

Title: Keeping Christmas All Year Long – Pt. 2  
Date: January 3, 2021  
Subject: How we can keep celebrating Christmas everyday by worshipping  
Scripture: Matthew 2:1 - 12

In August of 2017 Antarctic conservators made a shocking discovery during restoration on one of the earliest erected buildings on the continent. They found...a fruitcake. No, it wasn't discarded by a dissatisfied recent visitor. They believe the fruitcake was brought by explorer Robert Scott in 1910 meaning it was over 100 years old. Fruitcakes were valued rations as they were packed full of calories essential to sustain life in that frozen environment. The cake was described as "well-preserved." Program manager for the Antarctic Heritage Trust Lizzie Meek stated, "There was a very, very slight rancid butter smell to it, but other than that, the cake looked and smelled edible!" Many of you are thinking... nothing new about the smell. They haven't tasted the fruitcake but are restoring the wrapper and metal tin it was in and then placing it back in the building as part of the restoration. And more snide thoughts about nobody liking them.

The travel and weather conditions encountered by the wise men would have been on the other end of the spectrum. They weren't facing wind swept snow, frostbite, bitter cold and needing a 5000 calorie daily diet to simply survive. Come to think of it, they probably had cakes made out of fruit like dates, raisins and figs.

Continue our study of insights from the wisemen as Christmas isn't over. This Wednesday is when some cultures celebrate Christmas. It goes by different names -- Epiphany or as Vilma shared last week, 3 King's Day. It's "the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi." Gifts are given. There are special foods – King Cake in New Orleans, and in England...fruitcake. Some take down decorations on Epiphany Eve while others leave them up until the 40 days of Christmas are complete on February 2. We're within the realm of "acceptability" to take them down January 16.

Last week we saw worship requires belief in Christ. It takes place in spite of obstacles and difficulties. It's wanting to draw closer to the Lord, seeking to know him more, and diving deeper into the relationship.

Worship starts with receiving the love of God. The Magi had to understand the revelation given to them – that the King of the Jews was born, that he was the promised Messiah, that God was acting in the most loving and gracious way by sending his Son to earth to redeem people.

A Christian counselor (David Seamands), "The two major causes of most emotional problems among evangelical Christians are these: the failure to understand, receive, and live into God's unconditional grace and forgiveness; and the failure to give out that unconditional love, forgiveness, and grace to other people." We'll only focus on the first. Do we allow our hearts to be softened by God's expression of unconditional grace and forgiveness? Do we ponder the extent of God's love – it's height, depth, length and width of God's love?

The Lord seeks to present himself as the God of love. He did this after Moses broke the first set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments in anger over the Israelites' worship of the golden calf. The Lord

proclaimed, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin” (Exodus 34:6, 7). Not to be misunderstood, God spoke about justice: “Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.”

The Lord is a loving God and the judge of all mankind. He had unleashed his wrath on the Egyptians through the plagues and promised to punish the Israelites for turning away from him by making a golden calf. When people try to have one without the other, they get into serious problems, either making him a marshmallow God or one of whom we need to live in constant fear. God is a God both of love and justice.

Worship is about how we view Jesus and what he’s done for us. Herod viewed him as a threat, a rival to be met with hatred and hostility. He already had found someone to worship – himself. Therefore, he tried to stop any reference to the challenger and interference from him.

If people perceive Jesus that way, they probably won’t worship him. They won’t endeavor to get close. While we won’t attempt to cut off Jesus completely, there are times when our lives are infiltrated by the view of Jesus as a challenger. We withdraw. We don’t want him to get too close or things might have to change.

We need to realize the Lord is the only one who rules, and has the right to do so, in the universe and our hearts. We haven’t made ourselves, so we don’t have the right to rule ourselves or do what we want.

Other folks had a different view. The religious leaders, chief priests and teachers of the law, the ones who knew the Scripture, who had a ready answer on the tips of their tongues as to where the Christ was to be born “In Bethlehem in Judea,” who proclaimed they were awaiting the promised Messiah, couldn’t and didn’t take the time to travel a few miles down the road to follow the Magi’s lead and investigate for themselves?

Family Life Today Radio had an intriguing three-part series this past Monday through Wednesday. It was an interview with Dean Inserra who wrote a book titled *The Unsaved Christian*. He describes how many people refer to themselves as Christian because they aren’t Jewish, Muslim, atheist or some other belief. If you ask what makes them a Christian, they’d answer they believe in God, they’re good people and that’s basically it. They don’t mention Jesus and what he did on the cross.

