

Rev. Dan Welch Epiphany 1-6-19 Text- Matthew 2: 1- 12

It's really great to be back with you for worship this morning! I took some time off between Christmas and New Year's for us to spend time with my side of the family in the Cities and Amy's side of the family in Wisconsin. Last Sunday we worshipped at the church I grew up at near Downtown Minneapolis. It was nice to visit but As I said it's really great to be back with you for worship here at First Lutheran this morning! Speaking of worship, what pictures come to your mind when you hear that word? What are the ingredients to worship?

Well, here at First Lutheran we have been blessed with a very spacious and beautiful Sanctuary in which we can worship. We have padding on our pews to help us while sitting in worship, well **most** of the pews are padded anyway! I see plenty of open pews with padding up front! We also have beautiful organ music with a wonderful variety of organists to help lead us in our worship. Often times we have special music which always adds so much! As for the order of service, we have picturesque screen presentations to help us along with our hymnals. The laminated cards in the pew do a good job explaining **why** we do what we do in worship, what it means for our lives, and where each part of the worship service has its basis in the Bible.

As for the worship service itself we hear God's Word. We pray. We stand up and sit down a lot. We have a sermon. We have communion. About once a month or more we're blessed to have a baptism. There is one thing, though, that is a part of coming to worship – something you experience probably every time you come to worship that I haven't mentioned yet. Do you know what that is?

The wise men 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. And what is that?

It will become clear as we take a closer look at their story. They are called "wise men" in our text for this morning, although some translations of the Bible call them the "magi". Either way they were 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. 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 wise men were thrilled! They decided that they simply **had** to travel to Israel to see the Christ with their own eyes. Traditionally, we always think of three wise men, but in reality, we don't know if there were three or thirty. The Bible only tells us about the three types of **gifts** they brought: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Well, however many there were, the wise men packed up those gifts, along with their camels and their servants, and the whole entourage headed west, to the land of the Messiah, because they wanted to worship the Christ.

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 wise men, it was worth it.

Distance is a worship obstacle that many people today **don't** overcome. Whether it's a few miles or a few blocks, for some it's just too much of an inconvenience, too much of an obstacle to overcome. And when you think of the distance the wise men traveled to worship the Christ, you realize that true believers 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 the 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 seemed to believe. No one seemed to care. You would think that the wise men would have been discouraged by all this unbelief, but that weren't. They headed on 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 wise men, caused them to turn back. But for them, Christ was worth it. We are told, "when they saw the star (stop over the place where the child was), they were overjoyed." 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 for you and me! Worship is more than just sitting on cushy pews with enjoyable music and singing and praying and hearing God's Word. Worship is also ***overcoming obstacles***.

For some of us, it's distance. If you are a Christian who has to travel more than say a quarter of a mile to worship Christ, then you are following in the footsteps of the wise men. Another obstacle is unbelief. Some of you are surrounded by people who discourage you from worshiping the Christ - unbelieving family members, friends, coworkers, fellow students, maybe your neighbors look at you a little funny: "You actually believe that 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're surrounded by unbelief, and as you push that aside to come here this morning, you are following in the footsteps of the wise men.

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 humble Word, through His Sacraments. Have you ever noticed the lowliness of Christ?

Once again, you are walking in the footsteps of the wise men. But that's worship - overcoming obstacles - and there are many more than what I have talked about this morning. 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. Christ is not worth it.” Have you ever fallen into that temptation?

This morning, Jesus looks at you and says, “I forgive you for 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 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, hardly anyone believed Him. His disciples were almost always 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, 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 wise men, overcoming obstacle after obstacle, because we believe that Christ is worth it. Today we bring our gold, frankincense and myrrh – we call it our offering. But that’s not all we offer – we offer to Him our lives. Obstacles will always be a part of worshipping 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. Yes, wise men **still** seek Him and they still overcome many obstacles to worship Him. Amen.