

“Christmas Around the World: Poland”

Matthew 2:1-12

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All Scripture quoted from ESV unless otherwise noted

The average temperature in Poland during December ranges only from a low of about 27°F to a high of about 36°F, which means Christmas Day may have a dusting of light snow, but you’re more likely to have rain or a slushy mix than actual snow.

Early on Christmas Eve, houses are decorated and Christmas trees are brought in and decorated with gingerbreads, lights, glass ornaments, and more. The tree is usually topped with a star to represent the star of Bethlehem. Ceilings are often decorated with cobweb-like patterns with wreaths, stars, and flowers tucked into them, and hay or straw is often placed on the dining room table, under the tablecloth as a reminder that Jesus was born in a stable. Advent calendars (often homemade and very personal) are very popular in Poland.

At the beginning of the main Christmas meal, served on Christmas Eve, a large wafer called an Oplatek is passed. Everyone tears off a piece and gives a Christmas greeting to the rest of the family, akin to many communion traditions. “The Christmas Spider” is a story that seems to have originated in or around Poland. This story tells of a poor family who could not afford to decorate a tree for Christmas, but after the children have gone to bed, a spider covers the tree with cobwebs that are magically turned into silver and gold strands.

In Poland, people try to remember that Christmas is not about the excesses and celebration, but about the essence of Christmas, which is Jesus coming to earth. St. Nicholas Day is widely observed on 12/6, and the night before, boots or shoes are left by the fireplace the night before, in hopes of getting a small gift or some candy in them by the morning.

The trend of having an upside-down Christmas tree seems to have thrived in southern Poland. This is not a new trend; it may have originated in the 7th century, when St. Boniface used the upside-down tree to help explain the trinity and to represent Christ crucified. However, today it is as much an interior design choice as anything.

Three ways you might relate to Christmas in Poland and Matthew 2:1-12

There’s a house to be cleaned. In Poland, homes are thoroughly cleaned, windows washed, etc. in preparation for the Christmas season, and there is a familiar saying, ‘A dirty house on Christmas means a dirty house throughout the next year.’ Joseph and Mary were not prepared to receive guests, whether shepherds, wise men, drummer boys, Christmas spiders, or ghosts of Christmas past, present, or future. Conditions around the manger were less than sanitary, to say the least. The ‘house’ was not clean, but unlike the innkeeper of Luke 2, they *made* room for their guests.

When you have guests coming over, maybe you feel like you need to clean your house first. Why might you clean up when guests are coming? Maybe you think, if they see your house the way it really is, they will look down on you, or maybe you think, if the house is clean

before they arrive, it will make them more comfortable. The same may be true for your spiritual 'house.' You think, or someone you know thinks that the house needs to be clean before Jesus can be invited in; as if, 'I've got to get my act together and then I'll become a Christian.' That is backwards thinking!

Inviting Jesus to be your Lord and Savior is not the end result of cleaning up; it is the starting point. Spiritually speaking, you've got grit and grime and stains and stink that you simply cannot cleanse away, but Jesus says, "I've got just the thing." Jesus says, "Stop trying! You can't do it. You'll never get yourself "clean enough!" That's the reason He came; so you could 'Come as you are.'

You don't have to have it all together before you become a Christian; quite the opposite, actually. When you become a Christian – that is, when you ask Jesus to be your Savior – you do so because you *don't* have it all together. You can't clean out the grit and grime and stains and stink from your spiritual house. Jesus says, "That's okay; that's why I'm here.'

There's a spiritual house to be cleaned – but you're not the one to do it
There's a chair to be filled. Christmas is a time for family – there is little to no visiting friends, no cooking, and no cleaning on Christmas Day. Despite that, people in Poland often set an empty place at the dinner table, either in case an unexpected guest should stop by or perhaps to commemorate a dead relative or family member who could otherwise not attend the meal.

Who or what is missing from your Christmas celebration this year? There's a family member, a relative, a friend, a loved one who is not here, or a way of life that is not currently possible. In the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey is beginning to realize how different the world would be if he were not in it when Clarence (George's guardian angel) says, "*Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives and when he isn't around, he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he?*"

Christmas reminds us that there is an empty chair where a loved one used to be, or an empty place in your life that has yet to be addressed. Often, we feel loss more acutely around the holidays than at other times of the year. Acknowledge those losses, whether it is a loved one, a tradition, a house, a job, a dream, or something else entirely.

If you were to remove a cup of water from a swimming pool, the rest of the water would immediately fill in the space. But when you have a loss in your life, you don't just fill in the space or gloss over the hurt. When you see and acknowledge the extra place at your table, around your tree, or in your life, it's not living in the past or living life looking in the rearview mirror. *Moving forward doesn't mean never looking back*

This Christmas, there's an empty chair, but it's not yours to fill. Ask God to help ease the pain and bring you comfort as you acknowledge loss and continue (or begin) healing. This Christmas, there's a star to follow. In Matthew 12, wise men from the east followed a star to find Jesus. Today, stars have a prominent place in Christmas celebrations in Poland, and are usually used to top the Christmas tree. At the 12/24 meal, it's traditional that no food is eaten or gifts opened until the first star is seen in the sky, serving as a reminder of the star-led wise men.

God is responsible for the 'Star of Bethlehem.' This astronomical event didn't just 'happen' to show up at this exact, most opportune moment in the perfect place. *There's something spectacular about this star*; something noteworthy; something that told the wise men, 'This is it!' They had been watching and waiting, maybe not even knowing what they were watching and waiting for – but when it showed up, they recognized it and pursued it, and it led them to Jesus

What star are you following today? Where is it taking you? Maybe you're following the star of prosperity, ease, power, acceptance, success, or something else. Maybe if you're honest, you'd have to admit you're not really following a star at all; you're adrift – like you're chasing after the wind, but going nowhere. That's not how your journey will be written.

God's sending a star – wait for it; watch for it. Be in tune with His voice so that when the star shows up, you'll recognize it. Follow it, and it will always lead you to Jesus. This Christmas, there's a star to follow, but it's not yours to create; it's yours to observe and pursue. Let God lead the way, and you'll never wander; you'll never be lost again.

DIG IN!

Here are some farm-fresh questions that will help you to personalize and apply this morning's message.

- 1. What did you find most insightful, helpful, or troublesome from this morning's message? Why?**
- 2. What is your favorite part of the Christmas story? Why?**
- 3. Whose stocking would you most want to put a fake spider into? Why? How about a real spider? You know that's mean, right? Don't do that!**
- 4. When do you suppose the wise men arrived to see Jesus? Why? What Biblical support do you have for this answer? Is it at all possible that you could be wrong about that?**
- 5. What do you imagine it looked like for the star to "come to rest over the place where Jesus was?" What does this make you believe about the 'Star of Bethlehem?' Do you think it was an actual star, or something else?**
- 6. Complete this statement: "The wise men's journey was a journey of _____."**
 - Why did you choose this answer?**
- 7. How have you been keeping up with your Bible reading this week?**