Dean tells some of his story. “I could definitely recite the Lord’s Prayer, and the Doxology, and I could probably even do some of the Apostle’s Creed, because we read it every single week. But I never had anyone actually tell me that I was a sinner, who needed to be saved; that only Jesus, actually, was the One who could provide that. Did I believe in Jesus? I believed He was born in a manger in Bethlehem, and He was a good teacher. I even believed He died on the cross. I mean, I knew that as an historical event, but the significance of that, for me and for others—it just didn’t mean very much.

“What cultural Christians miss is, they admire Jesus, and like Jesus, and have a vague belief in God; but they appeal to themselves and their own goodness, not actually to the work of Christ on their behalf...People who want “enough of—“Jesus” to be associated with, but not enough to be inconvenienced...People that claim to be Christians, but the Christianity they claim is not the Christianity of the Bible—it’s sort of an American hobby or superstition type of approach.”

These people are more like the religious leaders than Herod. Look good and sound good but no real substance to their spiritual lives. We can be like the leaders - enjoy the sights, sounds, ideas surrounding Christmas, but not letting Jesus get too close. Content with what we know, bordering on indifference.

Worship is putting our focus and attention on who Christ is and what he's done. To be completely accurate, it begins in eternity past as we contemplate his attributes as being fully God. But we begin with his human life in the manger to focus on his mission of delivering people from their sins. We continue through his life, sacrificial death on the cross, resurrection, work in heaven and plan for us to be with him for all eternity.

Worship affects how we live. In Titus 2:11-14, we're reminded God sent his Son to bring salvation to all who place their trust in him. "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared." That's the Christmas story, grace in action. God demonstrated his undeserved love to us by sending Jesus Christ to be born into the world, to take on human flesh, to be the perfect God-Man and die to pay for our penalty.

It's this grace that instructs us. It would be absolutely fantastic if we didn't have to be taught and retaught. The truth is...we're in school 24 - 7 - 365 as *teaches* includes the whole program of training. Any parent knows it's not a one and done. There's constant giving of information, reinforcing right and wrong, guiding children as they make choices, encouraging them when they do right and disciplining when they do wrong.

God's program of teaching is all encompassing. His word instructs as to right and wrong. He guides in the decision-making process. He encourages us when we make the right choice. He's also there to discipline and reprove us. "All Scripture is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training and righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

We're to live self-controlled, righteously, and in a godly manner. The Lord wants us to be well trained students who know the material and put it into practice. He's not interested in us having good short-term memories where we could appear on Bible Jeopardy and spout off the right answers to trivia questions. It's not just the mere accumulation of information.

He desires life impact where we say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and live self-controlled, upright and godly lives. He's looking for people who can live out what they're being taught, people who will practice what they learn. We worship by separating ourselves from the desires of the world system. We seek to place the Lord first in our thoughts, actions, words, life.

Worship is loving God. We love others which Jesus said is in effect loving him. We seek to do good for others, as again, when we do it to others, it's doing it to him. Our actions are a major part of our worship.

We're to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in the here and now with eyes looking to the future while waiting for the second advent. Each year we anticipate Christmas and its coming with all the things we celebrate with family and friends. It's buoyed by an understanding of the true meaning of Christ's first coming. In like manner we live in anticipation of Christ's second coming, of what it will mean to enter the complete revelation of the worship of Christ. We look to the future and live toward it.

The wise men searched for the one who was born King of the Jews, King of kings. They saw the child who wasn't yet in the fullness of kingship. He didn't come with the trappings of the status. There was no throne, attendants or golden pacifier. And yet he was King because he was alive and was to be recognized as such. The fullness of being king will come in the future. That truth of that reality provides hope.

During WWII two men from Scotland, a soldier named MacDonald and a chaplain, were part of a bomber crew that flew behind the German lines. On one mission their plane was badly damaged and they had to bail out. They were captured and placed in a prison camp where MacDonald was housed with the Americans while the chaplain was in the British barracks.

Everyday McDonald and the chaplain met at the fence separating the groups. They spoke in the ancient Gaelic language which the Germans didn't understand. The Germans also didn't know American prisoners had built a radio enabling them to hear war news. One day it crackled with the message Germany had surrendered. The war was over. McDonald told the chaplain and waited as the man returned to the British POWs. The barracks erupted in celebration.

