

Scripture Reading:

Isaiah 60:7 "All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you, The rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; They shall ascend with acceptance on My altar, And I will glorify the house of My glory. 8 "Who are these who fly like a cloud, And like doves to their roosts? 9 Surely the coastlands shall wait for Me; And the ships of Tarshish will come first, To bring your sons from afar, Their silver and their gold with them, To the name of Jehovah your God, And to the Holy One of Israel, Because He has glorified you. 10 "The sons of foreigners shall build up your walls, And their kings shall minister to you; For in My wrath I struck you, But in My favor I have had mercy on you. 11 Therefore your gates shall be open continually; They shall not be shut day or night, That men may bring to you the wealth of the Gentiles, And their kings in procession. 12 For the nation and kingdom which will not serve you shall perish, And those nations shall be utterly ruined. 13" The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, The cypress, the pine, and the box tree together, To beautify the place of My sanctuary; And I will make the place of My feet glorious. 14 Also the sons of those who afflicted you Shall come bowing to you, And all those who despised you shall fall prostrate at the soles of your feet; And they shall call you The City of the Lord, Zion of the Holy One of Israel. 15 "Whereas you have been forsaken and hated, So that no one went through you, I will make you an eternal excellence, A joy of many generations. 16 You shall drink the milk of the Gentiles, And milk the breast of kings; You shall know that I, Jehovah, am your Savior And your Redeemer, the Mighty One of Jacob. 17 "Instead of bronze I will bring gold, Instead of iron I will bring silver, Instead of wood, bronze, And instead of stones, iron. I will also make your officers peace, And your magistrates righteousness. 18 Violence shall no longer be heard in your land, Neither wasting nor destruction within your borders; But you shall call your walls Salvation, And your gates Praise. 19 "The sun shall no longer be your light by day, Nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you; But Jehovah will be to you an everlasting light, And your God your glory. 20 Your sun shall no longer go down, Nor shall your moon withdraw itself; For Jehovah will be your everlasting light, And the days of your mourning shall be ended. 21 Also your people shall all be righteous; They shall inherit the land forever, The branch of My planting, The work of My hands, That I may be glorified. 22 A little one shall become a thousand, And a small one a strong nation. I, Jehovah, will hasten it in its time." "

"Of Shepherds & Wise Men, Part Two"

As we begin the New Year, I want to take just a moment to discuss where we are and where we will be going over the next few weeks as we begin the season of Epiphany or the manifestation of Jesus... Looking at His work and ministry. This morning we will complete our review of the lessons we can learn from the shepherds and the wise men in the Christmas accounts given by Matthew and Luke. As we discussed last week at length, we celebrate Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and the rest of the Church calendar each and every year to remind us & our children about all these important events that took place in REAL history.

- We are to be the faithful witnesses who know and proclaim to the world that Jesus DID come as the light of the world and that His coming has changed everything!
- NOT just because we believe it, but because it is REAL!

After we consider the wise men this week, we will look to Simeon & Anna as our examples of prayer next week: Lessons we must always be learning!

Then comes the wickedness of King Herod who slaughters the innocents where our study will lead us once again to call our nation to repentance over the grievous sin of abortion as we remember the dreadful Roe v. Wade decision that has now cost the lives of over fifty million children in our nation.

Lord-willing we return to our study of the Book of Acts at the end of January, We will see God's promises carried out as the Holy Spirit glorifies the Son by filling the earth with His Kingdom using redeemed sinners like us!

- **We are looking to the shepherds and wise men this year to remind us that we are to be the faithful soldiers in this advance of the Kingdom no matter what our station in life and to learn some basic lessons about faith and obedience**
- **These short accounts remind us about who is to hear the Son:
How we are to faithfully hear the Son AND how we must be ready and willing to obey the Son.**

Last week I pointed out that the shepherds and the wise men have much in common and much that is a contrast.

- **The shepherds would have been simple men working long hours in a poor region of Palestine.**
- **The magi or wise men would have been philosophers and leaders coming from one of the richest parts of the world, most likely enjoying lives of luxury.**

And yet God approaches both and in very similar ways:

- **They are given powerful signs**
- **They are given information about where to find the baby Jesus**

And both respond in very similar ways:

- **They follow the instructions and signs that were given**
- **They worship the newborn child as their Savior and King**

They all return to their lives knowing that the world will never be the same!

So with these contrasts and similarities in mind let us turn to Matthew's account of the Wise Men:

- **It is Matthew alone who tells us the details of the visit by the wise men or the magi from the east.**

As we go through the text we will take note of what we know and what we don't know looking for those lessons that we need to learn...

