

Note: The sermon below will be delivered by the Rev. Caleb Kim on Sunday, December 22, 2024, at 11:00 a.m. at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Fenelon Falls.

The Message: Joy and Rejoicing - Matthew's Christmas Stories 3

When I served two years of military service in South Korea in my twenties, I was a truck driver. My primary duty was to deliver essential items such as groceries, clothing, shoes, and snacks to various military stations. In addition to this task, I had to be a watch guard with a fellow soldier for an hour almost every night. Together, we stood at the front gate or the rear side of the facilities and made sure that our military place was safe and protected from enemies. One cold night, I spent an hour on watch duty with a soldier who had a deep knowledge of stars. He shared a fascinating introduction about the 88 constellations in the night sky. After that, he pointed out one of the groups of stars named the Big Dipper in the sky. As many of us have learned, this constellation consists of seven stars, and they form a shape resembling a large spoon. This group of stars is also called "the Great Bear," and we can find them in the northern sky. We could use these stars as a natural compass to locate the north side at night. Though I disliked the guard task, especially in the winter, I loved looking at the stars and listening to the stories behind some constellations.

In today's Gospel, we encounter another story of a star in the night sky. In this account, the Magi, or Wise Men, travelled from the east to worship the newborn Jesus. At the time, their only navigation tool would be a star. At one point in their journey, the star disappeared, and they became lost near Bethlehem. When this light reappeared and led them to the Messiah, they were overjoyed. This morning, I want us to examine the Magi's attitudes toward the star, Jesus Christ, and His birth. I also want us to apply these lessons to our Advent journey and experience sacred joy during this holy season.

Before we explore the Magi's responses to Christ's birth, I want us to look at three other responses from this scripture. The first perspective we can discover is from King Herod. In the presence of the Wise Men, Herod seemed eager to know where Jesus was born and pretended to be anxious to worship Him. However, he was deeply disturbed inside when he heard the newborn "king of the Jews" from them. After the Magi left his palace, Herod immediately commanded his soldiers to kill all the babies two years old and under in Bethlehem and in its surrounding areas. Herod's response reveals his self-centeredness as he desperately attempted to maintain power at any cost.

Another response is from the people of Jerusalem. When I reflected on this part, I had to pause for a while and think about why they were also troubled like King Herod. I felt that they would be happy with the news of the newborn king since they had been waiting for their Messiah for a long time. However, they appeared to be upset when they heard the good news. They may have not wanted to witness more confusion between King Herod and the new leader because they knew well about King Herod's aggressive leadership. When we look at the people of Israel during the forty years of the wilderness in the Old Testament, they complained a lot to Moses and God. They forgot their new identity as God's people whenever they were challenged. Too often, they wanted to go

back to Egypt, even though they would have lived in the previous ungodly circumstances. They were content with their past life situation. Likewise, the people of Jerusalem would not have liked to start a holy, adventurous journey with the Holy Infant.

The other attitude toward the birth of Christ is from some of the religious leaders in those days. They knew well what the Magi shared with King Herod. From the scriptures, they had learned that the future Messiah would have been born in Bethlehem. In chapter two of today's Gospel, God's prophet's statement related to this promise was repeated three or four times (Matthew 2:5,15,17,23). The distance between Jerusalem, where the Magi first visited, and Bethlehem, where the Messiah was born, is about ten kilometers. It could be a day's walking distance if we are able and willing. Compared to the Wise Men, who had journeyed for a long time and over a great distance, King Herod's chief priests and teachers of the law did not do anything for this baby. They had head knowledge, but their hearts were far away from the truth.

