

It was almost Christmas Day, and the mother of a 3 year old boy was furiously running from store to store trying to get her last minute shopping done. Suddenly she realized that her son's pudgy little hand was no longer in hers. Frantically she began to look around and then not finding him nearby, began to quickly retrace her steps. She found him standing with his little nose pressed flatly against a frosty window gazing at the manger scene. She shouted his name and upon hearing his mother's voice, he turned and shouted with innocent glee, "Look Mommy! It's baby Jesus – baby Jesus in the hay."

Frustrated because she was pressed for time and because of how scared she had been when he slipped away from her, she hastily grabbed his hand and jerked him away saying, "Come on! We don't have time for that!"

Now, I REALLY don't think she meant to say that. I doubt she intended to tell her child that they were too busy for Jesus... but that's pretty much how it sounded and a lot of moms find themselves in that same position when they are pushed to get everything done before Christmas. They certainly don't want to be late for the party!

And too often that's actually what happens in people's lives. Not that that's anything new. That sort of thing has been happening for ages. Sometimes its on purpose... sometimes it's by accident... but people just get too busy for Jesus.

As an example, consider our story about the Wise Men this morning. They had no idea where they were going. They were just out riding their camels, following a star in the sky with the faith that they would eventually find the Messiah.

When you look at a manger scene what do you usually see there? There's Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus. And gathered around the manger, you'll see cows and sheep and shepherds. But who is usually standing at the manger? That's right, the Wise men.

Now a manger is a feeding trough. It's the place where people would put the hay and oats for their cattle. It's something you'd find in a BARN. But when the wise men arrive, where are Mary and Joseph living. If you listened to the Gospel Lesson this morning, (vs. 11)? That's right... Joseph and Mary and Jesus are in a HOUSE

"On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him..." Matthew 2:11

From other information we find here in Matthew it appears that Jesus must have been about 2 years old when the Wise men came to offer Him gifts. They're no longer living in a barn. They've found a house to live in, and Joseph must have set up shop in town as a local carpenter.

Two years have transpired since the birth of Christ.

The Wise Men are late to the party... but at least they showed up.

Our Story begins long before this when the Wise Men started their trek to worship and bring gifts to the baby Jesus. Before they left, they spoke to King Herod about the trip and he instructed them to return and let him know where the baby was so he could go worship him also.

So, who was King Herod and what do we know about him? King Herod was the epitome of evil. He rubbed shoulders with the greats of Rome, Pompey and Cassius. He was appointed as Governor of Galilee at the age of 25 and held the throne for about 37 years.

Herod ruled with an iron fist and his reign was a reign of terror. He married ten times and all his marriages were unhappy. He was extremely paranoid, so much so that

he executed his favorite wife because he thought she was having an affair (though she wasn't).

He executed his brother in law Kostobar and his mother in law Alexandra - as well as his uncle Joseph. He also executed three of his 14 children.

And he wanted the Wise Men to tell him where the newborn king was so he could worship him. In his paranoia, he had only one thing in mind, to kill the baby so He didn't interfere with his Kingdom.

The wise men knew that Herod had only one thing in mind and that was to make sure the baby was killed. And so, after finding Baby Jesus and bringing him gifts, they took the long way home to avoid having to stop and see King Herod.

Not only did the wise men leave Nazareth, but so did Joseph, Mary and the young child the following night.

The angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream: "Joseph. Joseph. Wake up. Wake up." There's sense of urgency in his voice. But this is only a dream, he reasons. "Joseph, you, Mary and the child – you must leave Bethlehem tonight. Get up. Tonight Joseph. Tonight."

Joseph struggles to grasp the significance of what the angel is saying. He's conscious and yet he's asleep. It's not making much sense. But then the angels say something that sets off alarms. "Joseph, wake up. You must wake up. If you don't the Son of God will be murdered."

