

Shepherds and Magi **Luke 2:8-20, Matt 2: 1-12**

Welcome everyone, wherever you are streaming from right now. My name is Jerry Tu. I'm an elder here at PBCC. I'm honored to be sharing God's word with you during this season of Advent. It's a very difficult season for many of us, but it's also a season of love, hope, peace and joy.

In our Advent series this year, we have been looking at pairs of worshippers from Jesus' birth narratives. Each character was associated with a Beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount. Bernard Bell began our series with the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were poor in spirit. Last week, Brian Morgan led us through the narrative of Joseph and Mary, who were meek. Today, I will be sharing with you a third pair of worshippers: the shepherds and the "magi". Associated with these worshippers is this beatitude: "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied."

During the Christmas season, especially during this extraordinarily unsettling year, most of us are longing for family, fellowship, and a return to normalcy. It is most appropriate, therefore, that, as we observe what shepherds & magi are looking forward to, we also examine the hunger & thirst in our own lives. In addition, today is the third Advent Sunday, a day to celebrate Joy. We will find the theme of great joy in our passages today as well.

My message today takes the metaphor of a painting. If you google for a painting of shepherds, magi, and baby Jesus, you'll find a million hits on the internet. Believe me, I tried! Rather than showing you a painting, I'd like for you to imagine this painting in your minds. First select a beautiful frame, your favorite material to support the canvas. Then imagine a painting of the shepherds on the left, magi on the right, and Baby Jesus in a manger in the middle. Have you got it? Now let's begin.

The Beatitude

Let's focus first on the frame. It's our beatitude, it will be the frame around the painting that draws our attention to the shepherds, magi, and Jesus.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." (Matthew 5:6 ESV).

There are four sides of this frame: hunger, thirst, righteousness, and satisfied. Let's look first at righteousness. What is "righteousness"? In this day and age, the secular world is all about insisting on my "rights" as an individual. There are those in the public eye who declare they are "right" or "righteous" while others are "wrong" or "unethical". Are these correct definitions of "righteousness"?

Amidst all of this clutter and noise of the world, how do we discern true godly biblical righteousness? Well, I'd like to quote from our very own Shawn Reese with this helpful insight on "righteousness". I'll paraphrase Shawn as follows,

Righteousness can be simply defined as "right-relatedness". Righteousness is fundamentally a relational term. It begins with our relationship with God, recognizing who He is and who we are in relation to Him. When we are in a state of being acceptable to God and properly related to Him, we have that righteousness. It comes only through Jesus, and we understand and accept that right-relatedness we are

overwhelmed with gratitude and joy, In this beatitude, Jesus teaches us that righteousness/right-relatedness means to be truly human, made in the image of God and accepted by Him.

Now let's consider the two sides of our frame: Blessed are those who ***hunger and thirst*** for this *right-relatedness* to our Creator God.

We all do hunger and thirst, but often for the wrong things: physical or material things rather than relational or spiritual. Or, very often, we don't crave at all - we become lukewarm or ambivalent to God. I find myself vacillating between these two: either longing for the wrong things, or don't long for God at all. Perhaps you may identify with me. Either way, there is much we all can learn about longing for God from today's narrative.

The characters in our "painting" are the shepherds and magi. They are recorded in two different gospels: the shepherds are described in Luke Chapter 2, and the Magi's visit is in Matthew Chapter 2. Let's start with the context set in Luke 2:4-7 (ESV).

4 ... Joseph went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

While this sets up the context of our story, we realize that this is the most important birth in human history, the birth of the Son of God, Savior of the World. It is literally the climax of God's redemptive plan for mankind since the fall of Adam in Genesis 3. Yet, one simple sentence is all that is recorded in Luke, "*she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger.*" That strikes me as astonishingly brief! No time or date, length or weight. Just the description of a little baby wrapped in cloths and laid in a feeding trough. Yet this humble child is fully divine God through whom the world was made. What a marvel and mystery! It brings to mind that song by Graham Kendrick "Oh what a mystery, meekness and majesty, manhood and deity, ... in perfect harmony, the Man who is God."¹

Now let's look at the canvas of our painting, starting with the Shepherds.

The Shepherds: The Announcement (Luke 2:8-14 ESV)

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

¹ <https://www.grahamkendrick.co.uk/home/graham-kendrick-songs/make-way-for-the-king-of-kings-a-carnival-of-praise/meekness-and-majesty-this-is-your-god-2> retrieved 2020-11-23

Shepherds in Judea led a simple, hard life; they weren't idyllically frolicking in lush fields, doting on cute lambs. They lived on the brink of danger protecting their animals, braving harsh weather to care for their sheep. These Jewish shepherds worked hard in the background of society, a forgotten lower class of people. Yet, God chose to bless these little people with the honor to witness the birth of the Christ Child. The angelic vision and host of heavenly beings descended not upon a king, prophet, priest, or men of renown, but to little, poor, common working people. This is once again, a mystery and a marvel of how God works. He chooses common people like the shepherds, like you and me, to witness His glory, He chooses normal people like us to be His witness to the world. Do not be surprised when you hear His calling on you, don't be overwhelmed when He chooses you to be His instrument. Do not be afraid. The angel declared, "do not fear!" which is, as you've learned, the most commonly occurring command in our Scriptures. There are hundreds of mentions, one for every single day of the year!