What kind of spiritual attitude do we have toward the birth of Jesus Christ during this Advent season? We need to examine our hearts and ask ourselves this question as we are invited to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior. The Magi had a longing for what they believed in. I would say that they were not just fans of someone they admired but genuine followers of Christ. The scripture we read this morning did not describe how they had prepared for this celebration. However, we can imagine their preparations based on some of Matthew's descriptions in our Gospel. Some Bible scholars suggest that the Magi might have lived in the Persian Empire. The separation between their hometown and Jesus' birthplace would be more than sixteen thousand kilometers. It can be similar to the distance between Toronto and Sydney, Australia, and takes almost 23 hours by flight. As the hymn writer of "We Three Kings" mentioned, the Wise Men would have crossed rivers and climbed mountains, travelled far from home, and followed the "yonder star." The plans, prayers, and practices they made for this challenging journey must have required a lot of time, energy, and effort. Some people in my homeland believe that a star would arise in space when someone significant is born. The Magi would have sought salvation from their real-life issues through someone special who had the power to save them. They desired to worship the Messiah with all their hearts. They not only expressed their love for the Savior with their presence but also with the gifts they had prepared for Him.

When we consider each offering the Magi brought from their homeland, we can recognize their understanding of what Baby Christ would do for His people. The gold they presented would symbolize His kingship as the King of kings. Frankincense could represent His ministry as "the Great High Priest." Myrrh might reveal His sacrifice on the cross as the Savior. The Magi's humble attitude toward the Messiah moved from their heads to their hearts to their hands and feet. They were genuine worshippers. Their attitude toward Baby Jesus is the one that God wants us to have as His faithful followers.

What kind of blessing did the Wise Men receive when they found the star and Baby Jesus? They were so delighted! Throughout the Bible, many seekers provide godly

examples for us to imitate. From our spiritual ancestors, Adam and Eve, in the first book called Genesis of the Bible, to the Apostle John in the last book Revelation, seeking for the Savior of the world has been mentioned continuously. While waiting and looking forward to the Messiah's arrival, all the faithful in the Bible followed the star indicated in today's Gospel in one way or another. The Magi are an excellent standard of a worshiper's life.

At this point, we need to answer one crucial question, "What is the star in this scripture? It could represent Baby Jesus, as He is called "the True Light" (John 1:9) and "the Light of the world" (John 8:12, 9:5) in the New Testament. The star could symbolize the Word of God, which is "a lamp" to our feet and "a light" on our path (Psalm 119:105). It might also be referred to as one of God's revelations, messages, or supernatural lights in the universe. Honestly, we do not know what the star would truly mean in the Bible. The one thing we can be sure of is that God's stars can help His people live godly lives, lead us to Christ, and provide us with His guidance, strength, peace, and happiness in our faith journeys.

In our Old Testament reading for this morning, the Prophet Habakkuk experienced these sacred blessings and praised the Lord his God even while facing in challenging situations. At that time, the Babylonian Empire invaded the Kingdom of Judah and destroyed its land and even God's temple. They took some of the people of Judah to Babylon and made them captives. We can imagine how desperate this prophet must have felt as he witnessed the terrible destruction of his country. In his book, Habakkuk had an honest dialogue with the Lord. During that conversation, he discovered how the people of Judah could once again find joy in the Lord. Eventually, the prophet concluded his book with a powerful prayer and declaration. "Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds, Lord. Repeat them in our day, in our time make them known; in wrath remember mercy" (Habakkuk 3:2). "...Though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God, my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength..." (Habakkuk 3:17-19).

Habakkuk asked God to show His mercy and might to the people of Judah, who had been distant from the Lord. In the meantime, Habakkuk prophesized that God's mighty and merciful deeds could be repeated for them. He then shared the hopeful message that God would be their strength. If the Almighty God became the source of power the people of Judah needed, they could once again plant seeds and reap abundant harvests. Their fields could once again be filled with cattle. The key question was how they could receive God's strength. The answer lay in their decision to cultivate an intimate relationship with the Lord their God.

