



January 8, 2023 – Matthew 2:1-12

OPEN

Well...here we are “**in church**”! Is it hard for you to shift to this phrase? As a congregation we’ve never had our worship service “at the church” – at least not one that was entrusted to our care! Here we are in a new-to-us building for our very first Sunday worship service!

The first service in this building was January 5, 2012 as a Methodist church. Methodism grew out of the 17th and 18th Century Great Awakening in England, led by men like John and Charles Wesley. Then methodism came to Canada...and Webster’s Corners. In 1925 the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches in Canada formed the United Church of Canada.

But what about the engagement of our country with church today? The number of Canadians committed to church is dwindling. A recent [Cardus](#) study, suggests the spectrum of spirituality in Canada includes non religious (19%), spiritually uncertain (47%), privately faithful (19%), religiously committed (16%).

The study indicates that “*about 15 percent of the Canadian population indicated they attend a religious service other than weddings and funerals at least once a month, a decline from 24 percent in June 2018.*”

This really begs an important question – “Why Church?” What is the importance of being part of a worshipping community, which seeks to live and share the life of Jesus Christ?

DIG

This Friday was Epiphany, highlighting the visit of the magi to worship Jesus. Of course, we must continue to ponder the miracle of His incarnation. Let’s go back to what a familiar story – please read **Matthew 2:1-12**. As we look at the question “Why Church?” I believe that the gifts of the magi will help us.

Magi were well-educated, priestly elite in the Parthian empire. Through their astrological studies they were led to Judea. They arrived at a house when Jesus was near age two. We do not know how many came but at least three gifts were presented to honor Jesus’ great worth.

Important to note in this story is the timing of the arrival of the magi. This likely places Mary, Joseph, and Jesus – now close to two years old – living in Bethlehem. It was there that the star united the magi with the newborn King, for whom they were searching.

Through their gifts, the Magi worshiped Jesus. We do not know of other ways they worshipped – there is no mention of prayer, song, or liturgy. But the three gifts noted in our text – gold, frankincense, and myrrh helped to reveal characteristics of Christ. In turn, these are realities of Jesus become core values for us.

[A] Gold – an environment of precious reverence

Gold stands for royalty. The most malleable of all precious metals, gold is often worn as beautiful jewelry. It is also beaten and eaten (1/10,000 mm)! How much was brought to Jesus, or in what form, we do not know. What we do know is that gold points to Jesus as our King.

Back in 2020 there was a controversy about Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Built as a Greek Orthodox cathedral in 360 AD, after Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire in 1453 it became a mosque. In 1935 it was converted into a museum. In 2020 it once again became an Islamic mosque.

We may struggle with this story, yet we know from Acts 17:24 that God does not dwell in a physical temple! Clearly, this place we are now in *becomes* a sanctuary. In the NT the “church” is the *ekklesia* (Acts 19:41 – the term used then for a political or civil assembly). We are the “called out” ones, to become a place where God glory dwells, is celebrated, and shared.

Psalm 114:1-2 tells us that “*Judah became God’s sanctuary*” (holy assembly) in the Exodus. 1 Peter 2 says that Christ-followers are “*living stones*” built upon Jesus, the “*Cornerstone*”. To what end? We are to “*declare the praises of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His wonderful light.*” (v.9)

[B] Frankincense – an space of pleasant communion

Frankincense stands for intercession. This material comes from the resin of the Boswellia the gum is collected in summer by peeling bark and making a deep cut. When warmed it produces a sweet, pleasant odor.

Frankincense was part of the Old Testament Tabernacle worship and points to Jesus as our High Priest.

Have you ever heard of Sointula? It is a small village on Malcom Island, not far from Port McNeil. And it has an interesting story about its beginnings. In 1901 a group of Finnish settlers established a utopian socialist community and named it "Sointula" which means "Place of Harmony". The only problem with utopian societies is that they aren't. As the group disbanded some of the settlers came to a place called Webster's Corners!

One of the things that we learn from the book of Hebrews is that Jesus is the only one qualified to establish true community. Why? He is the only one who could provide for our salvation and freedom from sin. As our High Priest He is uniquely suited to draw us to Himself, which in turn, brings us into true community centered around Jesus.

[B] Myrrh – a community with a redemption story

Myrrh stands for sacrifice. This gift is a gum which comes from trees in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Arabia. At first the sap is oily, but eventually it solidifies. Also called "commiphora" it is widely used in medicines.

Myrrh was part of the embalming process in the 1st Century. Myrrh was offered to Jesus on the cross and points to Jesus as our sinless Sacrifice and our suffering Savior.

Mere days after Jesus' birth, Simeon celebrated the redemption which Jesus would accomplish. And he warned Mary that "a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:35). Yes, there was suffering to come. But as a result of Jesus' suffering and sacrifice, we can have a story of redemption.

Above all things, the local church is a place of redeemed, not perfect, people. Is that true of us? What is your redemption story? Are you living and sharing it with the people around you?

REFLECT

In our first worship service of 2023 it is so appropriate that we remember His great sacrifice around His table of remembrance.

You are welcomed to celebrate Jesus! We are also warned to do so with somber consideration.

In 1990 Graham Kendrick wrote a powerful song, reflecting on this amazing gift of new relationship with God.

*Only by grace can we enter, only by grace can we stand
Not by our human endeavor but by the blood of the Lamb
Into Your presence You call us, You call us to come
Into Your presence You draw us, And now by Your grace we come
Lord if You mark our transgressions who would stand?
Thanks to Your grace we are cleansed by the blood of the Lamb*

Take some time to read and reflect on two passages that reveal our great High Priest, Jesus:

- *Hebrews 9:11-14*
- *Hebrews 4:14-16*

To reflect further on Jesus' great sacrifice for us, listen to "[Jesus, Thank You](#)".

Jesus' birth gives way to His death for us. But there is more. In his devotional, **Awake, My Heart**, J. S. Baxter writes,

We must read the story of Bethlehem in the light of Easter morning. Jesus rose; and His resurrection is the divine pre-attestation that He shall yet rule the world as King and Judge.