

Title: Keeping Christmas All Year Long
Date: December 27, 2020
Subject: How we can keep celebrating Christmas everyday by worshipping
Scripture: Matthew 2:1 - 12

One of the popular Christmas songs is *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. It conjures up themes and scenes of home, family and sentimental aspects of the holiday. It's been criticized as treacly meaning syrupy sweet and too much so. Even more so in the version that's most frequently heard. The song was changed from the original (1944 by Judy Garland in the movie *Meet Me in St. Louis*) when Frank Sinatra asked for a change because the original wasn't jolly enough for his new album (1957).

The difference is shown in a comparison. The revised lyrics sung by Sinatra, Michael Buble, Mel Torme, etc. "*Through the years we all will be together, If the fates allow. Hang a shining star upon the highest bough. And have yourself a merry little Christmas now.*" They were originally: *Someday soon we all will be together, If the fates allow. Until then, **we'll have to muddle through somehow.** So have yourself a merry little Christmas now.*

An "original" unrecorded version was even more somber: *Have yourself a merry little Christmas/It may be your last/Next year we may all be living in the past.* (source: Jason Markusoff, macleans.ca/culture/its-the-perfect-pandemic-christmas-song-and-it-came-out-76-years-ago).

I don't think many people relish the idea of reliving this year, that next year we'll be living in the past or this will be the last one. And the idea of muddling through? Not exactly jolly or appealing.

When it comes to this year, almost everyone is ready for: out with the old and in with the new, goodbye, good riddance, adios, ciao, auf wiedersehen, farewell and aloha to 2020. Put it in the rearview mirror. Unfortunately, some believe 2020's shadow will remain a passenger for the foreseeable future.

It seems there are plenty of people who are content with having a merry *little* Christmas, emphasis on *little*. Don't get too carried away with the celebration. They're even okay with keeping Christ in Christmas... just the day, and then be done with him till next year. Time to flip the calendar page and move on. Take down the decorations. Untrim the tree. Put the music back on the shelf. Get back to business and life as usual.

That's the usual approach. This year the decorations and music may linger a little longer because of the kind of year it's been.

Add to the mix that Christmas, rather the days after Christmas, can be anti-climatic. There's a buildup, an anticipation, and then when the day has come and gone, there's a letdown. In spite of the life and world of 2020 or maybe because of 2020, there still was a looking forward to Christmas and the things connected with it. Now that the day is gone, the routine, or the "new normal" will resume. There can be a psychological and even spiritual let down. I've felt it at times. It seems like it's all done so fast. It makes Christmas *little* in our lives.

What are we to do? How are we to live our lives? We need to say, “Bah humbug” to having a merry *little* Christmas. We don't want a puny one, but a gargantuan one, a ginormous Christmas. Enough of the grinchiness but have our heart expand 3, 4, 5, 6 billion times. Time to make the move.

Turn to the passage read earlier – Matthew 2. How to keep Christmas going – worship like the wisemen.

Someone with a unique sense of humor speculated what would have happened if the wise men had been wise women. First, they would have asked for directions which leads to the second being on time so that 3) they could help Mary with the delivery. 4) they would have cleaned the stable. 5) they would have made a casserole. 6) they would have brought practical gifts.

I don't think the wise men were late. Even though they weren't at the birth and came later when Jesus was a toddler and found him in a house in Nazareth, not Bethlehem, they came right at the time God wanted them to be present. We want to focus on the wise men and insights we can gain about keeping Christmas with us every day, how to keep Christmas going. I'm not talking about the “spirit of Christmas” but rather the celebration of Christ because that's what Christmas means – the feast or festival of the nativity of the Christ. That's celebration mode...all through the year. The core of celebration is worship.

The magi arrived in Jerusalem and announced, “We have come to worship him.” Him who? The one who was born king of the Jews. This got King Herod's attention. He called the Magi to a meeting at the palace and they heard from him the words spoken by the prophet Micah. READ v. 6. They may have been familiar words to them, but hearing them again added to their understanding about the person they were going to meet.

The first thing worship involves is belief. People don't worship what they don't believe. When it comes to Jesus Christ, it requires belief in him. Stating the obvious. It often means changing from trusting in oneself to him.

What would it mean for the Magi to renounce their previous belief system? They lived in a kingdom and really an entire world where very few followed the Lord. When it comes to biblical revelation it's the 400 silent years from the time of Malachi until when Christ was born. The world was waiting for something to happen, standing on tip toes and with a hand cupped to its ear to listen into the black void.

