

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"The Visit of the Magi"

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-23

Opening Hymn: We three kings #173

Closing Hymn: Go tell it on the mountain #133

Children's Hymn: The first noel #136

Communion Hymn: What child is this #161

Choruses: All hail King Jesus, What a beautiful name, You are my King

Rev. Steve Filyk

January 6, 2019

Epiphany

Communion Sunday

There are numerous benefits

Associated with participating in faith communities.

Just consider this short list:

"[Some] studies have shown that religious attendance
once or more per week
leads to an extra seven years of life expectancy.

Other studies have shown other health benefits
such as a stronger immune system and lower blood pressure
[and] less depression and less alcohol and drug use.

Religious participation by kids has been shown
to result in less juvenile delinquency...
and a higher probability of graduating from high school...

Similarly, adults who regularly attend religious services
also commit fewer crimes
They also end up on welfare and are unemployed less often...

[It shouldn't be forgotten that]

People who are regular religious attendees
give more money to charity than other people,
which does much good in their communities.”ⁱ

You may be surprised to know

That I didn't find this list of benefits
In some church publication,
Though we should probably should be sharing this.

No, I found this in an article on Forbes.com.

[an article touting the economic benefits of religion]

There are numerous *documented* benefits

Associated with participating in faith communities.

Of course most of us recognise

That first and foremost church has something to do with worship.

That is, we come together to give thanks,

To acknowledge the **worth** of God

And the **worthiness** of Jesus Christ, God's son.

As *Living Faith* (a statement of belief for the PCC) reminds us:

“The church lives to praise God.

We have no higher calling

Than to offer the worship that belongs to God

Day by day, Sunday by Sunday.”ⁱⁱ

Of course, sometimes in the church, our worship gets distorted.

While God wants us to bring our anxieties and concerns to God,
 Our participation can become an attempt
 to force God to do our bidding,
 So that 'our will', not 'thy will' is done.

And sometimes in the church, worship can be completely upended
 And transformed into a program of **self**-elevation;
 Our participation becomes a way
 To show ourselves better than others.
Look how pious I am!

Wherever our motivations for worship
 today's Bible lesson would set us on a better track
 at the start of the New Year.

In today's story we meet a group of nameless foreigners
 That Matthew refers to as magoi (ma-goi).

As one scholar notes,
 the word magoi (ma-goi) has several different uses:

"In (the book of) Acts 13:6,8 it means "magician,"
 and this seems to be its predominant meaning
 in later Christian literature.

It could also designate the Magians [ma-gians],
 a Persian priestly caste, possibly Zoroastrians.

A scholarly consensus [however] seems to favor a third meaning
 for this context: astrologers.

The practise of astrology was popularly derived from “the east.”
 Since the visit of the magoi [ma-goi] is prompted
 by their observation of the stars,
 this seem sot be the probable meaning.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Matthew tells us that the magoi [ma-goi], these astrologers,
 have travelled from distant lands to Jerusalem
 Where they start making inquiries about a new king.

The cause of their journey
 And the purpose of their trip is made explicit:
 “We saw his star when it rose
 and have come to worship him.” [they said]^{iv}

The astrologers have come to worship the new king.

This sets Jerusalem in chaos.

It is enough to be visited by such exotic strangers,
 But here they are speaking of a new king
 While the existing king is still on the throne.

But the people, even Herod,
 are quick to discern that these travellers
 aren’t looking for just any king,
 But are looking for the Messiah,
 The long-promised descendent of David
 Who will usher in God’s new age.

So when the astrologers ask for directions
Herod gathers his own wise men
Who point to the promise of Scripture:
the Messiah will come from Bethlehem.

No sooner are the astrologers on the road to Bethlehem,
the star they had been following reappears
And leads them to the place where the child is staying.

Lots has been made of the various gifts
That the astrologers bring with them:
Gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But Scripture tell us that the first thing they do
When they encounter Jesus,
Is bow down and worship him.

It should be noted
“The order of actions,
Homage [o-mage] first and gifts second, is significant.

Gift giving can be a way of controlling others.

If the first thing the magi do is present their gifts,
then it might seem that they are in command of the situation.

There they would stand with precious goods in their outstretched hands.
They would appear like rulers
presenting treasures to each other on a state occasion...
each of them on their feet and facing the other,
in order to indicate their parity...

[This] is not the case with the magi.

They express their relationship to Christ
by kneeling and offering homage [o-mage] to him.

First, homage [o-mage]. First, worship.

First, giving themselves utterly and completely to Christ.

Then, offering their regal gifts.”^v

Having accomplished what they set out to do,
The astrologers turn back to their own land.

Herod had asked them to report back to them.

He claimed he also wanted to worship the Messiah.

But after a dream, they keep a wide berth from Herod.

And for good reason as our story reveals.

It's quite the story, isn't it?

It's amazing when you think about

How much trouble the astrologers went to

To pay tribute to Jesus.

Days, week, maybe months on the road,

Outside of the comforts of home.

But for them it was worth it.

For them this new king demanded honor,
Even if the only proof of his worth, his value
Was to be written in the stars and the Scriptures.

Of course we have more and greater reasons to give honor to Jesus:

We know about the sacrifices
That this servant-king has made for each one of us.

We've been blessed by the guidance
And the teaching of his Spirit.

We have answers to many prayers.

And we have the promise of a heavenly home
That he is preparing for us.

If the astrologers will the effort
To offer worship after seeing a sign in the heavens above them
How much more might we do
In gratitude for all that Jesus
Has accomplished in our very lives.

PAUSE

What will our worship be like in 2019?

Will our worship be an attempt to bribe God or control God,
To get God to do our bidding.
Or will we be like the Magi, offering our worship
Before sharing any gifts.

Will worship be a cloak, a cover, for our own plans for self-elevation.
 Will we be like Herod attempting to secure our own status,
 Or will we humble ourselves before the King of Kings?

When we get to know Jesus
 We know we don't need to get God in our corner.
He already is...

When we start to comprehend God's great gift
 We will forget about our own ambitions
 And lose ourselves in the wonder of God.

May it be so today.
 Amen.

ⁱ Jeffrey Dorfman "Religion Is Good For All Of Us, Even Those Who Don't Follow One" December 22, 2013
www.forbes.com/sites/jeffreydorfman/2013/12/22/religion-is-good-for-all-of-us-even-those-who-dont-follow-one/#4de019fa64d7

ⁱⁱ *Living Faith*

ⁱⁱⁱ Douglas R.A. Hare *Matthew 13*

^{iv} Matthew 2:2 NIV

^v Thomas H. Troeger "Matthew 2:1-12, Homiletical Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.*