The angel and heavenly host then proclaim the Good News, the Gospel: Jesus Christ is born Today! Jesus is given three exalted titles: Savior, Christ or Messiah, and Lord. The long expected, long awaited Savior, Messiah, Lord is coming Today, not only to the shepherds, to the villagers, but also to Israel, Gentiles, Romans, to "*all the people*". Christ the Lord is Savior for all people of the whole world throughout history, and for all time.

Now let's continue in verse 15.

The Shepherds: The Response (Luke 2:15-20 ESV)

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

What was the response of the shepherds to what they had witnessed? "*They went with haste*" or "*they hurried off*". The word used here for haste is "*speudo*"; it means with speed & urgency, but more than that, there's the underlying attitude of eager desire, expectation & excitement. They hurried because they *longed* to see what the angel described. This is the tie-in to our beatitude. The shepherds hungered and thirsted to be in the presence of this Savior.

Their hunger and excitement are reflected in their actions. First they eagerly sought to find Jesus. Second, they shared the good news of great joy to others, Luke 2:17 "*they made known that which had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered (amazed) at what the shepherds told them.*"

Thirdly, they returned to the source of joy

(v.20), "*and the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*". They returned to Jesus and worshipped God.

We see that the shepherds' journey of faith consisted of three steps:

1. Seek Jesus
2. Share the Joy with others
- 3) Return to Jesus and glorify and praise God!

The shepherds' journey of faith is a good example for us to imitate: Seek Him, share Him, worship Him.

The Magi: The Announcement

Now let's look at the right side of our "painting": the magi's visit in Matthew chapter 2:1-8 (ESV)
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 saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

*6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."*

7 Then Herod summoned the magi secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him."

The Magi or wise men were highly-educated men, specializing in astronomy, astrology, and natural sciences. They were likely Gentiles, not Jews, from Persia, 1,000 miles to the east of Judea. Traditions outside of the bible suggest that there were three of them (due to the three gifts) and even gave them ancient names (Melchior, Caspar, Balthazar). It's remarkable that God would choose these Gentile astronomers to worship His Son. His plan of redemption included the magi. It extends to both Jews and Gentiles, young and old, near and far, to all peoples everywhere.

The star is an age-old mystery. Many scholars have tried to explain the alignment of planets, stars, and galaxies that may have been visible from Persia 2,000 years ago. In fact next week, Saturn and Jupiter will align for the first time in 800 years, called "Christmas Star"! I will not try to give an explanation for astronomy. I view it as a map "pin" which God dropped on the navigation app which the magi were using on their camels. That's just me. It's a wonder of God, and not surprisingly, to use all of creation to point to Jesus!

Having received the sign from God, these Gentile magi packed up their camels and traveled for months; they must have been so motivated to come to this King. They tell of this good news to those they met in Jerusalem. The king and all people hear their testimony. But rather than accepting the news with wonder and amazement, these people were troubled and felt threatened. The scholars informed King Herod that the Scriptures did point to the Messiah; the prophet Micah prophesied the birth in Bethlehem of the One who will shepherd God's people Israel. King Herod wanted to identify and snuff out this potential threat to his own rule, so he sent the magi right to Jesus in Bethlehem. Herod thought he was smart, but ultimately, he was outwitted & out-smarted by the magi, who thwarted Herod's plans by obeying God.

Sometimes God does use the rulers and events of the world to point to Jesus, but even more often, God uses the foolish of the world to outsmart the wise, as it says in 1 Cor 1:27-28 (ESV): “*God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.*”

Let's continue to the Magi's response in verse 9.

The Magi: The Response (Matthew 2:9-12 ESV)

9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Let's look at the response of the magi as they come to Jesus. (v.9) “*(The star) came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*”. I love how Matthew described this. He used four consecutive superlatives to express the Joy experienced by the magi: rejoiced - exceedingly - great - joy. They were overwhelmed with joy! Have you felt such joy in Jesus' presence? I recall experiencing such Joy when I first accepted Jesus, and each time I return to Him and He continues to fill me with Joy.

Next, the magi fell down and worshiped the Christ Child (v.11). They realized they were in the presence of God Himself. Jesus is God; they are not. Understanding what they are in relation to Jesus, they have no choice but to prostrate themselves in humility and worship him. This, my friends, is right-relatedness. To realize that God accepts us into His presence without finding fault, through the righteousness of Jesus, should bring us to our knees, to tears, and to praise and worship. This is the only valid response to right-relatedness to God.

