

## #cometoworship – Matthew 2:1-12

Today we begin a new series entitled, **#come**. The hashtag has become a big part of communicating on social media these days to draw attention to a certain thought or idea. Also, as I looked at the Gospel readings during this season of Epiphany, I noticed a common denominator of movement – coming, going or leaving. So, I put them together to guide our worship and the study of these Gospel lessons. Today our theme is **#cometoworship**.

“Come and worship.” “Welcome to worship.” “Come and worship Christ the newborn King.” We use the word “worship” a great deal around here. What does it mean to “worship” God? What pictures fly into your mind as you think of “worship”? It is true; we believe that the believer’s whole life is an act of worship. But today, we are talking about the public worship service. The 5:30 PM/8:00, 9:30 or 10:30 AM moment. What are the ingredients to worship?

Well, we have our padded pews & chairs, our music and singing, our praying, our standing and sitting. We have a sermon. Twice a month we have communion. Sometimes a baptism. That’s worship, right? There is one thing, though, that is also a part of coming to worship – something you experience probably every time you come to worship. Do you know what that is?

The “wise men,” as we call them, experienced that other part. Their goal was to worship the Christ, just as it is your goal when you come here on Sunday morning. They brought their offerings, just as you bring your offerings. They bowed their head, just as you bow your head. But there was something else they experienced that you experience too – the forgotten part of coming to worship – do you know what that is?

It will become clear as we see study their story. The Greek word for these men is “magi” translated “wise men” in our text for today – highly educated men, students of the stars. They lived somewhere east of Israel, perhaps from Persia or Arabia. Somehow, they knew that a Messiah, the Christ, would eventually be born in Bethlehem. And then one day, God caused a special star to appear to them. And as those wise men studied that star, God revealed to them that this was a sign that the Christ had been born.

These men were thrilled! They decided to travel to Israel to see the Christ with their own eyes. Traditionally, we always think of three wise men (because of three gifts), but in reality, we don’t know if there were three or thirty. They packed up their camels, their servants, and the whole entourage headed west, to the land of the Messiah, because they wanted to worship the Christ.

But, their going to worship, and ours, includes overcoming obstacles. Part of their worship was overcoming the obstacle of distance. They didn’t live right next door to Bethlehem. This was going to be a big trip. Probably expensive & time consuming. They would have to put forth a lot of effort – distance was an obstacle. But for the Magi, it was worth it.

Distance is a worship obstacle that many people today don’t overcome. Americans are spending more and more time driving to work during the week, but most churchgoers have a quick trip on Sunday. Sixty-eight percent of churchgoers say it takes them 15 minutes or less to get from their home to their place of worship, according to new research from **Baylor University**. The report states: “As the distance increases, the likelihood of weekly attendance decreases.” Fifty-three percent of those who live within five minutes attend weekly. Only 32 percent of those who live more than 30 minutes away do the same.

And when you think of the distance the wise men traveled to worship the Christ, you realize that true Christians will overcome distance to worship their Savior.

As the wise men traveled, they encountered another obstacle – unbelief. They arrived in Jerusalem, and no one seemed to know or care that the Messiah was born. I'm sure the wise men looked at each other and said, "I can't believe no one knows or cares about the Christ!" They visited king Herod. He didn't have a clue. In fact, he was disturbed by the news and all Jerusalem with him. The Jewish chief priests and teachers of the law were there. They knew what the Bible said about the Messiah – that he would be born in Bethlehem, but you could see that they didn't believe. There was no faith in Jerusalem, no joy that Christ was born. No one believed. No one cared. You would think that the wise men would have been discouraged by all this unbelief, but that weren't. They headed to Bethlehem.

And as they sought to worship Christ, they encountered yet another obstacle – lowliness. Bethlehem was a lowly place – a little cow town just outside of Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph were lowly people – common peasants. I'm sure it was obvious to the wise men that Mary and Joseph weren't the king and queen of Israel. And Jesus – just a lowly baby, nothing special to look at.