Some of the anticipation was fueled by Caesar Augustus who established an empire many believed would last forever. They hoped he would solve the problems of human government and society could achieve. He borrowed the Greek word for *Gospel* or *good news* and applied it to the world order he created.

The Roman poet Virgil referred to Augustus as the “present deity,” “the restorer of the world” who brought in “a new order of the ages.” He declared, “a new human race is descending from the heights of heaven” because of “the birth of a child, with whom the iron age of humanity will end and the golden age begin.” Caesar promised peace, security and entertainment meaning bread, circuses and protection.

It worked to subdue the populace except for the people of Israel. They chafed under Roman rule as they had under Greek, Persian and Babylonian domination. Commentator William Barkley says, “There was no more explosive and inflammable country in the world than Palestine.”

The Maccabeans revolted against the Greeks and achieved a momentary victory which is still celebrated over 2100 years later as Hanukkah. Later rebellion against Rome resulted in 150,000 men dying in 30 years (67 to 37BC). Part of the reason for the revolt was against forced worship of many gods and the emperor being crammed down their throats. The region suffered another tragedy in 31 BC when an earthquake killed 30,000 people and a great number of animals. They referred to these kinds of tragedies as “pangs of the Messiah.”

Then entered the star. Some say the star was seen by many people. If it was, there’s no record anyone did anything about it. They may have commented about the unusual nature and beauty of the star, but that’s it.

Not so with a group of wise men hundreds of miles from Jerusalem. They were students of all things spiritual, both the worldview of their culture and those of surrounding people groups. They made it their life’s work to learn all they could to see if there was benefit from this, that or some other belief system.

Likely these astrologers were familiar with the prophecy as spoken by Balaam, “I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; A Star shall come out of Jacob; A Scepter shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17). They were driven by a desire to find the one who was born the King of the Jews. They wanted to find him so they could worship him. That was the totality of their purpose. It wasn’t to seek a peace treaty as a baby or child wouldn’t be able to affect one. It wasn’t just for sightseeing purposes. They came to worship.

They began their journey at least as seekers. The question they would face -- would they be willing to change their beliefs from a system in which people earned their way to the gods? Would they be willing to fully align themselves with the King they found and place their trust in him alone? They may have answered the question before their departure or on their journey. Somewhere along the line, they had a crisis of belief.

They had a long time to think during the long trip. Most feel the wise men came from ancient Persia which is modern Iran as the Persian Empire had overtaken the Babylonian empire. The biblical Daniel lived in the capital of Susa. He was a forerunner of Magi who came to the manger.

The journey would be about 800 miles as they’d follow the Euphrates River to be assured of an adequate water supply and then come down into Israel from the North. Assuming 10 miles a day... that makes a journey of 80 days. There are some who say the wise men came farther east as in India or maybe China.

One source speculates they traveled for 2 ½ years at 10 miles a day which comes to 9125 miles (Eric Christian Hansen on Quora). He says, “They departed on their journey in July of 3 B.C., the month Jesus was born...assuming that Jesus was born 6 months after John the Baptist...They visited the toddler Jesus from December 25, 1 B.C. to January 6, 1 A.D., that is the 12 Days of Christmas.” I don’t think so. Even a wobble course of 9125 miles means crossing through all of Asia from the eastern most point of Russia and possibly crossing the Bering Strait from Alaska.

The most likely scenario is an 800 mile trip which lasted several months. If not before they departed, at least by the time the Magi met King Herod, they had answered the question of faith. They said, “We have come to worship the King.” They recognized in their hearts that the one they were going to see would be the one was the promised Christ. Then when they saw the child, their faith was made more certain.

The wise men bowed down and worshiped him. Bowing indicated an acknowledgement they were in the presence of a superior, the King though yet a child. The important thing isn't the position the wise men took of bowing. It isn't essential to physically bow in worship although we often do that when we pray. We bow our heads in acknowledgment of the person we're talking to. We use terms like Lord which means master as a way to help us understand who's in charge. Worship responds to who Christ is.

The truth is -- Jesus can't be met as an equal. Sometimes people over emphasize the human nature of Jesus so they can cozy up to him like a warm blanket fresh out of the dryer. We are not at all alike on the elemental level. Submission comes before friendship. We spiritually bow before him.

