

January 6, 2019

Matthew 2: 1-12

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“The Deeper Wisdom”

When our children or grandchildren recreate the scene of Jesus’ birth in the Bethlehem manger the visitors from the east are always there. In Christmas pageants, these noble characters take their place near the shepherds and sheep, and sometimes there is a camel or two nestled down out back. In the classic scene there are three of them, each in turn carrying one of the gifts the bible says they offered to the holy family: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The kids who play the part often wear their mother’s jewelry and shiny, satin ponchos, and they place decorated crowns on their heads, because our tradition says the three were kings and kings wear crowns and crowns, even cardboard ones, should sparkle and shine with the illusion of wealth and power. They followed the star, we are told, and they traveled a long way, and their place in the Christmas story is one of the first indications that what God did in the birth of Jesus was bigger than just a small family or a small Judean town. The presence of the visitors from the east are a sign for us that what God has done through the birth of Christ is for the whole world.

Whenever we read from the bible it’s an opportunity for education as well as inspiration. And so, this morning let’s take a moment to go on the education side of things. As mentioned, it is our tradition to call them kings but the second chapter of Matthew’s Gospel never does. Matthew does not mention kings, except his reference to King Herod who is frightened and threatened by what God is doing. Matthew, in fact, writes in the Greek language and the word he uses to describe the visitors from the east is “Magi.” Matthew doesn’t tell us how many of them there were. Matthew doesn’t tell us what they were wearing but when he calls them “Magi” he does tell us something very important about their lives. In the east, in the territory of Persia and beyond, the Magi were part of a religious community that believed God was constantly active in our lives and our world. The Magi looked everywhere for the presence of God and that included the night sky. Like the ancient Hebrews and us, the Magi believed God created the heavens and the earth, and for them it was the stars that gave the sign God was about to do something dramatic and soul shattering. While the treasures of gold and frankincense and myrrh get most of the attention the message of this morning’s gospel points to another gift the Magi offer. It’s a gift they give to us, a gift that opens our eyes to what God is doing. The Magi encourage us to search and to seek and to look for the impact God is making in our world. So, the gift of the Magi is the gift of expecting God to emerge in our lives in ways that shape our journey in this faith.

And so, we move from being educated about the Magi to being inspired by their story. I suppose we’ll always think of them and sing about them as kings but there’s a bit of a problem with this, to be perfectly honest. If we only think of them as kings then we tend to think they aren’t like us. If we only see them as wealthy royalty then their situation in life doesn’t connect to the common and routine way we live. On most days camels and crowns have nothing to do with us. But if we take our cue from Matthew’s Gospel and recognize them as Magi their connection to our lives becomes much more relevant. They were seekers of God. They longed for a sign. They followed the light. They are not as mysterious as our tradition and songs make them out to be. They expected God’s presence and knowing this about them moves us to focus on where God is active in our world. The Magi are among the first to call us closer and closer to Christ. Today, January 6th, is known as Epiphany Day. This is the celebration of the star and the faithfulness of the Magi. There is a beautiful blessing that is ours today as we connect with the travelers from the east. The blessing is that our hearts are lifted up as we journey with them. We are with them on the road to find the place where God’s love is known and we’re here today because we’ve found that love. We’ve found the Child who is one of us and who is God with us.

In the midst of the hope the Magi represent for us there’s another side of their story that must be told. I mentioned the only earthly king Matthew identifies in his story is King Herod, and Herod nearly stopped the good news of Jesus before it got started. Herod is the face of fear. Herod is the champion of self-centeredness. Herod wasn’t looking for God but looking for ways to increase his own position and power. And, for a time, the Magi were nearly pulled into Herod’s dark and destructive thinking. This side of their story is our reminder that experiences in our lives can sometimes confuse us or pull us away from the path God wants us to follow. Now, we are good Christians, and so it’s rare that we would ever give ourselves over to the dark side but we can be discouraged by the hardships of life, and this can close our eyes to God’s presence and love. Very recently I was in communication with a family who has had some difficult experiences in the past year. There was a loss of employment, and any of us who’ve gone through that know the pressures that come with the loss of income. Added to this has been some significant health struggles, and all of it is enough to make any of us feel down or question why God has let this happen. However, defeat and darkness is not what this family experienced. I’ve learned that they feel blessed. Even in the midst of the trouble they feel God’s presence. They’ve been wrapped in the light of God’s goodness and it

came to them through support given by family, friends and the prayers of many. One member of this family shared with me, "I will never forget it...how God sprinkled these blessings on us in the most perfect and unexpected of ways. Amazing!" the mother said to me. I am convinced that it was faith that encouraged this family to keep searching for what God was doing in their lives. It's the story of the Magi, that not even darkness and fear, let's call it the Herod-syndrome, can divert our journey with God. The gospel wants us to know the light always shines in the darkness and we are led, as this family was led, to be at peace in the presence of Christ our Lord.

On this first Sunday of the year you may be considering a New Year's Resolution or two. Let me suggest one more for your list. This year look for God. This year be resolved to follow the lead of God for your life. And especially in the times that will be most challenging to you, keep your eyes on the ways God gives you a sign. We call them wise, these Magi from the east. The deepest wisdom is for us to know and to trust that Christ continues to come into our world that we might be drawn to him and find true life. Amen.