

WHAT MADE THE WISE MEN WISE?

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Jer. 29:13; Mt.2:1-12

We don't know a great deal about the wise men who came out of the East in search for the new-born King. But everything we do know about them is good. Measured by almost any standard they were wise indeed. Their knowledge was sketchy and imperfect. They were men who studied the heavens hoping they – the starry hosts -- could predict the events of earth. They were mystics who turned to the stars for their knowledge and, by tradition, belonged to a tribe of people who were thought to possess certain magic arts.

However, it is not for their alleged knowledge that we call them wise, for indeed what they termed knowledge has long since passed away. Astrology has become astronomy even as alchemy has become chemistry. But they possessed certain eternal qualities which set them apart, which distinguished them as men of rare insight and wisdom. It is for these lasting qualities that the Bible calls them -- wise.

There are many facets to the story of the wise men. Like a rare and priceless jewel which can be examined with care without fully exhausting its beauty, the story of the wise men can be turned over and over without dulling its luster. It has been told for twenty centuries, and yet each hearer finds in it something new. As I rolled it around in my mind this past week the story said two things to me and it said them loudly and clearly.

The first thing it said to me is that the wise men were wise because they refused to be hampered in their quest for Christ by lack of knowledge and --

They Acted On the Vision Which Was Theirs.

“We have seen his star in the East and are come...”

As far as we know, the wise men did not have the advantage of a written revelation concerning

the coming of the Messiah. Unlike the Jews, who for centuries had read prophecies of his coming in the sacred scriptures, the wise men only hoped they might find the infant King. They had no Hebrew tradition to go by and if, as a result of Israel's dispersion, they had come into contact with the Messianic hope, their knowledge of it was, at best, certainly secondhand.

They were not learned in the doctrines of the synagogues. They were not schooled in of the teaching of the Torah. They didn't know a great deal about Hebrew history. But each of them had a seeking heart and to their eternal credit they acted on what measure of knowledge and faith they had.

They were in search of a King. They had seen his star. They were eager to find him. And, by the grace of God, they did! And that's what God has promised to all earnest seeker! He has declared with unmistakable certainty:

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29:13).

You see, my friend, it isn't God's purpose to hide from you. It isn't his game plan to make himself difficult to find. As a matter of fact, from the very moment God breathed this world into existence he has sought to reveal himself to the world.

Through creation God has revealed himself in nature. Through the Bible God has revealed himself in language. Through the babe of Bethlehem God has revealed himself in human flesh. The only requisite for redemption is that you seek him with all your heart.

“We have seen his star and have come...” Surely there were others who also saw his star. Surely the chief priests, the scribes and the Pharisees were exposed to the pure white gleam of that first century “satellite.” Yet, as far as we know, not one of them had any spiritual awareness that the day for which Israel had prayed and longed had finally come.

They knew all the prophecies. They were keen-eyed students of the scriptures. They were

experts in the law. In terms of religious indoctrination, they were as high above the wise men as Mount Everest stands above yonder hill. But with all their knowledge they were blind to what was happening around them.

They knew the doctrine, but the wise men made the discovery!

Why? Because the wise men followed what little light they had and acted on the vision, however veiled, which was theirs.

Put it down as one of the inexorable laws of life, my friend:

“It is not the light you see, but the light you follow, that makes you wise.”

The wise men were wise because they followed the light they had. They refused to be hampered in their quest for Christ by lack of knowledge. They took the little they knew and put it to work. They acted upon the vision which had come to them and persevered.

“We have seen his star and have come...”

And they were rewarded in their quest by the discovery of Jesus. You can make the same discovery this morning. God has not left your “sky” without a star. His promise is as true today as it was centuries ago:

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

Right now I’m thinking of some of the people I have known who began with a tiny mustard seed of faith and by using it saw that tiny mustard seed of faith move aside a great mountain range of doubt.

A few weeks ago, as part of our Tuesday night “Winsome Way” visitation program, John Hill and I called in the home of a fine young man. After a few minutes of conversation, it became quite apparent that this young father and husband was an earnest seeker after truth. His religious background was scant. His working knowledge of the Christian faith was almost nil. He had some serious questions and doubts, but he also had the one indispensable ingredient God is looking for -- an open mind and a hungry heart.

