

Epiphany  
January 6, 2019

Today is the day that we celebrate the Wise Men coming to visit Jesus. At first, I thought that it was kind of a shame that we had to take down our Christmas putz before today's service. The Wise Men are a prominent feature in almost every depiction of the Nativity Story, and ours was no exception. We had all three of them, traveling from the East on their camels, bringing their gifts to the Baby Jesus lying in the manger. It is a beautiful image.

But then, as I began to read the scripture from Matthew a bit closer, I realized that maybe it is better that we don't have that scene up here. From a strictly Biblical perspective, the Wise Men don't really belong at the manger. This morning, I want to spend a few minutes separating the facts from the fiction about the wise men who visited Jesus, who paid him homage. I also want to share what I see as the most important lesson we can learn from the wise men.

Everything that is in the Bible about the wise men who visited Jesus is contained in those 12 verses that we just read from Matthew's gospel. In them there is no mention of them being kings, of there only being three of them, of them riding on camels, of them visiting the baby Jesus in the manger; it doesn't give their names, or where they are coming from, other than from "the East".

What we do have are wise men from the East, looking for the new "King of the Jews" after following his star. They go to Jerusalem to consult with the "old" King of the Jews, Herod. When they tell him who it is they are seeking, Herod understandably becomes upset by the news that there is a new king of the Jews. He consults with the Chief Priests and scribes and learns that the Messiah is supposed to be born in Bethlehem, a little town about 6 miles from Jerusalem. Herod calls the wise men back and sends them to find the new king, telling them that he also wants to pay homage to

him. But in reality, he is using them as unwitting spies to help him find this new threat to his power so that he could eliminate the threat.

The wise men follow the star to Bethlehem and see that it stops over a “house” not a manger or a stable. They enter the house and find a “child”, not a newborn baby or infant, and his mother (no mention of his father). They pay him homage- show him the honor and respect due a king. Then they give him the gifts that they brought- gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They depart without going back to tell Herod where he could find Jesus, because they were warned in a dream about Herod’s true intentions.

And that is it. That is all that Scripture tells us about the wise men. They are never mentioned again apart from a brief mention when Herod realizes they aren’t returning to give him the information he wanted. All the rest of the things that we think we know about the wise men come from other sources, from traditions and songs.

Even though it is not strictly accurate from a Biblical perspective, I think that it is perfectly fine to include the wise men in our depictions of the nativity of Jesus, to sing about the “three kings of Orient” who are “bearing gifts” and “traversing far” following the star to Jesus. Because they are an important part of the story of the birth of Jesus, the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. Just as the angels announcing the birth of Jesus first to the lowly shepherds signifies that Jesus was to be the Messiah and King of even the least of the children of Israel, the wise men’s recognition of Jesus as a king worthy of honor and respect signifies that Jesus came for all, even those who are outside of God’s chosen people of Israel.

For the wise men were the first Gentiles to worship Jesus, they were the first from outside of his own people to know that he was something more than the Jewish Messiah, that he was not only the King of the Jews. I think that this is something significant and it is also something that is easily overlooked. But the fact that these

important- even if they weren't actual kings, they obviously had the resources and the ability and the opportunity to travel to a far off land to visit an unknown king- the fact that these important visitors came to Jesus expands the reach of Jesus' impact. They were the first to reveal that Jesus would be the savior of the whole world, of all who believe in him.

And while this is extremely significant, it is not what I think is the most important lesson that we have to learn from the story of the wise men. Nor is it about the importance of giving our best to Jesus, as the wise men gave their gold and frankincense, and myrrh. It is important to do what the wise men did, to seek out Jesus and to give him our best. But what I think is the most important lesson is found not in what the wise men did, but in what they wise men did not do. And though they sought out Jesus, they found him, they gave him their best, they did not stay. They packed up and back went home.

Our scripture reading ends with an apparently happy ending, the wise men double crossing Herod and NOT going to tell him where to find Jesus but instead returning to their own country. But I would argue that it is actually a sad ending. Or at least not as happy an ending as it could have been. It would have been much better if the wise men had stayed and become followers of Jesus. But that takes a lifelong commitment, something that they (as wise as they were) didn't have, or at least didn't show.

It is one thing to seek out Jesus, to pay him homage, and to offer him your best gifts and then return to the life you have always lived. That is what an admirer of Jesus does. It is something quite different to leave your life behind and become a follower of Jesus. It's like the difference between those people who come to church on Christmas Eve and Easter and those who are in church Sunday after Sunday, week after week.

This is what I see as the most important lesson we can learn from the wise men. To ask ourselves who we want to be- an admirer of Jesus? Or a follower of Jesus?

That is the ultimate question and it is a perfect one as we enter into a new year. It is time to decide if you are going to be like the wise men and admire and respect and pay homage to Jesus, but not really commit to following him, just come to church on Sundays when it is convenient but otherwise not allow it to impact or change your life in any meaningful and lasting way. Or are you going to commit to be a follower of Jesus, to giving all that you have and all that you are to be his disciple.

That means making Christ and his church a priority in your life, not a convenience. It means giving without worrying about what you are going to get in return. It means feeding the hungry and giving water to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger and clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner. It means committing to being present, to being HERE, where we come together to worship, to learn, and to serve.

The story of the wise men challenges us to consider who we are and who God has created us to be and what Jesus needs us to do in order to make his Kingdom a present reality here and now. So who are you? An admirer- dropping in when you can but not really committed? Or are you a follower- fully present and fully committed to loving God with your heart and soul and mind and strength? The choice is yours. The wise still seek him but the true followers stay with him. No matter the cost.

He gave his all for us. Let us give our all to him and for his glory. As the great Howard Thurman wrote:

“Now the work of Christmas begins...

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
when the star in the sky is gone,  
when the kings and princes are home,  
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
the work of Christmas begins:  
to find the lost,  
to heal the broken,  
to feed the hungry,  
to release the prisoner,  
to rebuild the nations,  
to bring peace among the people,  
to make music in the heart.”

Doing the work of Christmas, the work of Christ, takes being committed. It needs followers of Jesus, not simply admirers. So let us do the work of Christmas, the work of Christ and show the world who he is and how he can change their lives and change the world.

Amen