Matthew 2:1 "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

First we see the contrast to the humble shepherds we considered last week:

- **These wise men or magi came directly to the royal court of King Herod and bore expensive gifts.**

The text does NOT tell us how many wise men came, how big their party was nor exactly where they came from. It is assumed that they came from the region near Babylon or Susa where they would have been familiar with Daniel and the other writings from the Old Testament...

- **Including the Prophecies of Isaiah which we read this morning.**

This is likely, but the Book of Ester shows the presence of the Jews stretching from Africa to India so we cannot be adamant. What they did know was that Messiah was coming to be the King of the Jews and that He would be born in Judea.

- **Obviously this did not sit well with the ruling King of the Jews!**

3 "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 "So they said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet:

6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.' "

Remember when we talked about people wanting special signs like the star that appeared to these wise men or the angels singing to the Shepherds? I pointed out that we should remember the sobering statement to the rich man that even if someone came back from the dead it would not convince someone who refused to believe God's Word...

- **We have the same situation here with King Herod.**

It was not that he did not know that there was a promised Messiah...

- **It was that he did not WANT to be subject to this Messiah!**
- **Knowledge can be present without faith...**
- **Mere knowledge does not bring obedience... Only faith does that!**

The Wise Men come telling him that the sign of the Messiah's birth has been given and the king's own religious leaders can tell him where he was to be born and it has NO positive impact. King Herod refuses to travel even the short distance to Bethlehem to see for himself... Instead, King Herod hardens his heart not unlike the great Pharaoh of Egypt:

- **He then lays plans to use these Wise Men for his own purposes...**

7 "Then Herod, when he had secretly called the wise men, determined from them what time the star appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also."

King Herod tries to verify when the child might have been born and sends these wise men off to find Jesus... King Herod may have feared that those protecting the child would flee if they saw Herod's company coming or he may just have been too lazy to make the trip. Whatever his reason, God uses this time to allow the Wise Men to come and worship the new-born King...

- **And to keep the baby Jesus safe.**

9 "When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was.

10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy."

Here is a good place to say something about the star, often called the star of Bethlehem because it led them to the place in that city where Jesus was. There have been many discussions down through the ages as to just what the Wise Men saw and there are often new theories brought forward with each passing Christmas season.

- **Was it a comet?**
- **Was it a grouping of the planets?**
- **Was it an exploding super-nova?**

What is common with all of these 'explanations' is that they attempt to use ordinary occurrences in the heavens to explain an extraordinary event used by God to point the way to His Son!

When we simply read the text, it is pretty obvious that this star was no ordinary celestial event: One could argue that the event they saw in the western sky from their eastern home might have appeared like an exploding super-nova or planetary alignment...

- **But what about the star reappearing and then taking them to the very place where Jesus lay in Bethlehem? [To the house, not just the city!]**

The text is clear that it is the same star so we must accept this as a miracle! Of course the skeptics who refuse to believe in miracles will reject this and demand that we give them some logical explanation...

It is easy to explain logically IF we accept what God has told us about Himself and His creation... IF God spoke ALL that exists into being out of nothing and organized the entire creation He has given to us in six ordinary days, then it is not illogical to say that He could provide such a sign for the Wise Men.

God is the one who placed ALL the stars in the heavens and according to Psalm 147 has given them all names *[something the Hubble telescope is demonstrating was no small task!]* So His providing this sign would be no problem, unless of course you demand that everything be explained without God which is where the skeptic wants us to argue from.

➤ In reality they are saying, “Assuming that your God does not exist, prove that He does exist!”

The true Wise Men did not have such problems and believed and obeyed God as we all should day by day...

11 “And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way”

It is here where I want to take a moment to talk about all of the manger scenes that we see in the Christmas season... We have many of them today, from the ones in our homes that are being packed away for next year to the live manger scenes that are presented by some Churches.

➤ Are they Biblical?

Well, yes and no: There is no Biblical command to remember the coming of Jesus with a manger scene. In fact, one could argue that these scenes are not an accurate representation of the Biblical accounts. Luke says that Jesus was in a manger and that the Shepherds came to see Him there, so the central part is right: We are not told whether that manger was in a stable or a cave and we are not told what other animals were present. We also know from this account in Matthew that the Wise Men were NOT present at the manger and we are not told for sure how many:

➤ Their visit came when Joseph and Mary had found a home there in Bethlehem.