The trouble with most of the people who say they cannot find God is that they undertake the task with a hermedically sealed mind. They are unteachable and, as a consequence, they are unreachable. They wonder why God does not reveal himself to them, but I'm afraid they cannot find God for the same reason a thief cannot find a policeman! But such was not the case with Jack. He wanted to know God, So I made a bargain with him. It was the same bargain I've made with many others.

I challenged him to accept God at his word. To truly seek him with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. To begin each day with a prayer asking God to reveal himself. To try in every way to honestly put himself in a position where God could speak to him. To attend church faithfully. To take part in Sunday school and the Hour of Power on Wednesday nights. To read selected passages of Scripture which were directed especially toward the seeking heart. And to do this for six months. If at the end of that period of time God had not kept his half of the bargain by making himself known, he would be free to go on living as if there were no God. "Fair enough," he said, "I'll do it!"

That was, as I've said, a Tuesday night. The following Sunday morning when I gave the invitation Jack Howard walked down the aisle. It hadn't taken six months for God to keep his promise. Like the wise men of old, this young man had followed the little bit of light which was his, and it led him to Jesus. That hasn't marked the end of his questions, or his seeking, or his doubts. He's still growing. But last night, when I called to ask permission to tell his story, Jack told me he wants to be baptized New Year's Eve!

It isn't always that easy. Right now I'm thinking of another young man for whom I have prayed for many months. He, too, has been faced with some serious intellectual problems. For several weeks he has been praying,

"O God, if there is a God I want to know you, and if Jesus is the Savior
I want to believe in him."

The last time I visited with him in his home he said,

“Whatever it takes, I want to believe in God.”

He's not far from the Kingdom! He's not far from that glorious moment when he stops praying: “O God, if,” and simply says: “O God!” When that moment comes the deed will be done. With your prayers and his persistence he will soon know Jesus. So pray for him, please! His name is Honest Seeker.

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

It's not God's purpose to hide from you. He is not trying to make himself difficult to find. And he has not left your “sky” without its star. If you want to find him and be found by him, all you to do is, like the wise men of old, act upon the vision that is yours. William Law put it this way:

“When the first spark of a desire after God arises in your soul,
give all your heart to it. Follow it.

It will lead you to the birth of Jesus – in your own heart.”

The second thing this story said to me is that the wise men were wise because --

They Came To Jesus, Not For What They Could Get, But For What They Could Give.

“And they fell down and worshiped him. When they had opened their treasury, they gave him gifts.”

Imagine coming to Christ for any other motive than to gain something from him! It's contrary to everything we've ever heard. The popular religions of our day have taught us to look upon God as a kind of cosmic bellhop who is convenient to have around whenever we need him. One who can do us favors. Can pull us out of tight spots. Can answer our prayers. Can be a kind of “Handy-Andy.”

We've thought of Christ as someone it's nice to know because he gives us peace of mind. The assurance of salvation. Eternal life. But whoever heard of coming to Christ, not for what you can gain from him, but for what you can give to him!

For instance: why are you here in church this morning? Because it's the thing to do? Because it will please your parents or your spouse? Because someone asked you? Or, perhaps, because you feel you need it? Well, whatever the reason, thank God you are here! But how many of you came for what you might *give* to Christ rather than what you can gain from Christ?

When it comes to our religion, many of us like little children. Have you ever noticed how self-centered a baby is? Someone has defined a baby as “an alimentary canal with an insatiable desire at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other.” As a young father, I think that sums it up pretty well. Especially that part about “no sense of responsibility.”

But that bit about “an insatiable desire” isn’t too far off either. Certainly there is nothing more insistent than a hungry baby. One does not have to hear his impatient squalls, watch his angry kicks and see his little face grow red with frustration when his bottle is not forthcoming immediately -- if not sooner -- to begin to have some pretty strong convictions about the doctrine of Original Sin!

