

"The Ones Who Saw the Star"

Merry Christmas! Today is Christmas. December 25 falls on a Sunday only once every couple of years. So it is a great joy for me to be able to worship the Lord with you all on this special day. Today's message will focus on the Magi who visited Jesus after His birth. First let us read from Matthew 2:1-12:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² 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."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

⁴ 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. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "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."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ 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."

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The first thing I would like us to see from this passage is how the Magi "felt the presence of God".

The Magi from the east mentioned in this passage were astrologers from a pagan country; they were the intellectual elites of their time and were well-versed in astronomy and mathematics. Their profession was to tell the future by observing the movement of the stars.

As astronomers they studied the universe. A zoologist may be able to physically touch the animal that is being studied. But for these Magi, the object of their study was the stars in the sky, so they couldn't touch or even get close to them. The only thing they could do was to observe the stars from far away.

In studying the movement of the stars, they must have discovered that there is order in the universe. For there to be order, there must be a mind that created that order. Order isn't something that just randomly appears. The other day I looked up at the night sky and saw the stars of Orion. Even a complete novice in astronomy like myself can recognize Orion. Orion is also mentioned in the Bible in a passage from Job where it says "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades? Can you loosen Orion's belt?" (Job 38:31).

As time passes, we see things change in our communities. The place that was once a diner we went to as a child may have gone out of business and be replaced by a 7-Eleven. We may remember the color of the walls in that diner and about our favorite meal. We reminisce over something that used to be there.

But when we look up at Orion, we see the same exact Orion that Job saw thousands of years ago. The Magi must have studied Orion as well. The position of each star has not changed and the same constellation that the Magi saw is what we see today. The fact that the position of the stars has not changed means that there is a force that maintains this order, and we attribute this force to an intelligent being we call God. Through their diligent study of the stars, the Magi too must have felt the presence of something great behind the stars they observed. In this way God has given us humans the ability to perceive His presence.

The same stars are shining above us today. But unlike the Magi of those days, we today no longer take the time to look at the stars. Our lives are so busy and we have too many things to do instead of watching the stars. Even if we were to step outside there are so many man-made lights that we hardly even notice the stars. For us today, when we think of stars we think of Yelp or the Michelin Guide. The highest number of stars on Yelp is five stars and for the Michelin Guide it's three stars. But the stars above cannot be counted. The difference of scale here says something about our ability to perceive the greatness of God compared to those living in the days of the Magi.

In Japan, this year's buzzword was *kamitteru* (which in English roughly translates to "godding" with the word "god" as a verb) and this term is being used to refer to anyone or anything that is extraordinary. If someone were to eat a delicious soba noodle they would exclaim "whoever made this noodle is *kamitteru*". If a second baseman makes a difficult catch people will say the player is *kamitteru*.

Whether it's a soba artisan or baseball player, this word is used whenever a person is seen as a rank above the rest. The word is casually being used to refer to a person as a god and this may be the product of a world that no longer looks up to see the stars that fill the sky.

A professional surfer who is a Christian once said that surfing helped him to have a deeper understanding of God. What did he mean by this? If you're a surfer you must wait alone on your surfboard until a wave comes. The waves don't always come when you wish. Needless to say you can't create your own waves. The only thing you can do is to wait for the wave to come and when it does, you must catch the wave and ride on it. Waiting for a wave as you are surrounded by the ocean forces you to realize how small you are, so it is not difficult for these surfers to feel the presence of something greater than themselves.

The singer-songwriter Masashi Sada wrote a song based on the true story of a Japanese doctor who was a medical volunteer in Africa, and in the song he sings "facing the sick in the middle of this vast wilderness, I ponder about God and about man".

But if we turn to look at our own lives, we find that we surround ourselves with man-made objects and we rarely take the time to ponder God's greatness. We have no time to look up at the night sky but instead we find ourselves weighed down by an ever-growing to-do list. It seems that we are drifting away from the pace of life that God has intended for us. Let's move on to the second point of today's message which is how the Magi "learned about God".

The Bible says that these Magi came from the east. Where exactly is this referring to? Many scholars suggest that they came from the region where Babylon used to be. After Babylon fell it became Persia. Today this is the region where Iran and Iraq are. When I think of all the things that are happening in that part of the world today, I sense that God had a special purpose in leading their ancestors to meet Jesus at His birth.

What kind of place was Babylon? It's where the Jews were taken to as captives. Approximately 500 years before the birth of Jesus which is 2500 years from today, the Jewish people were taken to Babylon and among them was the prophet Daniel. God blessed Daniel so he was favored by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and he was placed in a high position to rule over all the wise men of Babylon. This Daniel gave the following prophecy in Daniel 9:25: "From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.'".

I don't have time to go into all the details, but in one commentary the following explanation is given on this prophecy by Daniel. Here we see the mention of seven 'sevens' and sixty-two 'sevens', and these 'sevens' are referring to weeks. Add them up and it becomes sixty-nine weeks. Then if we turn this into days, 69 times seven days becomes 483 days. Then those days are counted as years and it becomes 483 years. Thus the prophecy is saying that 483 years after a decree is issued to rebuild and restore Jerusalem, the Anointed One, which is Jesus, will appear.

So when was this decree issued to "rebuild Jerusalem"? After Babylon fell and was replaced by Persia, king Artaxerxes of Persia issued the decree in the year 457

BC. Daniel is said to have been active from around 600 BC to 540 BC so that means this decree was issued over 80 years after Daniel's prophecy.

The decree was issued by Artaxerxes in 457 BC so 483 years after that will be the year AD 26. Many scholars say that the year AD 1 was not the exact year of Jesus' birth and instead they suggest that it was somewhere between 5 to 6 years before or after that, so that puts AD 26 at around the time when Jesus was 30 years old.