Do you see the obstacles the wise men had to overcome to worship the Christ? Distance, unbelief, lowliness - all those things could have discouraged the magi, caused them to turn back. But for them, Christ was worth it. We are told, "when they saw the star (come over the place where the child was), they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." They rushed to the house, and bowed down and worshiped the Christ. They presented him with their gifts. They pushed those obstacles aside and worshiped their Savior.

That is a big part of worship, my friends. Worship is more than just sitting on cushy chairs with perfect temperatures and nice music and singing and praying and hearing God's Word. Worship is also about overcoming obstacles.

For some of you, it's distance. If you are a Christian who has to travel more than a quarter of a mile to worship Christ, then you are following in the footsteps of the magi. Another obstacle is unbelief. Some of you are surrounded by people who discourage you from worshiping the Christ – unbelieving relatives, friends, coworkers, maybe your neighbors look at you a little funny: "You believe that holy-roller stuff?" they say. Our society in general will tell you that if you want to use your time to worship Jesus, that's nice, but really, you're wasting your time. You are surrounded by unbelief, and as you pushed that aside to come here tonight/this morning, you are following in the footsteps of the Magi.

And finally, there is the lowliness of Christ – that's an obstacle too. After you travel to get here, and overcome the unbelief around you, here you find Christ. But he's so plain! You can't even see him. There are just some symbols here – a cross, a book, some bread and wine. We're Americans – we want glitz and glamour – we want to see the Times Square New Year's Eve ball drop every Sunday with special effects and Dolby surround-sound. But Christ doesn't choose to reveal himself that way – he's so plain, so lowly – he comes to you through his lowly Word, just through his Sacraments. Have you ever noticed the lowliness of Christ? Once again, you are walking in the footsteps of the Magi.

But that's worship – overcoming obstacles - and there are many more than what I have talked about today. And as we think about these things, we cannot help but feel guilty. Because deep down, we know that we prefer worship where there are no obstacles – I don't want to have to overcome anything to come to church. I want worship to be easy. And when obstacles get in my way – maybe a strange look from an unbelieving relative, maybe this Sunday it just seems like too much work – when obstacles come my way, what am I tempted to do? “I don't think I'll worship Christ today. It's not worth it. I think I'll just stay home, drink my coffee, read my paper, watch my TV. It's just not worth it.” Have you ever fallen into that temptation, my friend?

This morning, Jesus looks at you and says, “I forgive you of that sin.” Isn't that amazing? Just think of the obstacles Jesus went through, so that he could say, “I forgive you.” On that first Christmas, he traveled from heaven to earth, from ultimate power to the puniness of an infant, from riches to the poverty of being a peasant. When you see the word “distance,” think of the distance Jesus traveled to be your Savior!

And while he was here, no one believed him. His disciples were chronically confused. The leaders of the people said he was demon possessed. His own family thought he had lost his mind. Again and again the Devil told him that it wasn't worth it. The crowds said “crucify him.” No one was on his side. No one encouraged him. When you see the word “unbelief,” think of the unbelief that Jesus overcame to be your Savior!

And finally, there is lowliness. But Jesus didn't shy away from that either. To become an infant wasn't lowly enough. He lowered himself even more, to the level of public humiliation, publicly beaten, and finally publicly hung on a cross. There he experienced a lowliness that you and I will never have to feel. When you see the word “lowliness,” think of the lowliness of the cross that Jesus suffered. And he went through all this and rose from the grave three days later, so that he could say to you today, “I forgive you.” “I love you.” “You are my child.” “Welcome to my family.” “Welcome to eternal life.”

That is why we worship him. You and I are the modern-day Magi, overcoming obstacle after obstacle, because we believe that Christ is worth it. Today we bring our gold and incense and myrrh – we call it our offering. But that's not all we offer – we also offer to him our lives. Obstacles will always be a part of worshiping Christ, but we won't let them discourage us. Because there, in the arms of Mary is God in the flesh, who gave his life so that you could have eternal life. “O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant. Oh come ye to Bethlehem, come and behold him, born the king of angels.” Push those obstacles aside, and come, let us adore him. He is Christ, our Lord. Amen.