

The Wisdom of the Wise Men

Isaiah 60:1-6 & Matthew 2:1-12

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

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Isaiah 60:1-6 (NIV)

¹“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD rises upon you. ²See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the LORD rises upon you and his glory appears over you. ³Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴“Lift up your eyes and look about you: All assemble and come to you; your sons come from afar, and your daughters are carried on the arm. ⁵Then you will look and be radiant, your heart will throb and swell with joy; the wealth on the seas will be brought to you, to you the riches of the nations will come. ⁶Herds of camels will cover your land, young camels of Midian and Ephah. And all from Sheba will come, bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the LORD.

Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)

¹After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ²and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.”

³When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵“In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

⁷Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The Wisdom of the Wise Men

Today is the day on which we celebrate Epiphany and the coming of the Three Wisemen. Now I know that many people are tired of Christmas by this time. They're worn out. They're overstuffed with food. They received gifts that didn't please them. And what they gave to other people wasn't always

appreciated. And the whole thing went on altogether too long. From Thanksgiving until the night of Santa's arrival, we've been bombarded with the sights and sounds of Christmas, and our senses are dull.

You can only take so much of Rudolph the red nosed reindeer. So it's easy to become cynical. Easy to want to settle back into the routine and stay with what's comfortable. But when we do that, we usually get what's coming to us — nothing. And for that reason, I want us to not rush away from Christmas until after today.

I want us to stay with the Christmas story, especially the story of these men who came from the east to find the one who had been born to be King of the Jews. So let's look at these Wisemen and see if we can't learn from them something that will set our lives on fire, give meaning to us, and thrust us into the New Year renewed.

Who were they, these fellows who traveled from afar in order to see the child who was born to be a king? We don't know who they were. We always talk about the three Wisemen because of the three gifts that are mentioned; gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the Bible doesn't tell us how many Wisemen there actually were. There could have been more than three. Some traditions name them; Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchoir. One tradition says they were kings — wealthy kings from a foreign land. Another tradition says they were magicians. Still another tradition says they were astrologers.

WHO THEY WERE REALLY DOESN'T MATTER.

What does matter, though, is that they have woven themselves into the fabric of the Christian story, and no celebration of Christmas would really be complete without the march of these three men to thousands of alters across the land, bringing their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

Now from the circumstances surrounding these men, they must have been rather well to do. The costliness of their gifts suggests that they could afford to be generous. Also, traveling in that day was very expensive; it was also dangerous because robbers were constantly leaping upon helpless travelers, and people such as this would have taken a contingency of people with them for protection, so they must have been well to do.

They must also have been people of leisure because it would have taken weeks and weeks to make the journey that they made by camel. So, why did they undertake this pilgrimage? Were they dissatisfied with life as they were living it? What motives pushed them out of the routine in their lives to go to Jerusalem just to find this little baby?

LET'S LOOK AT THEIR STORY, AND SEE IF WE CAN APPROPRIATE SOME OF THEIR WISDOM FOR OURSELVES.

Now, I believe the first clue to their wisdom is revealed in the question that they ask in verse 2; "Where is He who has been born king of the Jews?"

Evidently, they were not Jews themselves. Yet, they sought a king; someone they could believe in; someone they could trust and follow. Could it be — could it be that they had plenty of everything, except what they needed to make what they had worth possessing?

And so that leads us to the first truth of the story — most of us have plenty to live on, but not enough to live for. That's part of the wisdom of the Wisemen — they understood that. They undertook this arduous journey in order that they might find the child, the king that would add meaning to their life.

Most in this congregation today have the enough to live on. But I have an idea there are some here, and definitely many in our world, today who don't have yet enough to live for. What we live on is not nearly as important as what we live for. What we live on keeps us alive and breathing, but what we live for gives us meaning and life spelled with a capital L.

After asking the question in verse 2, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?" These wise men said, "For we have seen His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

As I've already indicated, one tradition has it that these men were astrologers, and well they might have been. In that day, stars were very important. People had an affinity to the stars; they sought to chart their lives by the stars. They believed that you could determine the future by the stars. In fact, they believed that a person's destiny was forged by the star under which that person was born. So these men might well have been professional astrologers.

Even so, it is to their eternal credit that they saw that star in the east and they followed it. Certainly thousands of others didn't see the star, and even thousands more saw it but did not follow.

SO, WHAT IS THE WISDOM HERE? DON'T LET YOURSELF GET TRAPPED IN THE ROUTINE.

Don't let life wear you down to the point that you are dull to the breaking in of mystery and wonder. What was the difference between these men who saw and followed the star and those who did not?

Maybe those who did not were so bogged down in their shops trying to make ends meet, or so busy with their affairs and engagements that it had not occurred to them to look at the star. They never saw it. We never see the stars when our eyes are focused on our plodding feet — when our heads are bowed and our shoulders are sagging.

There's a story about a preacher who spoke one Sunday morning on the topic of suffering. And when the service was over, one of the parishioners greeted him at the door by saying, "Reverend, I have to confess to you that I didn't really know what suffering was until I listened to your sermon today."

Well, some of us are like that. And it's strange how it happens to us. Life wears us down and we communicate it by our very being. We communicate our defeat. It may not be a dramatic defeat, but it

shows in the lethargy, the lack of interest, nothing zestful about who we are anymore and what we're doing, no spark, no tang to life.