We aren't told how long the Magi visited Joseph and Mary. It seems like it wasn't a very long time. They were warned in a dream to not go back to Herod. They understood their lives were in danger. They went home a different way because Herod would not be so fakely gracious the second time he encountered them.

The Magi probably had heard stories about Herod. Though people of that age didn't have modern conveniences like telephones, TV and Internet, word still got around from one country to another. This would include the kind of ruler who reigned. Herod didn't have the best reputation and for a completely logical and understandable reason. He was a man of terrible character and action. He was similar to many ancient world rulers which meant he was ruthless in seeking to achieve and maintain power. This meant killing his wife, three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle and many others who posed a threat to usurping the throne. He also gave an order five days before he died that many citizens be arrested and then executed on the day he died to ensure there'd be proper mourning. The wise men had good reason not to go back to visit the wicked ruler.

The Magi most likely went back to their home country to resume their lives. Remember it was a pagan country, society and culture which would be far from welcoming their new beliefs. Worship takes place in spite of what life brings.

The Magi who made the journey weren't the only wise men, astrologers, highly educated in magic, of that time period. What did the other wise guys think? What did their family and friends think of these men leaving to find the King of the Jews? Did they think they weren't too wise, had gone off the deep end, were getting too carried away in their quest, were wasting of time and effort? How were they received after being gone half a year or more and returning with an unbelievably incredulous story? It was okay to study those things but not to base one's life on them.

We're living in an increasingly godless atmosphere. There's less friendliness to the things of God and the Bible. There may be negative reaction or at least hesitancy from coworkers, neighbors or families. They might think it's okay to study those things but not to base one's life on them. A person doesn't want to get too carried away and waste their time. So many others after Christmas put him back in a box with the decorations and wrapping paper to be taken out next December. They don't understand that Jesus is worth giving everything a person has.

Our journeys will be filled with ups and downs, twists and turns. There'll be detours, distractions. Like the *Back to the Future* movies, we can go back to the manger or the house where the Magi encountered the Savior. Worship can be aided by going back to the "manger." I'm sure the wisemen recounted numerous times what happened. We can return to "the manger" for a glimpse of the Christ child. We can think about what it means for him becoming a human. We can ponder God's love for us as shown through the beginning of his earthly life. We can do this to reinvigorate ourselves with awe and wonder and amazement and appreciation.

There's another way to go back to the manger. We can go back to when we first understood the message of salvation and placed our trust in Christ. Review what it was like to come to grips with truths that we're sinners who can't save ourselves and God reached out through his perfect Son to save us.

But it's not just pulling up a pile of hay to sit on to stay and stare at the manger. We know there's much more to Christ's life and expression of God's love. We know our journey leads to the cross because he did. We become witnesses of his sacrifice for our sins. We know it ultimately will lead to heaven to be united with God. There's so much more to the story than the manger and shepherds and Mary and Joseph and angels and wisemen. There's so much more to understand, believe and therefore we worship.

A couple weeks ago I referenced Phillip Yancey's book *The Jesus I Never Knew*. I have an extra copy if somebody wants to borrow it. He writes about a missionary to China in the 1500s: "He brought along samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it. The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child, but when he produced paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the God-child had grown up only to be executed, the audience reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and insisted on worshipping her rather than the crucified God."

Yancey applies it to our situations, "As I thumb once more through my stack of Christmas cards, I realized that we in Christian countries do much the same thing. We observe a mellow, domesticated holiday purged of any hint of scandal. Above all, we purged from it any reminder of how the story that began at Bethlehem turned out at Calvary" (p. 33).

In order to properly worship, we need to see the Savior born and laid in a humble manger, the Savior as a toddler walking among the wise men, the Savior who teaches, heals and lives a perfect life, the Savior who gives his life on the cross, the Savior who triumphantly rises from the dead and the Savior who is coming back in all his power and glory so we can be with him forever. We need to see him in his totality so we can properly worship. Not just on one day, Christmas, or the days leading up to it, or the days when we feel like it and are in the mood, but every day. Every day should be Christmas, celebrating the nativity of the Christ.

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* ends with Scrooge desiring to put Christmas into practice all year long. He proclaims, "I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all three shall strive within me."

We have something much better than what Scrooge had. We have the Spirit of the Trinity in us to guide and lead us to think of Christ as look back at the past, view the present and look toward the future.