

“Wise Men...Wise Women...Wise People” (fn.:MATTHEW 2 1-12.2020.DOCX)

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

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**Matthew 2:1-12:** <sup>1</sup> *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,* <sup>2</sup> *asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.”* <sup>3</sup> *When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him;* <sup>4</sup> *and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.* <sup>5</sup> *They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:*

<sup>6</sup> *‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”*

<sup>7</sup> *Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.* <sup>8</sup> *Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”* <sup>9</sup> *When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was.* <sup>10</sup> *When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.* <sup>11</sup> *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.* <sup>12</sup> *And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

Today is the close of the Christmas season. For many of us, Christmas ended with the unwrapping of the last present and then we moved on to our “normal life.” Growing up, I can recall a couple of Christmas Day afternoons, when my mother had the Christmas tree down, the ornaments put away, and the dry, withering tree with few strands of sparkling tinsel on the street curb for pick-up. Nothing is over like Christmas when it is over.

And, yet what child received a prized treasure and then put that present away, not to be used for another 12 months? The most prized presents are the ones we keep open and around us—their use continues. And likewise, the most prized presence of God that we experience in Christmas is not meant to be put away.

So, today, we keep the presence of God in Christmas vital and alive as we consider the first gift-givers of Christmas—the magi, the wisemen...the three kings. As most of you know, there are three gifts mentioned in the text—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—but nowhere do we have an indication of how many there were...at least two, but there could have been more than three. And, as delightful as it is to consider them as “kings,” there is no reference to that status either.

Here’s what we do know: they are wisemen or magi. Wisemen...their wisdom has, of course, been questioned. They set out with nothing but a star to guide them and they brought such impractical baby gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh. Perhaps you have seen that reflection on what if they had been three wise women rather than three men:

Three Wise Women  
Would have asked for directions  
Arrived on time  
Helped deliver the baby  
Brought practical gifts

Cleaned the stable  
Made a casserole  
And there would be peace on earth.<sup>1</sup>

Wisdom...how wise do these “wisemen” seem? And, then let’s go further. The accepted designation is “wisemen,” but the root word here is “magi”—we get our word “magic” from this word. Magi are star-gazers—they observe nature. And so, they study the stars—they see the hand of God in the natural world. And they trust in astrology! Astrology? Our destiny and fortunes can be found in the stars and their movements? Do we really put credence in that perspective?

I had an odd experience early on in ministry that is suggestive here. A PNC—you’ll soon learn that acronym: PNC stands for Pastor Nominating Committee—a PNC is elected by a congregation to go out, find a pastoral candidate, and then make that recommendation to their congregation. Back in 1984, I was interviewing for a pastoral position with a PNC—as I recall, about 7 to 9 church members for this congregation. The interview was going well—we seemed to be making a good connection. All was going well until...until one member of the PNC asked me, “What’s your sign?”

I was a bit taken aback. I was expecting questions about Jesus, the Trinity, pastoral care, and so on. But what’s my sign...as in my Zodiac sign? How to answer that question? Should I just give the answer, or should I go into a harangue about the silliness of astrology and our fate being wrapped up in the stars. What I finally said was this: “Does it matter?” The PNC member said, “No,” and the discussion moved on.

However, what was clear in the interview was the reaction of all the other PNC members. They all dropped their heads, their shoulders drooped, and they almost sighed out loud. What I read in their expressions was this: Here we were, doing so well with this candidate, and now he knows that we have members who have odd takes on the world...or just plain crazy “takes” on the world.

Astrology...how seriously are going to take those who read their fortune in the stars...or in tea leaves...or in fortune cookies?

What the wisemen or magi discern is that God is at work in the world. They are not atheists; they are not oblivious to the divine. They do not live as if God were not a part of our story. They have gone to great effort—they have put their time, their talent, and their resources to work in the search. What they know is **that** God is present in the world...and worthy of their attention and efforts. What they do not know is **where** God is present. That’s why they showed up in Jerusalem. They do not know “the where”—the “where” to discern what they experience by nature.

