

“What the Wise Men Teach Us”

Date: January 4, 2015

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Matthew 2:1-23

Occasion: Epiphany, series “The Journey”

Theme: Signs, universal gospel, joy, , refugees, gifts

Today we come to the conclusion of our sermon series based on Adam Hamilton’s book *The Journey*. I hope you’ve enjoyed it. We’ve been focusing on Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, but today we turn our attention to Matthew’s account. What do the Wise Men teach us?

First of all, we often speak of these wise men as “kings.” Later today we will even sing the carol, “We Three Kings;” it’s one of my favorites. However, Matthew does not identify them as kings, but as *magi*, from which we have our English word *magician*.

They were probably not magicians but more like priests who studied the stars and who believed the relative position of the stars were signs of future events. They were something between astrologers and astronomers.

These magi were likely from Persia, which today we call Iran, and they probably were followers of the teachings of Zoraster. They traveled about a thousand miles to Jerusalem to pay homage to the newborn king. Their journey would have taken three to six months.

But *what* drew them to this place; where did they know to look? The magi apparently saw something in the heavens that led them to conclude that a new and great king had been born in Judea. What was it that they saw? We call it the Star in the East.

However, various theories have been put forth as to what the magi actually saw. Some people have suggested that it was a comet.

Others suggest that it may have been the motion of Jupiter as it seemed to align with the star Regulus and later with the planet Venus, and perhaps its apparent movement backward in the sky, from the west to the east, further amplified the unique sign they saw in the sky.

Whatever occurred, it led these ancient astronomers to believe that a great king was being born in Judea. What I find fascinating about this text in Matthew, is that God gave a sign to a group of truth-seekers, who likely were not Jewish.

God beckoned these people to Judea by speaking to them in an unorthodox way – but in precisely the way that Zoroastrian priests would have been looking for! Matthew’s telling of the birth of Christ points towards God’s concern for *all* people.

Jesus was not only the king and savior of the Jews, but of everyone. He was to be the savior of the whole world. What does that say about how God looks at people of other faiths? Christians are often too quick to pronounce judgment upon those of other faiths.

But this text seems to say that God cares deeply about people of other faiths. The magi ultimately foreshadow the fact that the gospel would be taken to the entire world. We could certainly have something interesting conversation about this, sometime.

Let’s return to the wise men. After three to six months of traveling, they finally arrive at the city of Jerusalem. They went to Herod’s court, assuming the child belong to the king. They asked about the child “born” king of the Jews.

Herod’s response was one of fear. Who was this child that the heavens themselves declared was destined to be a king? Herod was

paranoid, constantly in fear that others were plotting to overthrow him. He had his favorite wife executed. He put her mother to death as well. He had his brother-in-law killed. He also had three of his own sons executed. All of this is well documented.

In Matthew's account of the birth of Christ, Herod inquires of the wise men where the child was to be born, allegedly because he wanted to pay homage to the child. In truth, he wanted to kill the child to protect his throne.

He was afraid that the baby would take his crown. Jesus has been a threat to the powers-that-be since his birth. The radical nature of God's grace is a threat to those who hold power on earth. Jesus was and is a political threat. He was eventually killed by those who were threatened by him.

The magi learn from Herod's own leaders that the child was to be born in Bethlehem, based on the prophecy in Micah 5:2. Herod sends them off, asking them to return and give him a report. However, being warned in a dream, they go home another way and Herod never gets to hear their report.

Less than a day's journey away, they depart Jerusalem and arrive in Bethlehem. When they found the place where this child was, Matthew tells us they were overwhelmed with joy. (2:10b) *Their* response is the appropriate Christmas response.

We saw it in Luke's gospel as well as Matthew's. When we fully understand what is happening at Christmas, *joy* should be one of our responses. I hope and trust that you had a joyful Christmas this year. Note what happens next in the story of the magi:

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (2:11) The magi did not enter the stable; they entered *the house*.

This was likely the home of Joseph’s parents, which had now become Mary and Joseph’s home as well. It is likely, however, that the magi arrived months after Jesus’ birth, and not the night of his birth, or even several days later. Why do we think that?

Because Herod, in his attempt to kill the Child, had ordered all the little boys, two and under, be put to death. This passage seems to indicate that from the time the magi had first seen the star, two years had passed.

Matthew alone includes the story of the slaughter of the innocents in 2:16-17. We often imagine that hundreds of children were put to death, but in a town the size of Bethlehem it may be that only a dozen or so children were killed by Herod’s men. Still, tragic!

By this time, Joseph had been warned by God in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to Egypt to escape Herod’s maniacal plan. The holy family became refugees and aliens in Egypt during this time.

Adam Hamilton tells us, that when he thinks of this story, he can’t help but think of the many immigrants, both legal and illegal, who flee to the United States in fear for their lives in their home country, or in hopes of a better future. Jesus was a child, taken into Egypt, as an alien, a refugee.

One last word about the magi: Over in Luke’s gospel, the emphasis had been on the lowliness and humility of Jesus’ birth. But

Matthew helps us to see that the rich, too, are invited by God to pay homage to Jesus.

The affluent magi brought gifts to honor Jesus – gold, frankincense and myrrh. These gifts have been seen as symbolic of the three roles Jesus was born to play. Gold was the gift of kings. Frankincense was offered by the priests with certain sacrifices. Myrrh was used in preparing the dead for burial.

Jesus was born to be both king and priest, *and*, he would one day give his life for the sins of the world. His body would be anointed with myrrh before burial.

Well, these are new ways of seeing the old, old story. But, I hope this study has added to your understanding of the Christmas story we know so well. The wise men teach us that Jesus came not just for the Jews, but for the whole world, and for all people.

The wise men teach us that joy is the appropriate response to meeting the Christ. And the wise men teach us that the rich, as well as the poor and humble, are invited to kneel and offer their gifts to the Child.

Finally, the wise men teach us to look for Jesus to be king of kings, and to look for Jesus to be the high priest who intercedes with God to forgive us of our sins, and finally to look for Jesus as the final sacrifice offered for the redemption of the world.

It's a new year. What will be your response to this most precious gift that God has given the world? May we also be counted among the wise ones, who seek to follow Jesus. Amen? Amen!

Adapted from Adam Hamilton's book *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, pp. 120-125.