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 Matthew 2 and Luke 2
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SHEPHERDS AND MAGI

BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST

Years ago, when our children were younger, we were driving home from Los Angeles after spending Christmas week with family. Half way into the long trip, my wife and the kids were asleep. In that quiet solitude, I suddenly realized how tired and very empty I was inside. Although it was great spending time with extended family, I realized that I had not spent any time with God. With the stresses of traveling with young children, crowded freeways and sleeping on the floor, Jesus had been pushed aside that entire Christmas. And I hungered for Him desperately. At that very moment a beautiful, glorious rainbow appeared over the valley, as if God was saying, “I am here with you.” I longed for God, and He met me right there on Interstate 5. He satisfied my hunger and filled my emptiness. I think I sang praise songs all the way home.

What do you anticipate on Christmas -- family and friends, food and presents? We would all like to have Christmas be full of meaning and a celebration of Jesus’ birth. But what actually happens? Many times, what could have been an encounter with Christ is instead devoid of meaning and impact.

I’m compelled to ask each of us: What are we hungering and thirsting for this season? Are our present-buying, traveling, and family gatherings pushing out the meaning of Christmas? After our Christmas celebrations are over and the decorations put away, are we satisfied on December 26 and beyond?

Today, we are going to meet two groups of people that truly encountered Christ on Christmas. These people sought for Jesus purposefully and with excitement because they were hungry and thirsty for the right thing – a genuine relationship with God. They were transformed by the encounter and praised God afterwards. The encounters we’ll consider are the shepherds from Luke 2 and the Magi, or wise men, from Matthew 2.

Shepherds in the fields

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

**“Glory to God in the highest,
 and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” (Luke 2:8-14)**

This very familiar Christmas narrative began with the humble shepherds huddled around their sheep late at night; they were probably cold, tired, and hungry. All of a sudden, an angel appeared

with the glory of the Lord shining amongst them – a supernatural light-show that blazed in the fields like lightning. Of course, the shepherds were terrified! Just as in the two previous angelic visits in Luke, the angel immediately offered a word of comfort. As to Zechariah and to Mary, the angel said, “Do not be afraid!” What a compassionate and understanding God, who comforts and encourages them – and us – during times of fear and distress.

Why shouldn’t the shepherds be afraid? It is because the angel *brings good news*. The Greek word used here is *euangelizo* from which comes our word “evangelize” – to bring good news. Furthermore, the news is of *great joy for all people*, a joy that fulfills the deepest longings of humanity and satisfies them completely.

This is what brings joy: the Savior, Christ the Lord! The Savior delivers humankind from the Enemy: Satan, sin, and death. The Greek title “Kristos” is the same as the Old Testament title “Messiah”; both terms mean “the Anointed One.” The coming of the Christ is the fulfillment of a thousand years of prophecy and expectation. And the climax of all history comes humbly wrapped in rags, lying in a manger!

The shepherds were transfixed, amazed, and confused – wouldn’t you be? As if to address their confusion, God did one better: He sent a great host of angels to go and sing a beautiful hymn of praise: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.” This angelic hymn has been loved throughout history and adapted into prayer, liturgy, and songs. We sang exactly these words earlier in its Latin form, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*.

I marvel that these simple praises concisely express the mission of Jesus on earth. His first mission is to give glory to God – everything He does draws our gaze to the Father. Jesus also displays God’s glory to earth. Author Sam Storms writes, “I define glory as the beauty of God unveiled. Glory is the resplendent radiance of His power and His personality. Glory is all of God that makes God God, and shows Him to be worthy of our praise, our hope, and our joy.”¹

Jesus is the Glory of God. Through Him we see all aspects of God’s glory: deity, character, and love manifested in a form that we can grasp and understand.

Jesus’ second mission is to bring peace to man. This peace is not necessarily absence of war, but rather peace in our relationship with God, with others, and within our own souls. Jesus promised, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

As we hear and sing these words, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*, during this Christmas season, let us truly appreciate the deep theology and great truth that the angels sang for us: Glory to God and Peace to man – all through the ministry of Jesus Christ.

What was the reaction of the shepherds after this heavenly concert?

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:15-20)

The shepherds encouraged each other, “let’s go and witness this great event; let’s meet the Christ!” So they “hurried off.” The original Greek word for “hurried off” is *spseudo*, which means to make haste, to be urgent. Additionally, there is a secondary connotation for this Greek word, and that is to “earnestly desire” or to “want desperately.” The motivation behind the shepherd’s urgency is an earnest desire and a hunger in their souls to meet Jesus. That is a wonderful hunger to have! We all have an inherent longing in our souls that drives us in our choices and activities. This hunger may be misdirected toward the wrong things, or it may be so deeply hidden that we do not recognize it, but it’s there. What we hunger for and what we do about it make all the difference in the world.

So the shepherds encountered Mary, Joseph, and the baby. When they saw Him, their goal was reached, and their hunger was satisfied. And they spread the good news to others – *euaggelizo*. Their enthusiasm and joy were so infectious that all who heard them were amazed. The shepherds returned home glorifying and praising God, having been transformed by their encounter with Jesus. They became outspoken witnesses who overflowed with great joy.

