

Psalm 148

Praise

Matthew 2:1-13

December 28, 2025

Out of the 2nd chapter of the Gospel of Matthew comes the story of the Magi. Some time after the birth of Jesus, Persian priests philosophers astronomers showed up in Jerusalem inquiring after the king that had been born. They met with Herod the Great, who was in power there because he paid tribute to the Romans, and was king of Judea and most of what had at one time been the Israelite Empire.

The kings advisors directed them go to Bethlehem in Judea, where they appeared bearing their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Later, after having been warned in a dream, they returned home by an alternate route because they knew what would turn out to be true, that King Herod was not pleased that so near to him a rival had been born who might challenge his dynasty.

In the sequel to the story, after the, “wise men,” left the scene, there is an escape to Egypt that brings up remembrances of other sojourns into Egypt by other biblical characters such as Abraham and Isaac and Joseph, and a horrific policy that brings visions of pharaoh in the time to Moses.

They are a beloved part of the Christmas story and make their appearance on Christmas cards and in nativities and pageants each year. *Because* they gave three gifts, a popular tradition developed that there

were three of them. They read the skies and noticed a star that signified to them that a king had been born in what was to them the west, so they came. They are remembered for the worship they bowed down to give, and the gifts they gave to the baby Jesus.

There are two ideas associated with worship in the bible; one regards religious ritual and liturgy, whether it be the sacrifices the people in the Old Testament were instructed to give at the temple, or more modern acts of worship, kneeling, reading scripture, singing songs and bringing offerings, listening to speakers.

And the other has to do with service, which means deeds of service, helping other people, serving the larger good. In both cases giving praise and gratitude to God. They are both considered worship. They are both considered service.

Today is the first Sunday in the Christmas season, which lasts twelve days. It is also the only Sunday after Christmas and before the New Year. Even if there is some trouble or hardship, or inconvenience even; if there is sickness or sadness that is a part of our lives, this is a series of days that are devoted to the outcome of God’s grace in our lives, the outcome of our faith, and our part in it is to render worship not unlike the Magi.

So here we are in an actual *worship service*, and at the end of a year in which we have participated in ministries that are a part of our community life, and part of our denominational life; and on the personal

level, we have aspired to be helpful every day as much as we can. It is good to take this moment to commend you all because of your generous service, each act of which is an act of worship, an expression of praise. And I encourage you to think of it this way.

I am reminded of the 12th chapter of Paul's Letter to the Romans, right at the beginning of the chapter, in which Paul encourages us and all of his readers, to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

And then he makes a statement that illustrates this varied nature of worship. In some translations it is rendered, "this is your spiritual worship," and in others, "this is your reasonable service."

This interpretation signifies to us that what we do at church matters, that in important ways religious life is a part of a healthy life and must be tended to. And it also signifies to us that the way we live when we are not at church is worship as well, that generosity and kindness, service and sacrifice *are also* acts of worship, and a part of a healthy life.

Whoever these men were, wherever they came from, they reveal to us that bowing in worship, expressing gratitude and praise is connected to the places we go and the things we do, helping others and giving gifts; like the long journey and the gold and frankincense and myrrh that they brought, because they represent high regard for the divine origins of our lives and of life itself. Thus is seen the combination of a worship

service like this one, and a life of service as features of faithful living.

All of life is worship, an act of praise.

There is a jolt of energy that gives an uplifting spirit to the experience of life that has to be expressed. It is similar to the energy associated with finding something that was lost, and Jesus told parables to such affect. Or like the psalmists who sometimes catch that same wave of energy in the beauty of nature; sunshine, the whiteness of snow, newness of spring, or when they looked at the stars in the sky.

It has to be expressed. The name of that expression is praise. It is expressed in a service such as this, and in the gracious living of life. The reading from the psalter for today is the 148th, and is one such expression. I thought we could let it have the last word today, which is also the last word this year, because the next time we meet will be in 2026.

It is a psalm that calls all the created order to praise, including all nature, and people too, those who govern and those of humble means and everyone in between. It asks that we offer first of all the worship service kind of worship. Then we too can be lead to the other kind, the life of service kind of worship, just like the Magi that came so far to bring their gifts.

It is both a good way to end, and a good way to begin. Let it be our prayer, for in its way, it sums up

our response to the Christmas gift, the gift of life, and the gift of Redemption through the Christ child.

Praise the Lord.

Praise the Lord from the heavens;
praise him in the heights above.
2 Praise him, all his angels;
praise him, all his heavenly hosts.
3 Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars.
4 Praise him, you highest heavens
and you waters above the skies.
5 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for at his command they were created,
6 and he established them for ever and ever—
he issued a decree that will never pass away.
7 Praise the Lord from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
8 lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do his bidding,
9 you mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars,
10 wild animals and all cattle,
small creatures and flying birds,
11 kings of the earth and all nations,
you princes and all rulers on earth,
12 young men and women,
old men and children.
13 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for his name alone is exalted;
his splendor is above the earth and the heavens.

14 And he has raised up for his people a horn,
the praise of all his faithful servants,
of Israel, the people close to his heart.

Praise the Lord.

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose[b] and have come to worship him.”

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

6 ““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.””

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

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