The sleepy fog lifts and Joseph is on high alert. The angel's words are ringing in his ears: "Herod will destroy the child if he finds him!" Herod will destroy the child if he finds him!" Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus arise in the night and start their flight to Egypt. What faith they had to believe a voice in the middle of the night telling them to pack up and go to Egypt. That voice didn't tell them where to go, what route to take, just to get up and flee to Egypt. They were looking at more than a two week trip to get there without knowing where they were going. That my friends are true faith.

Herod is livid when the wise men don't return with the information he desires. He's fit to be tied and sends soldiers to Bethlehem to find the traitors. But we know from scripture that the wise men - the traitors - never go to Bethlehem. The star took them to Nazareth. "How dare they mock me and not tell me where this king of Israel is? I'll kill them! I'll kill them all!"

This becomes the dark side of Christmas. "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Wise Men, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Wise Men." What a horrible time this was and it was referred to as the Slaughter of the Holy Innocents.

It was a real power move for Herod to ensure that he would remain the King of the Jews (or he thought he was) and to make sure that even a tiny baby would have no opportunity to grow up and be the REAL king of the Jews.

We are a lot alike the Wise Men. We do recognize that Jesus is the Messiah. We worship him. We have time for him. Too many people in our world don't have time for Jesus or they don't want to recognize Him as our Savior.

Look around and see how people are reacting to Jesus. Over the past few years: Schools have prohibited the singing of carols and even the mention of Christmas in class. Jingle Bells is fine and so is Rudolph the Red nosed reindeer, but for goodness sake, don't mention Silent Night or Joy to the World.

There was the school district in Plano, Texas that banned the colors red and green as being too religious. For their "Winter Break Party" they required parents to bring only white plates and napkins.

The Word Christmas has been removed from almost all Holiday advertisements and been replaced by Happy Holidays.

We have become so afraid that the word Christmas might offend somebody that we have quit using and saying it. That is a blanket statement for those who don't want to cause dissention. If we come to church we are proud to say Merry Christmas and rarely do I say to anybody Happy Holidays.

When you consider how much time it took for the Wisemen to reach Mary and Joseph, you realize how important it was for them to bring him gifts and worship him. From Babylon to Bethlehem was more than a 4month trip, not counting the preparation for going there and the stops made along the way.

Would you be willing to plan a trip that would take 4 months, especially if you had to ride a camel all the way. That's how important it was for the Wise Men to make this trip. We don't know how many people gathered at the manger. We know the shepherds were there and we have to assume the people who lived close gathered to spend some time with the Baby King.

Jesus values the time you set aside to gather with other Christians in worship. And think of the gifts the Wise Men brought. God surely must have inspired their offerings.

- The Gold - presented to the infant King - represented His royalty.
- Frankincense (an expensive resin that was used in religious offerings) spoke of His divinity.
- And Myrrh, (another expensive resin that was used in embalming) represented His death for us.

These were gifts given with a care and an adoration of this newborn King. But as religious as their gifts were... they had a practical value the Wise Men may not have realized.

What do you suppose Mary and Joseph were going to use for money on their trip to Egypt? And how could they survive in a foreign country where they'd live as strangers – with no family and no immediate source of income?

That's right, they've got gold, and frankincense and myrrh to tide them over until they can get settled. Isn't that just like God? When something unexpected comes up and we don't know how we'll make it God makes a way. He had found a way to take care of their financial needs when the angel sent them to Egypt.

We can't give gold and frankincense and myrrh, but we can give the gift of time to Jesus. Just being together with your Christian brothers and sisters on Sundays tells Jesus how much He means to you. Jesus is so impressed by this gift of time that He has promised us that "... where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." Matthew 18:20

And so, we can be assured this morning that Jesus is right here in the midst of us. He's with us looking after us, praying with us. In this new year, may we trust God like Joseph and Mary, no matter what crazy adventures lie in our path. Let us trust that He will guide us into His plan for us just like he guided Mary and Joseph.