Reflections on the Shepherds

This transformation is an exhortation to me, because I am by nature reserved and uncomfortable speaking about Jesus in front of people. As a young Christian, I was more “on fire” and eager to share the Gospel with others, but have lost some of that zeal now. I pray that I will be transformed like these shepherds to joyfully proclaim Jesus to all peoples.

My second reflection concerns how precious the shepherds were to God. In that society, shepherds were at the bottom of social ladder. Yet God does not look down upon their despised status in society. In fact, God considered them so precious that He sent hosts of angels to seek them out and fill them with unspeakable joy. In the same way, God seeks out each one of us in order to bring great joy into our lives. Why? Because we too are so precious in His sight that He would go to great lengths to bring the good news to us. Perhaps you may feel unworthy or unlovable like the shepherds, but realize that you are so precious that God would send His own Son to have a relationship with you. Jesus is knocking at the door of your heart right now. Will you open the door and meet with Him?

The Magi / Wise Men

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests

and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

“‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd
my people Israel.’”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” (Matthew 2:1-8)

Magi (Greek = “Magos”) is the name given by Babylonians, Medes, and Persians to wise men, astrologers, and teachers. These were probably not kings but rather men of science. The Magi studied nature and the heavens and discerned God’s message to them through the rising of a star. God’s fingerprints were literally in the heavens for them – and us – to see.

The Magi’s inquiries at Jerusalem came to the ears of King Herod. Herod the Great was the political king of the Jews appointed by the Roman Senate. As a non-Jew ruling over the Jews, Herod felt threatened and disturbed by the Magi’s statements. The chief priests and the Jewish scholars of the Old Testament revealed the prophecy from Micah 5:2 that the ruler of Israel would come from Bethlehem. Herod directed the Magi there with ulterior motives; he wanted to track down Jesus through the Magi and kill him before Jesus became a threat to himself. What a contrast Herod is to the Magi! The wise men were humble, obedient, and focused on God. Herod was self-centered, self-serving, and focused on his own political kingdom.

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:9-12)

The Magi continued their journey, following God’s sign to where Jesus was. What was their reaction? The text says they were “overjoyed.” This single English word does not adequately convey the occasion. The original Greek has four consecutive superlative words that mean joy. The literal words are “overjoyed-exceedingly-great-joy.” The words “great joy” are exactly the words used by the angel to the shepherds. In Greek, this is literally “mega-joy.”

The Magi’s second reaction was to “bow down” and “worship.” Again, these words do not adequately convey the dramatic act of profound reverence. In fact, they literally fell down and prostrated themselves on the floor. It was customary amongst Persians and Babylonians to touch their forehead on the ground with reverence. This is the magnitude of their reverent worship; there was nothing restrained about it at all!

What attitude do we have as we worship God? Nancy Leigh DeMoss defines worship as, “... a believer’s response to God’s revelation of Himself. It is expressing wonder, awe, and gratitude for the worthiness, the greatness, and the goodness of our Lord.”²

Do we have a sense of overwhelming awe and profound adoration to our God as the Magi did? If we truly understand the magnitude and glory of our God, perhaps we would be less complacent and would worship Him with more humility, expression, and wild abandon.

The Magi continued their worship with the presentation of costly gifts fit for a king. There are many theories about the symbolism of the three gifts: emblems of the triune nature of God, symbols of Jesus' kingship, ministry, and death. Some have taken the three gifts and inferred that there were three Magi, and so on. I don't wish to expound on these theories for now. Instead, I will just offer this observation. The Magi's act of costly devotion shows us that we too ought to offer our most valuable possessions to our Lord. This Christmas, as we encounter Christ, let us offer Him our best: our property, our time, our hearts, our all.

So there we have our two stories, our two encounters that first Christmas. I now offer some reflections and encouragements for you to consider.

Our Journey

The two narratives have remarkably similar patterns and structures. The flow of the stories are: receiving good news from God, obtaining direction to find Jesus, a journey of faith, great joy upon the encounter with Christ, and transformed lives.

| Traveler: | Shepherds | Magi |
|----------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Receive Good News | Angel | Star of king |
| Obtain directions to Jesus | Sign of manger | Herod's direction |
| Journey of faith | Earnest desire and urgency | Travel under the star |
| Joy of encounter | Mega Joy | Exceedingly overjoyed |
| Transformed lives | Spread the Good News | Worship |

In many ways, the pattern may be the journey of many Christians as well. We first hear the good news through the "angel" of a witnessing friend, or in our own search through Scriptures. We receive directions pointing to Jesus, such as Jesus is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life and no one comes to the Father but through Me" (John 14:6). Often, our path to encounter Jesus involves a journey through difficult times, spiritual wilderness, or even the valley of the shadow of death. As we arrive and meet Jesus, we are filled with inexplicable joy. And our response as followers of Jesus is Worship and Sharing the Gospel.