So with all these problems, do we need to throw them all out before the next Christmas season and condemn those churches that put on such pageants? I do not believe this would be wise because the manger scenes are not meant to show all of the historical details as accurately as possible:

➤ That is what we have the text of Scripture for!

When used properly, the manger scenes show the centrality of Jesus in the Christmas account and bring together all of the major faithful witnesses of this blessed event. When they are understood in such a way they can add to the enjoyment of the season and be an important part of the instruction of our children. We must remember that if a brother or sister in Christ is offended by such things, that we are to be sensitive to them and not cause them to stumble.

Coming back to the text here in Matthew, we see these Wise Men bringing the newborn King great gifts. Three gifts are given which is why it is often assumed that there were three wise men bringing them... Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh. These are all great treasures that would be fit gifts for an earthly King, but we must always remember that Jesus came as the suffering Messiah

Jesus came to save His people from their sins and would do so as THE Lamb of God who would give His life as the sacrifice that could propitiate the wrath of God.

It is Matthew who is writing his Gospel primarily to the Jews and he mentions the gifts: Faithful Jews would not have missed these images, and neither should we if we are familiar with our Bibles, including the Old Testament!

Gold was prominent in the Temple and especially in the Holy of Holies!

Frankincense represented incense that would have filled the Temple as the prayers of the Saints were lifted up to God and reminds us that Jesus would be the Great Ascension offering going up before the Father as a sweet-smelling savor.

And finally the Myrrh: The fragrant perfume often mentioned in the Song of Solomon, poured on the feet of Jesus in preparation for His burial and used to wrap His body in the tomb

- **The aroma of which filled the air in the garden on the morning of His resurrection!**

As I mentioned, there are many similarities and contrasts with the coming of the wise men and the shepherds...

- **They were given great signs to lead them to the baby Jesus**
- **They followed these signs and came to worship the newborn King**
- **The rich Wise Men from the East brought great gifts to remind us about the great work that Jesus would do for His people.**
- **The poor shepherds of Bethlehem came from their work of tending the very sheep that were used for sacrifices in the Temple to foreshadow the great work that Jesus would do on the cross.**
- **Both returned to their “normal” lives knowing that the world had been changed!**

As we are commissioned today and return to our “normal” lives we must once again remember the simple lessons that we are to learn from these shepherds and wise men...

First and foremost it reminds us again of the importance of our being faithful in our callings...

Last week we pointed out that any shepherd who had decided that keeping the sheep was just too boring or that this particular night was too cold would have missed that heavenly chorus and the chance to see Jesus! The same holds true for these Wise Men: If they had not been diligent in their studies they would have not known what the star signified.

And this leads us to the second lesson where we must learn to listen carefully to what God has to say, even when it might seem a little strange: The shepherds where to seek the Messiah in a manger & the Wise Men had to leave the great Kingdoms of the East to look for the King of Kings.

- **And of course, we must not only hear what God says, but obey His commands as these Shepherds did that night and the wise men did in taking their long journey.**

Each and every one of us can learn these simple lessons:

- **To be faithful daily as we serve in our vocation or calling**
- **To hear what God has to say**
- **To do what God commands, even when it seems a little strange!**

These are the lessons that we are to learn and follow as God fills the earth with the Kingdom of His Son!

As we see the fulfillment of what the Prophet Isaiah saw years ago that we read this morning:

Isaiah 60:18 “But you shall call your walls Salvation, And your gates Praise. 19 “The sun shall no longer be your light by day, Nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you; But Jehovah will be to you an everlasting light, And your God your glory. 20 Your sun shall no longer go down, Nor shall your moon withdraw itself; For Jehovah will be your everlasting light, And the days of your mourning shall be ended. 21 Also your people shall all be righteous; They shall inherit the land forever, The branch of My planting, The work of My hands, That I may be glorified.”

- These are words written long before the birth of Jesus and they should remind us of the picture John was given of the New Jerusalem, the Bride of Jesus as she fills the earth with the City of God:

Revelation 22:9 “Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, “Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife.” 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, 11 having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. 12 Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: 13 three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. 14 Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb... [John describes the walls & foundations]

21 “The twelve gates were twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. 22 But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. 23 The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. 24 And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. 25 Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). 26 And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. 27 But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.”

- May we rejoice in this New Year that our names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life
- May we faithfully serve the King of Kings as we invite the nations of the earth to come to the City of God!

Communion Meditation: Nehemiah 8:

“ 9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn nor weep.” For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.

10 Then [Nehemiah] said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” 11 So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them. ”