One illustration I often use to explain this is to think about blood vessels. When vessels are blocked, especially in the most vital organ, the heart, we may feel weak and experience discomfort in various situations. We should not ignore these symptoms; instead, we need immediate medical attention and proper treatment. Additionally, we must follow essential guidelines: consuming the right nutrients, exercising appropriately, and having regular check-ups. Similarly, whether we realize it or not, our sins are the

biggest obstacle to joy in our Christian lives. One consequence of sinning against God is the loss of holy pleasure in our spiritual hearts. Sacred joy flows through the channel of our relationship with our Savior, Jesus.

Before we go any further, I want to emphasize what I have stated before: dealing with sin is a continuous process. We cannot claim that we are now living a sin-free life simply because we have had a good relationship with God for a long time or because we have repented of our sins. Until our Lord God calls us to be with Him in His Joyful Kingdom, we must continually humble ourselves, examine our hearts and minds through God's word, turn away from sin, and surrender everything to God. Through this ongoing spiritual process, the boundless source of godly happiness will continually flow in us, no matter what kinds of challenges we may face.

In Christianity, delighting in the Lord is not optional. In our Epistle reading for today, the Apostle Paul, while in jail, wrote a letter to the Philippians. Think about the circumstances he faced: confined to a tiny space with very little freedom, living day by day. His health may have been compromised due to severe persecution for his faith in Jesus. Despite this, Paul encourages us as his readers to "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). This is not a suggestion but a command-not only when everything is going well but also when things go wrong. Paul repeatedly uses this command to "Rejoice" in his letters.

Some of us may ask, "Do we have no option to be sad? Are we not allowed to feel sorrowful?" Please understand this: many scriptures in the Bible address real-life issues. This means that God does not guarantee constant happiness or a life free from pain simply because we are His children. Our Lord understands our sorrow. When Jesus heard that His loved one, Lazarus, had passed away, He wept. Denying the realities of life is not what God desires for us. As His children, He wants us to stay near those who suffer and have compassion for those enduring difficult times. When we commit wrongdoings, we must lament for ourselves and repent. Rejoicing in the Lord always is, ultimately, our choice. We may not be joyful about our challenging circumstances, but we can rejoice in the Lord when we obey His instruction. This command is not easy for any of us, but with the Lord's help, we can find joy in Him even during difficulties and discover His will for our lives.

As we prepare for the Birth of Christ during this holy season, we need to ask ourselves: Are our eyes focused on the Rising Star, Jesus Christ? Are our spiritual hearts pure for the birth of Christ? We must evaluate ourselves through God's Word, the True Light. Are we governed by the Spirit or the flesh in our daily lives? Are we willing to accept the divine invitation to the birthday celebration of our Savior, or are we too busy to respond? Do we think, speak, and act according to God's truth, or do we merely keep His words in our minds without living them out? We must repent of any corrupted thoughts, words, and actions and make a firm decision to journey toward the Light of the Star in our spiritual adventure.

When we long for the Great Star and follow the Brightest Light in our spiritual race, we can “walk and not be faint,” we can “run and not grow weary,” and we can “soar on wings like eagles” (Isaiah 40:31). God promises us His presence through the Prophet Jeremiah: “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you and will bring you back from captivity” (Jeremiah 29:13-14). Some of us may feel emotional difficulties this Christmas, perhaps because it is the first one without a loved one. Others might be enduring challenges, while some may feel that this Christmas is just another mundane holiday. Regardless of our individual feelings or circumstances, God Immanuel - God with us - calls us to seek Him with the same solid and spiritual longing as the Magi on their journey.

When we follow the Star in repentance and faith and pray wholeheartedly for our loved ones, the Mighty and Merciful God will save us and them from troubling situations. The Everlasting Father will protect us and our loved ones from the influences of sin and death. Above all, Immanuel will fill our hearts and theirs with divine joy through His presence, protection, provision, and power - not only during this Christmas season but every day. Amen!

**In this sermon, I have incorporated thoughts from various reflections based on the texts from Habakkuk 3:1-2, 16-19; Matthew 2:1-12; Philippians 4:4-9.*