

Sermon Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Now you may wonder why we bother with the Wise Men story. You may think, “I already know that story.” Well, maybe not. Maybe not.

One of my favorite Christmas cards has a Far Side cartoon on the cover. In the cartoon, there are three Wise Men at the door of the manger scene with their gifts in hand, and there is a fourth Wise Man with his head down, kind of walking away, and the caption says, “Unbeknownst to most theologians, there was a fourth Wise Man, who was turned away for bringing a fruitcake.” Now, I love fruitcake, but in moderation.

Now, that’s not true, but trust me there are things that you probably don’t know about this story. How many Wise Men were there? Most people answer three, but we really don’t know. The Bible doesn’t say. There could have been two or five or ten or twenty. The number three comes from legend and a guess from the number of gifts. What were their names? Most people know that legend says Melchior and Balthasar and Gaspar, but the Bible does not say. They’re mentioned only in the Gospel of Matthew, and the names and the number are not mentioned.

Were they kings? I think you can see where this is going. Well, not according to the Bible. Only Matthew mentions them, and Matthew calls them magi. Magi were many different things, but they were not kings. Magi were Persians. They were not Jewish. Our word magic or magician comes from the word “magi.” They were horoscope readers, a practice that was condemned by Jewish law. Magi meant, in Jesus’ time, astrologers or fortunetellers or stargazers, and they did not worship the God of Isaac, the God of Abraham, the God of Jacob. Characters of their ilk were also condemned in the New Testament Book of Acts. Emis and Simon Magus were both magi, and they were both condemned for their beliefs and their practices. You may be starting to be angry at me for poking at the tradition, but you need to get the picture.

Just like the Good Samaritan story that Jesus told, that parable where the priest and the scribe are not the heroes, but the outcast Samaritan, the magi in the history of Jesus’ birth were of the wrong race, the wrong denomination, the wrong faith, and yet they, outsiders and ritually and religiously unclean, are the very first, the first to honor Jesus as King. The first to honor Him by bringing the best they had as gifts to celebrate His birth.

You realize, if you think about it, that the very tradition of gift giving at Christmas, the tradition that we continue, and the tradition that we will continue to pay for up until about May, is a tradition that we get from this story, from these outsiders. Magi, bringing their best from a far country.

From a far country when just six miles away in Jerusalem was the Temple, the headquarters of all the priests and all the scribes and all the learned men of Israel. Israel, who was told to expect the Messiah, six miles away, and they were oblivious to His coming and to His star. That may be the major point of this passage. Every time we

think we know how and when and where God will act and sit down satisfied, God goes and does something entirely unexpected. Don't ever think you have God in a box. Don't ever think you've got God on your side, figured out and tamed. God will act how God will act.

When God's people stop looking for God to act, this passage says to me, that God will find another people, who are looking. We must never presume to know what God can and cannot do, and whom God can and cannot work through. We want clean-cut, well-scrubbed, rumor-free, community-minded religious heroes above reproach, but that is not what we got in the magi, nor when you read it carefully, any other part of the Gospel story.

The Gospel story is not a story of good people getting their just rewards. It is not a story of decent people getting even better by wisdom and understanding. The Gospel story is a story of sinners saved by grace. Hopeless, fallen creation redeemed by a loving God, who came to us in Jesus Christ. A gift – the ultimate gift of God's love for the world – Jesus Christ.

A world filled with imperfection, filled with twisted ideas about God, filled with twisted ideas about love and what worship means. On one level, these magi got worship right. They had hope. Worship ought to be a time of rejoicing and God's hope against the darkness of this world, and they got right that they were to bring the very best as gifts, and they did. They brought themselves through personal cost and through danger and through darkness from a far country and the best that they had to honor what God was doing. They brought gifts.

The poet, Emerson, wrote about gifts. He said, “Rings and jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. The only gift is a portion of thyself; therefore, the poet brings his poem. The shepherd his lamb. The farmer, corn. The miner, a gem. The sailor, coral and shells. The painter, his picture. The girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing.” Something that is of your essence. These gifts represented the tools of the trade and the value that they had in what they did.