We must be careful not to become too obsessed with prophecies that deal with numbers as it often only leads to more confusion, but one thing we know for certain is that the time given in Daniel's prophecy exactly matches the time that Jesus made his appearance to the world.

As I mentioned earlier, Daniel was a Jewish exile in Babylon, but because of his character and wisdom, he was favored by the king of Babylon and was placed in a high position. Daniel had a lasting influence in their society and we can imagine that even 600 years after his time, the Magi knew about Daniel and his prophecies as they studied the movement of the stars. Then one night they saw an unusual star rise in the sky. They have heard about the "Anointed One" who will come, so they must have been able to calculate the time that this Anointed One was to be born. But even with all their data, if they did not know about Daniel's prophecy, it wouldn't have been possible for them to connect that star in the sky with the birth of the Anointed One.

The Babylonian captivity was not a pleasant experience for the Jews. But as we see here, everything that happens within history is in the hands of God, and He can take things from the past that only appeared to cause us harm and use it to accomplish His plan for us today.

Through their study of the stars the Magi sensed the presence of God. Then as they learned of Daniel's prophecies they came to know about God. They went from feeling God's presence to learning about God's existence. In the same way we can feel the presence of God through His creation and learn about Him through His Word. Now let's move on to the last point of today's message. First

the Magi "felt the presence of God", then they "learned about God", and finally they came "to know God".

When the Magi arrived at Judea, King Herod secretly summoned them 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". The Magi left Herod's palace and as they followed the star that moved ahead of them towards Bethlehem, the star suddenly stopped. The Bible says that the star "stopped over the place where the child was". As the star stopped it signified the end of their long and hard journey, which began as a quest to find out who was behind the stars in the sky, then they learned about the coming of the Anointed One through Daniel's prophecy, and now they have finally come to the place where they found the One they've been searching for.

They have felt the presence of God and have learned about God. But they still did not know God personally. They were led by a star in the sky and could not travel during the day, so their journey was a journey through the darkness of night. We could say there was also darkness in their hearts. In that darkness they felt God's presence, learned about Him, yet they still did not know Him personally. But now they were about to see the dawn that will end their long journey through darkness.

The Bible says that "When they saw the star, they were overjoyed". The original text can be translated as saying "they rejoiced with the greatest joy" and the greatness of their joy is strongly emphasized. We can picture them leaping with joy. Beneath the star they found the child and bowed down to worship Him. They finally met their Savior. They have finally come to know Him personally.

A film based on the historical novel "Silence" by Shūsaku Endō will be in theatres next month. In his novel, Endō wrote the following words: "Everything that had taken place until now had been necessary to bring him to this love". The novel is set in Japan during the time of the anti-Christian purges. Like the protagonist of this novel, European missionaries and Japanese believers were forced to renounce their faith by stepping on an image of Christ known as *fumi-e*. But the

book describes how even this act of apostasy was necessary to bring his protagonist to know Christ's love.

Though the Magi practiced a pagan religion, it was through their astrology that they were led to Christ. This means that even their pagan astrology was necessary to bring them to Jesus. In the same way, everything we have experienced until now had been necessary for us to know Jesus' love. Whatever we have gone through in the past, we now know that it was for the purpose of bringing us to God's love.

As the Magi departed, Herod's words "As soon as you find him, report to me" must have been on their minds. They knew what Herod meant when he said that. So instead of going back to Herod they took another route. Their choice to take a different route was also a symbol of the change that happened in their life, a change in the way they lived from that point onward as they returned to their country.

The Magi felt the presence of God, learned about God through their studies, and by meeting Jesus they've come to know Jesus personally. And through that personal encounter with Jesus they were led to a new way of life. This change was seen when they offered their gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus. It is said that these were items used for fortune telling. By giving up the tools of their trade they showed that they no were longer going to live a life controlled by the movements of the stars but instead they began living a new life which God gave them through Jesus.

Today is Christmas. Christmas Day is always a week before the end of the year. A week later from today will be the New Year. The last week of the year may be a time for us to reflect on ourselves and to prepare to start afresh in the New Year.

I want to ask you, have you ever felt the presence of God? Even if you don't have faith, God has given us the ability to feel his presence. If we have no Creator and humans are the descendants of amoebas, it would seem illogical for us to want to know if a Supreme Being exists. But that we have such a longing in our hearts seem to indicate that we were indeed created by God.

You may know *about* Jesus Christ. You may have learned about Christianity in school or have even studied the Bible. Many people claim that they live by the words of the Bible. But that only means that you know *about* God. To know *about* God is only a step in the process of coming to *know* God personally.

This morning I want to go a step further and ask: do you *know* Jesus Christ? In other words, do you know if you have a personal relationship with Jesus? Where is this personal relationship to be found? It is found in the very purpose for which Christ came to this world. It is found in the fact that Christ became man and died on the cross for our sins. It is found in His resurrection through which He offers us eternal life. I just said He died for "*our* sins" and that He "*offers us* eternal life", but what I'm really trying to tell you is that Jesus became man and died on the cross for *your* sins and was resurrected to give *you* eternal life. Christianity is not a religion, but it is the personal relationship you have with Jesus Christ.

What a blessing it is for us to know that everything that had taken place in our life until now had been necessary to bring us to His love. In this way we discover that everything in life has a purpose. As we reflect on our past we realize that every event in our life played a part in leading us to know Jesus' love.

We are approaching the New Year. As you ponder all the things you have experienced in life until now, like those Magi from the east, I hope you find that they were all necessary to bring you to God's love. As we think of all the blessings we've received and the trials we've faced, do we not find that they were all worked together to lead us to Jesus? I would like to close this message by telling you that there is no greater event in our life than this, to come to know Jesus Christ personally. Let us pray.

Translated by Team Machida