A baby lives in the world of the personal pronoun -- present tense! “I want mine -- now!” And it takes a good deal of growing before this complete preoccupation with self begins to cease. I’m grateful for my kids. I wouldn’t trade them for all the money in the world. But like all little children, they are self-centered too. They’re concerned about being fed and clothed. About who is going to care for them, protect them, and watch over them.

As yet, they don’t know anything about a spirit of altruism. They are children. They act like children. They think like children. They are primarily concerned with what they can *get* from life, rather than what they can *give* to it.

I guess it isn’t until one gets out of his or her teens and begins to tackle the responsibilities of life that he or she really becomes self-less to any great extent. Some people never make it at all. They remain forever in the world of children. Concerned about “me, my and mine.” Concerned

about what they can get from life, rather than what they can give to life.

Well, how many of us are like that in our relationship with the heavenly Father? How many of our prayers are taken up with the “gimmes”? How many of us are Christians who have never left the world of children? Have never grown-up spiritually? Have never become mature followers of Christ so that when we come to church we are motivated, not by what we can give to Christ, but what we can gain from him?

The thing that made the unselfish worship of the wise men so beautiful is that it is so rare. We tend to look upon Christ as merely a source of help. Well, he is a source of help, but I think the word “merely” must hurt him deeply. To be sure, he is bread to the hungry and healing to the sick. He is guidance for the wanderer and strength for the weary. He is comfort for the sorrowing and salvation for the sinful. He is your helper! But – he is not your helper -- merely! He is your Lord and your God as well. And apart from anything he may do for you he is still infinitely worthy of your ardent, poured-out love and worship.

One of the things which made the wise men wise is that they understood that. They came for what they could give to Jesus rather than for what they could get from Jesus. That’s what makes the Christmas story so gripping. So compelling. So challenging.

The other evening, as I stood in the driving rain watching our Outdoor Christmas Pageant, I couldn’t help but hear the comments of the crowd: “Beautiful.” “Wonderful.” “Impressive.” “Done with dignity and good taste.” “It makes me feel warm and good inside.” And I thought to myself, why? What is there about the Christmas story that so captivates people’s hearts? A few shepherds in a field? Nothing impressive about that. A brilliant star in the sky? Millions have seen Halley’s comet. A mass of people going to pay their taxes? That’s nothing to write home about. Three man on a long and tiring journey? Nothing special about that, either. Even a baby surrounded by doting parents is not an un-familiar sight.

Then what is there about the Christmas story which grips us? As I reflect on the biblical record of wise men kneeling...shepherds prostrate on the ground... angels singing praise to God... it hit me with incredible force. This is a scene of worship. Here are the rich and the poor, the high and the lowly, the animals of earth and the angels of heaven all joined in the act of giving worship and praise to God. Of giving Jesus the homage and devotion he is due

“We have seen his starry and the East and have come to worship him.”

That's what made the wise men wise. That's what set them apart. They came to Jesus not for what they could get, but for what they could give. And what they gave was their worship! Would to God we had more of their wisdom today! Just one more thought and I'm through --

Suppose They Had Not Come?

Dr. Clovis Chappel, one of the truly great preachers of today, raises that question. In developing the supposition he visualizes one of the wise men decades later. Chappel imagines him as an aged grandfather with his little grandson on his knee. He is telling the boy – in vivid and gripping detail -- the most wonderful story ever told.

His grandson listens enraptured as the old man relives the soul-stirring experience of that night when the glory of heaven burst upon the world and angelic choruses sang

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.”

Then, Dr. Chappel has the old man stop abruptly His grandson asks him excitedly:

“But is that all, grandpa? Was it true? Was the Christ child really born?”

The old man shakes his white head sadly and answers:

“I don't know. Some say it's true. But I don't know for sure.

I was on a journey and I didn't take time to stop and see.”

What a tragic ending to the story of the wise men that would be. But thank God it didn't end that way. The wise men acted upon the sight they had. They reached out in faith, followed the star

and it led them to the place where the Christ child lay. When they got there, they concerned themselves with giving rather than with getting.

Will you follow in their footsteps this morning? Will you begin where you are and let God take you where you want to be? Will you begin as you are and let God make you what you want to be?

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”

“Come! Taste and see that the Lord is good.”