Now, back to the Wise Men. You know there's nothing particularly wise about seeing a star. There's no trick in that. Anybody can do it. Stars are not hidden. They're up there for anybody to see if, if you look up. Now, maybe they were wise because not everyone looks up, literally or attitudinally, not everyone looks up. In fact, very few people are positive in their outlook and consistent in their up look.

The famous motivational speak, Zig Zeigler, once said, “I am such an optimist that I'd go after Moby Dick in a rowboat, and I'd take the tartar sauce with me.” Now, most of us are not like that. It's so easy to get caught up in the negativism of this world and to give in to pessimism. It's easy to have your head down and have your eyes focused on the ground because there is so much wrong in the world today, and even when things go right, we don't trust it. The news is mostly bad news. Violence, division and strife and

mistrust are everywhere. Most of us are more like Charlie Brown, who once announced, “I have a new philosophy! From now on, I’m only going to dread one day at a time.”

Remember, it was the same in Jesus’ day. The bad headlines, the violence, the strikes, the division. These Wise Men did not get bogged down in the mere facts of the world. Facts and news and headlines and views and opinions and food and drink and class and nation and race – somehow they saw beyond that and beheld a hope coming from outside the world, a hope coming into this world, a hope that no mere physical view, no mere factual view can ever explain. No, these men believed in a world beyond this world, different from this world, and yet a world that was making itself known through the appearance of a star and a newborn King. This was very wise, for these men believed that there was more to the world and to their lives than meets the eye.

They saw a sign. A sign that pointed out into the darkness, and they journeyed following after it. Their looking up with hope was welcomed. Their gifts may have been the very means and the very money that Joseph and Mary used to escape the murderous Herod. They, not the priests, recognized and worshiped first the newborn King, recognized first this new thing that God was doing. Outsiders or not, they were welcomed by God. They were welcomed by the Christ child Himself, welcomed by His sweet spirit, whether or not we might have welcomed them if we had been there.

They are welcome be they magi or murderer, astrologer or drug dealer, stand-up citizens or poor white trash. They are welcome because this is Christ’s church, and they have come to look for the things that only Christ can give them – grace and mercy and forgiveness and wholeness and peace and joy, and above all, hope, precious and holy hope. For their sake and for God’s sake, let us be as welcoming as God dares to be when he not only lets the outsiders, the magi, in the front door, but He also placed a star in the heavens to guide these old astrologers to the place, to Bethlehem where Jesus was born.

Apparently, God wants everyone to know that hope is available here. In this story of the magi is not just a sweet tale for funny costumes and children’s programs. It is one of the most powerful stories in the Gospel. One person has called it the entire Gospel crammed into a few paragraphs.

Brian Stoffregen said, “If God has magi, foreigners, and pagans come as the first to recognize and give Jesus the proper respect as King of the Jews, then we should know that there is nothing in our lives that would keep God from bringing us to Jesus, and if there is nothing in our sinful lives to keep us away from Jesus, then there is nothing in the sinful lives of others we meet every day that will keep them away from Jesus.”

It is true. The cliché that we see sometimes on little pins and Christmas cards, it is true that wise men and wise women still seek Him, but wise men and women never stop seeking Him. As soon as your understanding grows stale, as the priests and the scribes in Jerusalem understanding about God had grown stale so they missed it. As soon as your understanding grows stale, you may miss what God is doing next. When you think you

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The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

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have all the answers, when you look down on your fellow seeker one pew over, when you come to believe that you have arrived in your faith and you have nothing left to learn, then you have left wisdom far behind. The magi knew in their hearts that no system of belief, no ritual, no program, no matter how well-intended, could bring salvation and hope to the human heart. It takes a person. They came bearing gifts for a person, the person of God in Christ. Their salvation would come only in a person in this case the hand and voice of God in the form of the baby Jesus. I believe they found the salvation that they sought, and having found it, they went home changed men another way.

However firm your theology, however firm your politics, however firm your philosophy or world view, you still need a person to give you hope. You need, I need, God in Christ. Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us. When you find Him, give Him your best, give Him yourself, and put on your running shoes and keep looking up because you don't know where God will lead us next. You don't know where God will lead us next. Amen.