

Where do you come into the picture?

Wise Men: Seeking the promises of God

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne December 14, 2008

Jeremiah 29:11, 13 (The Message)

"I know what I'm doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for. When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else ... you won't be disappointed."

Matthew 2:1-2 (NLT)

Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We have seen his star as it arose, and we have come to worship him."

Reflection: Sometimes they are called kings, sometimes wise men. The Bible does not make that clear. Indeed, there's been a recent trend to discredit those stories as legends and downgrade these guys to some form of ancient, well, new age astrologists. Of course, with them packing expensive treasures like gold and frankincense, if they were not kings, they would've had to be very good at their task to be so rich. You have to wonder, though, if these guys were so wise, why did they start off by showing up in the wrong town? As we just heard, they first came to Jerusalem seeking the new king. Not Bethlehem. Just goes to show even wise men won't ask for directions until they're really, really lost. And that, folks, is at least in the Bible.

But then, we should expect they would've gone to Jerusalem first to seek the new king. Jerusalem was the capital. It was where the king lived. Consider if a foreign dignitary came to this country looking for the president, you'd expect him to show up in Washington, not Passaic, NJ. What's important for us this morning is these men were wise enough to seek, and keep on seeking. Set backs did not make them turn back. They had come a long way looking for the baby Jesus. If they had to go a little further, so be it.

That's a lesson we would all be wise to learn. If you are seeking God, keep on seeking. Even if sometimes you feel God is still far off. At times you may feel disappointed you have not felt God's presence in your life recently. You aren't the only one. We heard in Mother Theresa's private letters published last year that she went years without feeling God's presence, but she did not give up seeking him. Maybe you have felt God's presence keenly in your life, but you want to experience it more. The same advice works for you. Keep seeking him. Even if at times you end up in the wrong place, or you end up someplace you did not expect. Just keep seeking God with all of your heart and mind, soul and strength. As God tells

us in the Bible, *"When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed."* That's what I want. I want to find the one who gives hope, who helps me experience God. I may not be a wise man, but I know this much at least, it is in seeking Jesus that I find him, and in finding him, I find the reason to have hope. Please stand ...

Jesus, hope of the nations

*Jesus, hope of the nations, Jesus, Savior and Lord of all
You are the God who lived as one of us
Jesus, friend of the fallen, Jesus, joy for all human hearts
You are the source of every hope we know
In history you came to earth,
You shared our life and humble birth
Jesus, hope of the nations, Jesus, comfort of all who mourn
You are the source of heaven's hope on earth
Jesus, light in the darkness, Jesus,
Truth in each circumstance
You are the source of Heaven's light on earth
In history you lived and died, you broke the chains,
You rose to life
You are the hope, living in us,
You are the rock, in whom we trust
You are the light, shining for all the world to see
You rose from the dead, conquering fear,
Our Prince of Peace, drawing us near
Jesus our hope living for all who will receive ...
Lord we believe!*

Matthew 2:9-12 (NLT)

After this interview the wise men went their way. Once again the star appeared to them, guiding them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house where the child and his mother, Mary, were, and they fell down before him and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But when it was time to leave, they went home another way, because God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod ...

Reflection: So the wise men went on in the search for the new king. And why did they need to find him so badly? I asked our kids this week in the Wednesday Kids in the Kingdom program. They told me exactly what I expected to hear. The wise men were on a mission. They had to deliver three gifts. Only that's wrong. As I like to remind you, these wise men were not an ancient version of Fed Ex. Delivering presents was not their main mission. What was? They told King Herod: "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We have seen his star as it arose, and we have come to worship him." Then when they came to the manger we are told: *When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house where the child and his mother, Mary, were, and they fell down before him and worshipped him.* For the wise men it was all about the joy of finding Jesus, and worshipping him. If only we all could have the same mission ... to find our joy not in so many other things, but in worshipping the one who loves us and came to be with us.

As for those gifts, they were things the wise men brought out afterward, almost as a second thought. They had come to worship first ... though it makes sense to give gifts too ... because worship includes wanting to honor God with what you have, even with all you have. For them it was a joyful thing, even a natural thing to move from worshipping Jesus to giving him gifts.

(You know, that's why we pass a basket at our services. It's not about the church having enough money. After 25 years of being a priest I can tell you no matter how much money a church receives it's never enough to do all that needs to be done in the church and for others. And if we won the lottery and had all the money we needed to run the church, that would not take away my need or my desire to give back to God. We pass baskets because giving is part of worship ... and if you have a hard time giving God thanks, you may be having a hard time really worshipping him too. Jesus said "where your treasures are there will your heart be too" ... and since worship has to do with your heart, being able to give your treasures to God shows where your heart is. Just a thought, folks.)