The magi's final act: they gave their very best, their most precious gifts to Jesus. We as well must give ourselves to His kingship, submitting to His rule over them in every aspect of life as our response to King Jesus.

The magi also have a three-part journey of faith: rejoice exceedingly, worship humbly, submit completely. This, too, is a pattern we can imitate in our own journey of faith.

Reflections

In these passages, in our “painting”, we see these remarkably parallel themes in the shepherds and the magi.

- Each receives the good news from God of the birth of a king. They receive directions to find Jesus - manger and swaddling cloths, a “dropped pin” in the form of a star.
- They go on a journey of faith. They follow the instructions or directions to find Jesus.
- Their journey of faith is filled with anticipation and excitement. They hunger to see what God promises. They thirst to be in the presence of Jesus.

- They are so excited that they tell Good News to others they meet.
- They each come in the presence of Jesus and worship the Christ Child, the only possible response when they are in the presence of the Creator God.
- Their encounter with Jesus transforms them, filling and satisfying them with great, exceeding, overwhelming joy.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, right-relatedness, for they will be satisfied with overwhelming and eternal joy.” What a marvelous story and lesson for us.

Implications

What are the implications for us? Let’s start with the frame of our painting: What do we hunger and thirst for? In past Christmases, my kids were excited to give & receive presents, food and fun with cousins. I desired those as well. Of course, these desires are not wrong. But, after I receive these things, I feel kind of empty on December 26 or January 2.

During these days of Shelter in Place, we also long for human touch, hugging our loved ones. As difficult as the pandemic is, there will eventually be a time when human touch, hugs, and fellowship will be restored, Lord willing. When that happens, will we be fully satisfied?

What does the world do to satisfy its hunger & thirst? The world turns to pleasure, money, fame, sex, false religions, self-gratification. But, as Shawn quoted from the rock-n-roll classic “though I try and I try, I can’t get no Sa-tis-fac-tion...”.

This emptiness, lack of satisfaction is universal. 400 years ago, the French mathematician Blaise Pascal coined this phrase “God-shaped hole”. In his work *Pensées*, the mathematician summed up (!) this concept, “*What is this craving, this helplessness, the emptiness? Man tries in vain to fill this emptiness with everything around him, though none can help. This infinite abyss can be filled only with the infinite and immutable, in other words, by God himself*”.²

3,000 years ago, the Psalmist said, “*my soul pants for you, my God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?*” Psalm 42:2 (NIV). Where indeed can we go and meet with God and be satisfied? The answer is in the center of painting before us. To recap, the frame of the painting is our beatitude, the characters in the painting are shepherds and magi, the emotions of the painting are hunger, thirst, and great joy. All of these elements direct our attention to the very center of the painting. Here in the center is the answer to how we meet with God: only through Jesus Christ, the Savior, Messiah, Lord.

Invitation

If you do not yet know Jesus, let me explain to you that He is the only way to meet God. Jesus said in John 14:6 “*I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.*” No Jesus, No Life, but if you Know Jesus, accept Him as your Savior, then you will know Life, starting right now, and you will experience eternal life forever!

If you do know Jesus, realize that He is necessary to sustain life. In John 6, Jesus declared, “*I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever*

² <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/2746/where-does-the-concept-of-a-god-shaped-hole-originate> retrieved 2020-11-23

believes in me will never be thirsty... For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them."

As we know, Jesus is not saying we should literally eat his flesh or drink his blood. Rather, He is speaking of spiritual nourishment; it is the Holy Spirit. Jesus explains in John 6:63 "*the Spirit gives life... The words I have spoken to you -- they are full of the Spirit and life.*" The Holy Spirit is necessary to **sustain** life; without the Spirit, we have no direction, no energy, no guidance.

God doesn't want any one of us - believers and non-believers alike - to be wandering lost in life, hungry and thirsty for meaning that the world cannot give. So God gives us the directions to find Jesus; celestial dropped pins throughout the Bible. And He gives us the Holy Spirit to illumine, convict, guide and energize us.

Here is our conclusion: as the shepherds and magi have done, we must hunger and thirst for Christ, we must come into His presence and partake of Him. Furthermore, we need to turn to Jesus *continually*, seek the Holy Spirit for every decision, every interaction, every day. In turn, the blessing is that our hunger will be satisfied, our thirst quenched, and we will rejoice exceedingly with great joy. May the example of shepherds and magi, and the beatitude of the hungry and thirsty, point you to the only source of life: Jesus Christ, the Savior and Lord.

Closing Benediction (adapted from Romans 15:13)

May the God of hope and abundance satisfy your hunger, quench your thirst, and fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that not only are you satisfied, but that you may overflow with hope, joy and love by the power of the Holy Spirit.