At which stage of this journey are you today? Realize that following Jesus may require several iterations of this journey. Our journey of faith may go through multiple revelations and wilderness experiences. Our joy of meeting Jesus happens not just once, but every day. And the transformation of our character is a lifelong process. Whatever stage you may be experiencing today, I encourage you to pursue Jesus with renewed passion and urgency.

Hunger for Righteousness

My second reflection concerns the earnest desire – *spendo* – that drives each of our travelers, and drives each one of us. The hunger of the shepherds and Magi was to meet Jesus, to encounter Him, and to have a relationship with Him. They were willing to drop everything and pour their resources and energy into this goal.

What do we long for and pour our resources and energy into? Throughout my life I have hungered for physical possessions to satisfy myself. Ever since I was a kid in elementary school, I've wanted the "ultimate Porsche" – the 1976 first edition 911 Turbo Carrera. Let me tell you, this is the wrong kind of hunger! Getting this kind of physical object offers no lasting satisfaction (and the repair bills are ridiculous). During Christmas, are you hungry for some latest gadget, jewelry, or other material possession? And if you get it as a present, will you be satisfied? PBCC missionaries Tom & Barbara Metzler had the "American dream" here in the Silicon Valley, but they realized that it is more fulfilling to pursue Jesus in their calling as missionaries. So they gave all of that up and have been serving God in Thailand for nearly a decade now.

Do we pour our energy, time and money into our health and body? Of course we do! As a society, we spend billions of dollars on health clubs, equipment, the latest organic food, diets, and medicine to have strength, health, and long life. There is certainly nothing wrong with that, but is that all we look forward to? I once read a sign – ironically outside a health club – that said, "Eat Healthy, Exercise Regularly, Die Anyway!"

Do you desperately desire a relationship, a spouse or children? Do you place all your emotional expectations on a human being? You will come up short, for no human can satisfy these longings. It is a "God-shaped" hole that can only be filled by God Himself. He is the one for whom we can and should hunger. The Psalms are filled with passionate prayers that give words to that hunger and thirst for God. Psalm 42 says, "As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you. My soul thirsts for God, the Living God. When can I go and meet with God?" (Ps 42:1). The time to go and meet with the Living God is now! Let's make that our goal and desire this Christmas.

How do we seek and meet Him? Each one of us has a different way or journey. Here are some of the ways that have helped me draw close to Him:

Pore over the Scriptures. You can do this on your own or join a Bible Study or small group. I've been studying Isaiah with the Men of Tuesday group. This incredible book is so accurate in the description of the Messiah that it points me directly to Jesus.

Worship Him. Worship may come in the form of corporate worship here at church, or singing alone in the car, or an act of service in the neighborhood. Worship is less about the mechanism, and more about the object of adoration. John MacArthur writes, "Worship is our innermost being responding with praise for all that God is, through our attitudes, actions, thoughts, and words, based on the truth of God as He has revealed Himself."³

Take a step of faith out of your comfort zone to follow Him. At work last month I was chatting with a new colleague at the water cooler, and I sensed God telling me to share of my faith with him. I obeyed (uncomfortably), and was blessed tremendously by making a new friend in Christ, for my colleague is a believer as well! This strengthened my walk and faith in the Holy Spirit's guidance.

Pray always and be still to hear His voice. Over the past months as I prepared for this message, the Lord woke me at 3 am nearly every night. It's His way of prompting me to carve out time to pray. As I pray and listen, I am filled with the assurance that He is present and pleased to meet with me, one-on-one in the dark. And I am filled with peace morning after morning.

Seek fellowship. The shepherds and Magi did not travel alone. They traveled with friends and companions that shared the same hunger and thirst. God does not call us to travel this journey of faith on our own, so seek out fellow believers that yearn for Jesus as well.

Scripture, Worship, Faith, Prayer, Fellowship; by taking these steps and others, we can rekindle our passion for Christ, connect with God in a meaningful way, and bring Christ back into the center of Christmas.

Epilogue

After meeting God on Interstate 5, I decided that if we were going to visit family during the holidays, we would always travel after Christmas Day. We have the freedom to say “no” to the good in order to say “yes” to the best. We want to make sure we give Christmas Day and the whole Advent season to Jesus.

My friends, if you focus on anything less than Jesus this Christmas, you will not be satisfied on December 26 or beyond. But if you do hunger for Jesus, He promises in John 10:10 that He will give you life, and you will have it to the full. This means you'll be satisfied completely in every sense of the word – morning after morning, prayer after prayer.

This Christmas, seek Him and spend time at His feet; then, just like the shepherds and Magi, you will be filled with great joy. May you be blessed this Christmas season. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Let us hunger for the True Bread of Life this Christmas. May our God fill you with hope and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with joy by the power of the Holy Spirit.

1. Sam Storms, *The Ultimate Aim of Theology*, November 8, 2006 <http://www.enjoyinggodministries.com/article/the-ultimate-aim-of-theology/>
2. Nancy Leigh DeMoss, *A Place of Quiet Rest*, (Chicago: Moody, 2000), p. 211.
3. John MacArthur Jr., *The Ultimate Priority* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 127
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