Life at the prison camp changed. American and British soldiers shouted, sang, waved at the guards and laughed at the dogs. Three nights after the prisoners, the Germans finally heard that the war was over. The guards fled under cover of darkness and left the gates unlocked. The next morning American and British prisoners walked out as free men. The truth is - they were free three days earlier when they heard the news.

The same is true with followers of Christ. We've been set free...but our freedom isn't completely realized yet because the battle isn't completely done and we aren't in heaven. In the meantime, we're to live that way...shout, sing, wave at trials, and laugh at the devil. We can rejoice, live in love, have hope and be at peace. Peace and joy are aftereffects. The Magi didn't work up joy or peace. They got them when they saw Jesus and were living according to truth.

Worship has many facets like a cut diamond. There are lots of ways to worship. The first that comes to mind for many people is what we're doing this morning -- sing a few songs, listen to a prayer, stand up, sit down, hear a sermon, put money in the basket, leave. What we do here is worship and it's critically important, but there's more to worship than one hour on a Sunday. It's all of life, all of who we are, given in response to all we know about who God is.

Music, whether singing or listening to it, is important. Some of us, myself included, will occasionally break out Christmas songs in February or June or when the first snow falls in the fall. We love the melodies and words crafted into them. They're a great source of inspiration and teaching. Music can recharge the soul but it's not the only or even main means of worship.

Giving is an important part of worship. The wise men's gifts weren't the usual presents for a baby. They have symbolic meaning. Gold shows Jesus as King; incense Jesus the priest who builds a bridge to God; myrrh, an embalming element, indicates he was born to die. Some people point to the practical side -- gold to pay for the family's expenses. Incense and myrrh could be converted to money. Since the gifts were intended

for a King and a King deserved something worth giving to a King, they were substantial. They didn't offer him one piece of gold or tiny amounts of frankincense and myrrh. It would have been an overwhelming amount.

We give what we possess, our gifts and abilities. We give ourselves in service to him.

Worship comes at a price. The wisemen's trip may have lasted a half year or more. That's a lot of time and effort which would incur lots of travel expenses – transportation, food, helpers, guards – as well as the gifts. They had plenty of obstacles and danger – the scorching sun, hot desert sands, roaming bandits. Another price is the Magi chose Jesus' side rather than Herod's as they went home another way.

We're confronted with a choice. There's going to be a cost if we want to keep Christ front and center. We're to give our best not just leftovers of our devotion, abilities and time. People may think we're downright silly spending so much time on God. Going to church is fine, but spending time reading and studying the Bible by yourself? C'mon.

Living the life God has set for us can be hard. Temptation has a long reach and a powerful pull. I read this insight, "Normal, self-centered people do not mind a little Christmas religion. But they stamp down hard on the glow of Christmas whenever it threatens to illuminate their darkness and burn up their evil" (John Stackhouse, Jr.). We may not have time for other things. Have to revise our schedules.

From an international worker "One of my (Chris's) favorite Christmas songs is "O Holy Night." It wasn't until recently that I started contemplating the lyrics of this song more closely. At the beginning of December, I heard this song for the first time this season and the phrase "a weary world rejoices" has been in my mind since, with the weight of that statement ever growing. Looking back over this past year and considering what the next year might hold, it seems that one could easily despair at the current situation we find ourselves in. As the song says, the world has long lain in sin and error pining, and it is a weary world. How deeply true this is, and it has been more evident to me than any other year of my life. It's easy to turn to social media, news outlets, governments, and our community, but we find little to no hope when we turn to ourselves for answers. I believe too many hope for things to rightly align here on earth and for a magical switch to turn on and make things better. If I'm honest with myself, I believe this too often—more than I care to admit.

"As followers of Christ, we are to look to the blessed hope (which we have not seen) in the appearance of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself to redeem us! We can cling to this Hope, or we can place our hope in the things of this world like leaders, medicine, and other temporal things that are groundless and hopeless in many ways. It's too often that we distract ourselves with temporary things that we think will bring us hope in this life. We should simply point those who are hopeless around us to the birth and cross of Christ.

"Looking to the new year, direct your attention to Jesus, and ask yourself if you can say without any qualifiers that it is truly well with your soul. Let us raise our eyes above this weary world and rejoice at the work Christ has done on the cross. That we may cling to the Blessed Hope we have in Him. Let us look heavenward and share this hope we have."