For the wise men it was all about the joy of finding Jesus, and worshipping him. If only we all could have the same mission ...

So these three wise men offered gifts. As others have said many times, they didn't really offer very baby-friendly gifts. How smart was that? Only here too, their gift selection shows an amazing wisdom. Here they have come all this way to worship this new king and what did they bring? Gold, the stuff kings use to make crowns ... Frankincense, which is burned when you pray to God. Those gifts proclaimed that they had come to worship a baby who was both God and King. OK. But then they gave him the third gift: Myrrh. It's the oil used to anoint a body for burial. Only in this gift the wise men show us all why they are so wise after all. They could see in this child one who was born to be king, who was, as unlikely as it could be, God with us, and he was one who had come in the end to die for us

all. Who would have thought that could happen? Perhaps it takes some divine help, some heavenly guidance to come to this faith. If so, then today, I pray God will guide us all to see Jesus anew.

We three kings

*We three kings of Orient are bearing gifts we traverse afar.
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,
Following yonder star.
O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light.
Born a king on Bethlehem's plain,
Gold I bring to crown him again,
King forever, ceasing never over us all to reign.
Frankincense to offer have I. Incense owns a deity nigh.
Prayer and praising, all men raising,
Worship him, God most high.
Myrrh is mine: Its bitter perfume,
Breathes a life of gathering gloom.
Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding dying,
Sealed in the stone-cold tomb.
Glorious now behold him arise, King and God and Sacrifice.
Alleluia, alleluia! Earth to the heaven replies.*

Message: Each week of this season we are looking back at some of the people you find in the familiar setting of the manger scene. I'm asking you to think about what each of these people was doing there ... so you can find where you fit into the story. Because the Christmas story may be all in the past, but that moment in time has simply changed everything else for all time. And Christians have long believed, that a day is coming when you and I will stand face to face with Jesus. That's a day I don't want to catch me unprepared. I don't really want to wing it when I meet Jesus ... I want to be ready in heart and mind and soul. The way Joseph was ready for the impossible, and was willing to trust God enough to believe what could not possibly be true. I want to be ready like Mary, living in expectation of God's arrival, living expectantly for whatever will be, not trying to fit God into my own expectations of what he must do, you know, if he really is God. Today, with the arrival of the wise men, I see another way, a very practical way, that you and I can be prepared to meet Jesus.

The wise men display two basic traits of wisdom: perspective, perseverance. We'll talk about them in a minute. First we need to be clear about this wisdom thing. Wisdom is not the same as intelligence. I think we have very clear evidence of that. It probably takes some amount of intelligence to become a high elected official, say like a governor of a state. But you have to wonder about the wisdom of the governor of Illinois selling a senate seat, or to be fair, the governor of New York thinking he'd hire a call girl and no one would notice, or the governor of New Jersey who hoped no one would worry about his payoffs to cover up an extramarital affair with a staffer. Not what you'd call the three wise men. What boggles the mind even more is the my old graduate school has taken in the New Jersey governor to study to become ... wait for it ... a pastor. OK, so I

think it's clear we need more wisdom in this world.

Wisdom has to do with seeing the big picture, of being able to see the importance of something. It's about mental acuity more than mental ability. That's especially true when it comes to faith. You see, unlike a lot of other religions, Christianity is a religion for all people. There is no inside info that only the enlightened people have. And there is no intelligence test for faith. Faith is something a child can have, or a professor. It's something that does not depend on understanding God, but on trusting him with your life. Indeed, from what I have seen in my life, people with the highest intelligence often have the hardest time getting over themselves and getting to the point of choosing to trust their life to God. They can always come up with another excuse or rationalization for not believing in God. But the starting point for faith is plain enough. Once you master the story of Jesus in the Bible, you have enough of the facts to enter a life-changing relationship with him. That's not to say Christianity is anti-intellectual. Nope. I'm smart enough to know even after all these years of studying the Bible, I'm still seeking to understand more and more about my God. I also know my salvation is not based on what I know, it's about who I know: Jesus. The rest of my life is about trying to know him more. So I've never stopped being a seeker. I hope you never do either.

Seeking God takes this sense of perseverance, where you won't stop and settle for anything less until you find God. According to the dictionary wisdom means *"knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment as to action."* To be wise is to both know the right thing to do and to follow through and do it. Wisdom helps you know the right thing to do and follow through. That certainly describes the three wise men. They set out to find the king they believed had been foretold to be born in just that time and place. How'd they know that? I don't know. We're told they were just astrologers. Well, my horoscope normally plays it safe with some generic and cryptic statement like: "It's a good day to live up to your potential" or "Watch for strangers who mean you harm." That's useful any day ... or not. So what? Horoscopes don't give you advice like, *"Go to Israel and worship a new king to be born in exactly three weeks' time."* I'm betting the stars did not tell them this, God did. Still, however they came to know about the upcoming birth of Jesus, I know this, they got busy. Wisdom is not simply knowing the right thing to do, but actually having the courage to act on it. And act on it they did. They left home and families, they left work and security, to travel to an unknown place to find a baby. When they got lost, they kept going. No matter how long it took. They just kept at it. They kept going until they saw what it was they had come to worship.

