

One of the things I really like about New Year’s is that in some ways it’s a fresh start. When I look back over the past year, I can see times when I have been lazy and mistakes that I’ve made, but I can look at the new year as a fresh start and say, “I want to be different. I want to be better.”

Now I know that most new year’s resolutions are abandoned very shortly after the new year, but I still like the idea of a fresh start. For the most part we can’t control our outward circumstances. We can’t control whether the outward circumstances of 2021 are going to be any better than the outward circumstances of 2020. But we can control who we are. We can control our attitude and our behavior. So going into 2021, what kind of people do we want to be? What do we want our attitude and actions to be like?

I think the Magi are a great example for us to follow. The lesson I’d like us to learn from the Magi today is this: I want to give Jesus my best, even when things don’t go as I expected them to go. I want to give Jesus my best, even when things don’t go as I expected them to go.

The Magi had seen a star in the sky. And somehow they knew that this star meant that the King of the Jews had been born. Matthew doesn’t tell us how the Magi knew this, but the point that I want us to get is that God putting this star in the sky was a sign of his grace. God wanted the Magi to know that his Son had been born and so he used a star to help reveal to the Magi that the King of the Jews had been born. And he also used that star to lead the Magi to Jesus. This is a sign of his grace because the Magi were Gentiles. They were outside of his Old Testament people Israel. But God wanted them to know about Jesus and so he put this star in the sky.

God also wanted you to know about Jesus. And so he shined his light into your heart when someone brought you to baptism or told you about Jesus. And he continues to shine his light into your heart whenever you hear his word.

When God revealed to the Magi that the King had been born, they wanted to give the king their best. They made a long journey from the East to come and worship him. And they brought him expensive gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. God has called us out of darkness into his wonderful light and so in this coming year we want to give Jesus our best too. But we also know that we will face challenges in this coming year. There might be unexpected challenges. Things in this coming year might not go the way we expect them to go.

I don’t know exactly what the Magi were expecting when they came to Jerusalem, but things probably didn’t go the way they were expecting them to go. They came to Jerusalem because the king of the Jews had been born and they were coming to worship him (Matthew 2:2). Now if a king had just been born, you would think that the city would be celebrating, but that’s not what the Magi find. Instead they find that nobody knows about the birth of this king. And when they do find out about it, they are not happy, instead they are disturbed. **“When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him” (Matthew 2:3).** King Herod was disturbed because he didn’t want any threats to his throne and the people were probably disturbed because they knew how violent King Herod could be.

Herod calls together the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They are the ones who know the Bible the best and so he asks them where the Messiah is to be born. And they tell him, “In Bethlehem in Judea” because that is what the prophet had written (5:2). And so Herod calls the Magi in secretly and tells them to go to Bethlehem and then report back to him.

Many people have wondered why no one goes with the Magi to Bethlehem. Maybe it was because Herod had called them secretly. No matter what the reason, things probably weren’t going the way the Magi thought things would go. They probably thought that they would come to the city and everybody else would be bowing down to the king and they

¹ I owe many of the points in this sermon to the books by Daniel Deutchlander, *On Giving Advice to God* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2017), 36-42; and Martin Chemnitz and others, *Harmony of the Four Evangelists*, vol. 1. Translated by Richard Dinda (Malone, Texas: The Center for the Study of Lutheran Orthodoxy, 2009), 182-199.

would be just some in a long line of people who were taking their turn to pay reverence to him. Instead, they find themselves on their way to Bethlehem alone.

Sometimes someone who is new to the faith is very enthusiastic about the faith, but then they might feel a little disappointed when they see that we who have been in the faith for so long are much less enthusiastic. This can certainly be a rebuke to us who have had the light of the Gospel all our lives. Someone who is new to the faith can reveal how cold our love has grown.

When there are things that disappoint you, remember the Magi. If they were disappointed that nobody came with them to Bethlehem, they didn't let that stop them. They still wanted to give their Jesus their best and so they went to Bethlehem. When you encounter disappointments this year, whether it's disappointments from church or disappointments in other aspects in your life, don't let that stop you from giving Jesus your best. Even when you encounter disappointment, God still shined his light into your heart. God still called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. And that still inspires us to give Jesus our best.

When you encounter unexpected challenges, God will pick you up in just the way you need. As the Magi were on their way to Bethlehem, the star appeared again. And it says, **"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed" (2:10)**. One commentator pointed out that we encounter many challenges to our faith, we encounter many temptations and trials, but God knows how to strengthen our faith when we are weak. I don't know how the Magi were feeling, but if they were feeling weak and discouraged, this strengthened them. In this year ahead you might encounter things that will very much discourage you. It could be a tough year ahead. But our God who called you out of darkness with his light also knows how to strengthen you with his light. **"When they saw the star, they were overjoyed" (Matthew 2:10)**.

The star led them to the place where Jesus was and they entered the house and found what they were looking for. They found Jesus. Some commentators wonder if it struck the Magi as strange that this great King was living in such a humble house in such a humble town. Again if that struck them as strange it did not bother them. It did not stop them from giving full worship to Jesus. It says, **"They bowed down and worshiped him Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh" (2:11)**.

Things didn't go the way they expected, but that didn't stop them from giving Jesus their best. In this new year, things might not go the way you expect, but don't let that stop you from giving Jesus your best. Ask yourself, how can I give Jesus my best this year? I want to give him a generous offering just like the Magi did. I give Jesus my best when I give a regular offering to the Lord. I want to worship him regularly. The magi said that the reason for their long journey was to worship him (2:2). I give Jesus my best when I take the time to worship him regularly either by coming to church here in person or by watching the service videos at home. I give Jesus my best when I pray to him regularly. I give Jesus my best when I love those around me and sacrifice my time and effort to serve my neighbor. In this new year, give Jesus your best, even when things don't go the way you planned.

Things didn't go the way the Magi planned. The last big twist came when God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod and so they went home by another route (2:12, NIV). One commentator, a man named Martin Chemnitz, pointed out that the Magi left with a better understanding of Christ's kingdom. He's a King in a humble little house in Bethlehem. King Herod wants to kill him. And that's the way it would be for Jesus for the rest of his life. He came to be humble and to suffer and die for us on a cross. Maybe this year if things don't go the way we expect, if we encounter some unexpected difficulties, it will be hard, but we might come out with a better understanding of Christ's kingdom. It might make us more humble, more reliant on him, and more thankful that he called us out of darkness and into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9, NIV). His light gives us eternal salvation and that's a light that certainly deserves our best. Amen.