I know some people who are so alive, and who are so expectant about life that they can enter the room where I am, and it is as though the morning sun has risen in all its brightness. And I know other people who can come into the room and it's like a heavy cloud has shrouded the sun and everything turns into gloom and grayness. And those people, those people talk like this — “If that accident hadn't happened”, “If circumstances had been different”, “If John hadn't died”, “If my parents had given me a better education”, “If I hadn't been born in Mississippi” — IF. Then things would be different.

The truth is, that isn't so! What happens to us is not what makes the difference! How we respond to what happens to us is what makes the difference! It was illustrated by an easterner who made his first trip out west on a bus with a tour group, and he was unmoved by the scenery. He scoffed at the Grand Canyon. He yawned at Yellowstone. He had no interest in the Coastal Redwood Groves. And finally the bus driver could take it no longer. He couldn't stand the fellow's carping and the fellow's indifference. And so as not to embarrass him, he said quietly to guy, “Mister, when you haven't got it inside, you can't see it outside.”

It's easy to get trapped in the routine, to become dull and bogged down. The wisdom of the Wisemen admonishes us to stay alive to the mystery in life, keep our eyes open for a star that might burst forth in the dark night of our soul.

And those stars do burst forth. Sometimes it's the star that's seen in the wisdom of a little child; sometimes it's the unexpected action of a caring friend; sometimes it's the word of a preacher and the Lord speaks to you. Sometimes it's the Holy Spirit. If you will just keep your eyes open when you're involved in the drudgery of every day, the Holy Spirit might just mysteriously invade that routine, and you will get a vision that you've never had before.

And sometimes — sometimes, it's when you're suffering — when tragedy has invaded your life and you don't know where to turn, and you don't know what's going on, and you can't understand why it has happened to you. All of a sudden, meaning begins to unfold and life takes on a preciousness that it never had before.

The stars will shine, so keep your head up; keep your eyes open; keep your heart tender, so that when the star shines, you'll recognize it. And when you recognize it, follow it. Follow it!

WHAT OTHER WISDOM DO WE HAVE HERE FROM THE WISEMEN?

There it is in verses 10 and 11 — look at it. “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy 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.”

Now that's the ultimate wisdom of the Wisemen — when they saw the child, they worshipped Him and they gave Him gifts. They gave Him gold. Seneca tells us that it was the custom that no one could come into the presence of a king without bringing a gift; and gold, the king of metals is the proper gift for the King of kings. We do well to remember that Jesus is King. We never come to Jesus as an equal; we must come to Him in submission and in surrender.

Nelson was one of the great Navy admirals of England. And it was his custom to always treat his vanquished opponents with the greatest kindness and courtesy. After one of his naval victories, the defeated admiral was brought aboard Nelson's flagship and onto Nelson's quarterdeck. And this fellow knew Nelson's reputation for courtesy and kindness and thought that he could trade on that reputation. He walked across the quarterdeck with his hand outstretched to greet Nelson as an equal. But Nelson's hands remained at his side. When the admiral got to him, Nelson said, "First your sword and then your hand." That's the way it is in our relationship to Jesus. We may give Him our hand in friendship when we have surrendered our life to His lordship.

They gave the Lord Jesus gold. They also gave Him frankincense. Frankincense was the sweet perfume that was used in temple worship and at the temple sacrifices. As gold is the gift of a king, frankincense is the gift for a priest. The Latin word for priest is pontifex, which literally means a bridge builder. The priest is a bridge builder between persons and God, and that is Jesus' ultimate function. He built a bridge between us and God; He made it possible for each one of us to enter into the very presence of God.

They gave the Lord Jesus gold and frankincense, and the third gift was myrrh — the gift for one who was to die. Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. Jesus came into the world to die. At Christmas we remember that shattering truth — that Jesus is the only man who ever chose to be born. But we also remember that He chose to die. He gave Himself to us in life and He gave Himself to us in death.

Most of you have seen and remember Holman Hunt's famous painting of Christ knocking at the door. The telling message of that painting, and its genius, is that there's no latch on the outside of the door; only the person on the inside can open the door.

Hunt has another painting equally powerful in its symbolism, though not as well known. It shows Jesus, when Jesus was a little boy, at the door of the carpenter's shop in Nazareth. He has obviously come from the carpenter's bench where He's been at work and He comes to the door to get some fresh air and to stretch out His arms.

The sun is shining brightly from outside and as the little boy Jesus stretches out His arms, His shadow is cast on the wall of the house inside. And it's the shadow of a cross, and Mary the mother stands looking with tears in her eyes, because she knows what is to come. Jesus came in the world to live for us; He came into the world to die for us. The wisdom of the Wisemen in their gift giving is clear.

Jesus is our Savior. His death is for our redemption. Jesus is our High-Priest. He continues as our bridge to God and as the writer to the Hebrews said, “He ever liveth to make intercession for us.” Jesus is King of kings. And only in the giving of our allegiance to Him, only in His lordship, will we find life.

Don't leave the message of Christmas too quickly. Take the wisdom of the Wisemen with you into the New Year, and it will make all the difference in the world.

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