emotional life to share with you.

In our culture, we think emotions are the stuff of life. You can't tell me what to feel. I am because I feel. I'm real because I feel. I must do what I feel. But if Jesus is our priest, the one who carries the things of us to God, and the things of God back to us, then he can say, "Give me what you feel, and I will give you what I feel." And that, more than anything else in our culture today, proclaims Jesus as the true priest of the one, true God. After all, let's be real, and let's be precise. You feel because He gave you the capacity to feel when he created you. All of your emotions are actually rooted in the fact that you are made in the image of God. All of your basic desires for love, connection, beauty, joy, goodness, and justice come from Jesus himself. He is the true light, says John 1:9, who

enlightens every person as they come into the world. But you and I can take our emotions and do weird things with them. We can cultivate desires that were not intended by God. So Jesus gives us back emotions, redeemed human emotions in his human life. Jesus even shows us God's emotions, since Jesus is the Son of the Father who reveals the Father in every way.

Illus: This month, my son John and I have been reading one Psalm each day, and we discuss it together. One of the most important things about our times is recognizing our own emotions. In many of the Psalms, the writer talks about being attacked, or injustice, or the wicked prospering in a broken world. And when we feel like something is wrong about ourselves or the world, we can feel despair, or we can give up and feel apathy, or we can just turn down our expectations and give up on wanting more, or we can just say, "I'm just going to care about myself, because if I don't, then who else will?" But in the Psalms, we see the emotional cry, "How long, O Lord?" That is the appropriate cry and lament and question for God. It's not that God is offended. So when we see a two or three tier justice system in this country, when we see violence, when we see the wicked prospering, we need to cry out to God, "How long, O Lord?" And we are cultivating hope as opposed to despair, a deeper desire for God's garden and shalom as opposed to shallower desires. Because God is good and loving and will ultimately triumph over evil and self-centeredness.

So once again, how will you let Jesus shape your emotions? Take a moment to bring the emotion you feel that is most unlike Jesus' emotions.

Myrrh: Jesus is Prophet

Now we come to the third gift: myrrh. Myrrh was also used in worship, and as a medicine and perfume, but it was specifically used as a fragrance for dead bodies. Because of that, myrrh became associated with the role of prophets, because prophets were often rejected and sometimes killed. People didn't want to hear God's word, so they killed the prophets. So people would use myrrh to anoint their bodies for burial.

Jesus was the highest prophet because he not only spoke the words of God, he became the Word of God incarnate. And the magi recognized that this baby would grow up, be God's word, speak God's word, and get killed for it.

Illus: In our day, we do other things to Jesus. I read a funny and irreverent article on McSweeney's.net that portrayed Jesus as if he was a college professor, and got reviewed by his students.¹

- "Very inconvenient class! Always holds lectures on top of mountains, in middle of the Sea of Galilee—but never close to the main campus."
- "Wears sandals too much. No one wants to see your dusty feet."
- "Kind of absent-minded. My name's Simon, and he's called me 'Peter' for the entire semester."
- "Doesn't respect students' time. A line of us had been waiting outside his office for over an hour. Finally, he showed up, said, 'And the last shall be first,' and started seeing us in reverse order. Made me late for work-study."

But Jesus is not a college professor. And we are not paying customers judging him and giving him ratings. Jesus is THE prophet, the one who speaks for God because he IS God!!

Illus: In the coming days, with Ming, I'll be bringing my family budget to Jesus. Why? Because it's easy to say, "Jesus is God and speaks for God" in theory, but then spend your money as if you are god. I'm sure he'll have a lot to say. Ask me about it later. And I will ask you, too.

Conclusion

Jesus is king, priest, and prophet. As we relate to him in those roles, we proclaim to a broken world who he is. And on this first day of 2023, we declare that we prioritize Jesus and his work in our lives. We declare that we will let him shape us more than anything else: more than the ads and commercials, more than the comparisons, more than the fear of missing out. Jesus, we thank you for these magi and their gifts. And we thank you that we share in the giving, so that we share in acknowledging who you are.

¹ Amanda Lehr, "Selective Negative Evaluations of Jesus Christ," *McSweeney's*, December 29, 2022; <https://www.mcsweeneys.net/articles/selected-negative-teaching-evaluations-of-jesus-christ>