Folks, there are times in life when you may experience God as very close to you. Those are wonderful moments. There are other times when God seems far off. Sometimes that's because you have wandered off. Maybe instead of looking for God when he can be found you've been off looking for fulfillment in whatever you could grab. Instead of looking for love in a manger you've gone looking for love in all the wrong places. No wonder God seems far off. Some of you have let addictions or anger get in between you and finding God. For others it's a sense of pride that says *"I don't really need God, I'm fine,*

thanks anyway." Each time these things get up and get in the way, wisdom says to do what you have to do to get past it. Just remember this: wisdom doesn't sit still. It seeks, and keeps on seeking. It doesn't settle for less than the truth.

Along with perseverance, wisdom brings with it a new perspective, that ability to see the truth more clearly. That's something else which is not tied to intelligence. As I said, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to be a faithful Christ Follower. You know, I've been told even rocket scientists can sometimes lack wisdom ... for example, did you know that rocket scientists at NASA have developed a gun built specifically to launch dead chickens? It's used to test the strength of windshields on airliners, military jets and the space shuttle. The idea is to simulate the frequent collisions the craft have with birds. Well, it's hard to keep such a fun thing secret, and some British engineers heard about the gun. They were eager to test it on the windshield of their new high speed trains. So arrangements were made to borrow the gun. But when the first time the gun was fired, the British engineers stood shocked. The chicken hurtled out of the barrel, crashed into the shatter proof shield, smashed it to smithereens, crashed through the train's control console, snapped the engineer's backrest in two, and embedded itself in the back wall of the cabin. Horrified, the British sent NASA the disastrous results of the experiment, along with the designs of the windshield, and the specifics of the testing environment. They then begged the U.S. scientists for help. NASA's response was just one sentence: "Next time thaw the chickens."

OK, so more wisdom is what's needed. Think of it as having perspective. That's something the three wise men showed us too. They were not upset to find the new king in a manger, in a stable. They did not turn back because this baby was not where they expected him to be. They were not put off by the surroundings or the smell of the animals, they were not deceived by the lack of silk curtains and servants. Wisdom sees through what's on the outside and sees what's truly there. A lot of other people passing by that first Christmas night probably took little notice of the baby in the stable. It takes wisdom to see where God is at work, where God is present. So let me ask you: Would you have walked past Jesus without knowing him? Without knowing God was present in a stable? I probably would have. I tend to put my head down and go about my tasks and not pay as much attention as I should to other people around me. I might well have missed Jesus just when he was there to be seen. But then, I'll never know because that was way back when.

The bigger question for me, and for you is this: How often do you miss Jesus today? How often do you walk past a situation where God is present, where God is waiting for you to come join him? How often do you simply miss out on God's presence because you're not wise enough to see him when he's there? How often do you get caught up in your own worries and forget God has promised to be with you always, even to the end for the ages? Do you sometimes miss the beauty of God in creation, or miss out on the chance to serve Jesus by serving someone right in front of you who is in need? Sometimes I do. I need the wisdom to see beyond myself. Phillips

Brooks, who wrote *O little town of Bethlehem*, once preached a sermon about expecting Jesus. I read his words 20 years ago, and they changed my whole perspective:

Christian watchfulness means to be so possessed of the conviction that God is around us always, and may show himself to us at any of the commonest moments, so we are always alert and ready to receive him ... Yes sometimes from mere expectancy you may be deceived sometimes it may seem as if God spoke to you when it is only your own longing that he may speak that makes you think it is his voice; but I think it is better to be mistaken so a hundred times than once not to be ready, and so say, "Oh it is nothing," when he really does speak. It is better after all to be so superstitious that we find God where he is not than to be so skeptical that we will not find him where he is.

I don't want you to miss God. What about you? Will you have the wisdom this week to seek God while he can be found? He's here in our midst. Don't miss out on God's presence my friends. And when you do find him nearby, then take a page out of the wise man handbook ... and give God your own treasures, give God what he wants most of all. Give God your heart and worship him.

Lord I give you my heart

*This is my desire to honor you,
Lord, with all my heart, I worship you
All I have within me, I give you praise,
All that I adore is in you
Lord I give you my heart,
I give you my soul, I live for you alone
Every breath that I take every moment I'm awake
Lord, have your way in me ...*