And what happens? They receive the guidance of Scripture. The religious counselors to King Herod turn to the Bible. They find the answer in Micah—in the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible) or what we call the Old Testament. In other words, Scripture sets out the place for the birth of the Messiah, the king of the Jews. The Messiah will come from Bethlehem, King David’s ancestral home. In Scripture, the “where” of God’s presence will be discerned. In Scripture, the “where” will be made clear. In Scripture, the “where” God is present will fit with the “that” God is present.

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<sup>1</sup> Unknown.

Here is the wisdom of the wisemen—they don't just trust in a general way that God is present in the world. They put their lives into that knowledge. And (important "And") ...And they trust that where God is present will be discerned in Scripture...and they follow. Here is the twofold wisdom—looking for God in this world and trusting Scripture to make the divine clear.

First part: look for God in this life, in this world, in this history: In the star, in the flower, in the happenstance visit, in the random connection with neighbor, in the compassionate tug on heart to invest in the hurting. We trust that God will be experienced in this world. The writer Parker Palmer coined the phrase, "functional atheism"—that sometimes even faithful people get so connected to our schedules, our wounds, our agendas, our victimhood, our anxiety, our boredom, that we no longer look for God. We have a sort of "spiritual amnesia" or "functional atheism." But not the magi...they are looking.

When we have those moments of transcendence...when the spirit breaks through and we go "ah"—in music, in love, in a sunset, in your favorite team winning, we also tend to fall for the trap of trying to repeat the moment of transcendence. In fact, it is something akin to addiction—we need and want more, while becoming disillusioned and depressed when it does not happen. We don't want to let the experience end and moment slip away. And, so people hop from church to church; buy another book that they will not read; click every link on the Internet that promises permanent bliss.

In the days following Christmas, I watched my oldest grandson play the game *Battleship* with his cousin. In the game, each player has a grid on which they placed their fleet of toy ships, their placement on their grid is hidden from their opponent. And then, on their turn, they would call out positions on the opponent's grid: A7, G5, and so on. And the opponent would have to say whether the guesses were misses or hits on their hidden fleet. Oh, the excitement to hear "Hit!" and what sighs of disappointment came when they heard "Miss!" All too often we live life throwing out our guesses—many, many more "misses" than "hits."

We have moments of transcendence...we know **that** God is present...but hits come few and far between.

The second part of wisdom is doing more than taking a chance on transcendence. Wisdom is what Eugene Peterson called the "long obedience in the same direction." As we sung of the magi today, we recall they "traverse so far." They faced obstacles and challenges: "Field and fountain, moor and mountain." It was a long obedience...not a short one. And the "where" God is present is not in them and not even in their own experience of transcendence, but in Scripture. Scripture gives them the "where."

Scripture gives us the "where." That's why we keep coming back to worship and to other Christian education opportunities. Here's what will sustain us in all the misses. Not the "where" in the sense of knowing all the answers...but the "where" in the sense of trusting God even in the absence of knowing exactly.

Here's what I mean. Turning to Scripture, we might turn to that story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. They have been arrested by King Nebuchadnezzar; they are going to be put to death if they don't worship the king's idol (this is religion "for keeps" ...not for when you feel like being religious!). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego know the "where" in having no other gods than the Lord, so they say: If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of

blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up (3:17-18). They knew the “where” even when the present moment was not to their liking or contentment.

Here is the wisdom of Scripture: God is experienced in the lapses, in the gaps, in the darkness, in the absence. What the wisemen find is that the real king is not in the royal palace in Jerusalem but born to a peasant couple in that little town of Bethlehem; the real king ends up being a refugee who has to flee to Egypt; the real king dies on a cross, quoting Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The wisemen needed the Book, the Bible, the Scripture, to experience the “where” ...to make it to Bethlehem.

Are you looking for a New Year’s Resolution? And, even if you were not, would you consider one? Would you consider the following two-part resolution?

1. I am going to look for God each day...and be ready for more misses than hits.
2. I am going to embrace the Bible...home reading, a devotion, a recommitment to being in worship, a Bible study group...someway for the “where” of God’s presence to connect.

Wise people still seek Jesus—look for God and stay anchored in Scripture.