

Wise Men Still Seek Him

Sterling UMC
January 2, 2011
Matthew 2:1-12

A family who lived just outside town had to pass by a church that had a beautiful manger scene set up on its front lawn. Each time they came into town in the weeks before Christmas they passed it by and each time it would draw their attention.

On the Sunday following Christmas, as the family drove by the church they noticed the manger scene had been taken down. The car was quiet for a few moments, but then the youngest son, as only child can do, broke the silence. "They have put Jesus away for another year."

Christmas Day is over. After all the preparation, after all the anticipation, December 25th has come and gone and a new year has arrived. The parties are over. The gifts have all been given and received. Now comes the process of taking down the decorations. Putting away all of the gifts. Starting the diets to take off those pounds put on at parties and dinners. And just like that we have put Christmas away for another year. Yet, today, we are still asked to remember a Christmas story - the story of the magi, three wise men, Kings or astrologers.

The story of the wise men is a story that is shrouded in mystery. From tradition we seem to know all the facts and details. But as we study the scripture we find that there are a lot of questions we cannot answer about the wise men from the Biblical text.

For example: Where did they come from? "The east" you say. But where in the east? How far east? We know they came from the east and they came from a long way away, but we don't really know where they came from.

How many of them were there and what kind of men were they? Again, we don't know. In the second century, a church father named Tertullian suggested that these men were kings because the Old Testament had predicted that kings would come to worship him. He also concluded that there were three kings based on the number of gifts mentioned, gold, frankincense and myrrh. And the manufacturers of nativity scenes caught on and so in every nativity scene, you see three kings or wise men. But the Bible doesn't tell us who they were or how many of them came.

In the sixth century, someone decided that their names were Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar. And so operas have been written ascribing these names to them. But no one really knows what their names were.

So we don't know who they were, where they came from or even how many of them there were. Why not? Why doesn't Matthew tell us any of this information? I'm not sure I know with certainty, but I'd suggest that all of this detail is left out of the picture in order

that the full emphasis may be placed on the one thing that is central to this story, namely their statement, “we have come to worship.” That’s the main point of this particular story as Matthew tells it to us. “We have come to worship.” And as we look at what Matthew tells us about these men, although we have very few details about them, they really were wise men.

And the challenge for us today, is whether we will be wise men and women. Why, because I believe that wise men still seek him. Wise men still serve him and wise men still worship him.

First, wise men still seek him. It’s likely that these magi were descendants of the ten tribes of Israel that remained in Babylon after the time of Daniel. Many of the Jews did not return to their homeland but rather chose to remain behind in Babylon. There they were assimilated into the culture and probably adopted many of the religious practices of the pagans. So these magi may not have been very orthodox in their faith, but still, they were looking for the coming messiah. They took literally the statement from Numbers 24.17: “A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” And so they searched the skies for hundreds of years looking for a sign that the messiah had come. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced and came seeking the one who was born king of the Jews.

We don’t know exactly how far they traveled, but it is likely that they came from 500 to 1000 miles away. Imagine traveling that far on the back of a camel. And it was a long and difficult trip across the desert. Give these men credit. They really wanted to come and worship Jesus. They were serious seekers.

Contrast them with the chief priests and teachers of the law. They were not the least bit interested. They didn’t care about the star. And they wouldn’t travel 6 little miles down the road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem to check out what was happening. They knew the right answers. They just weren’t willing to make the effort to see if what they had heard was true.

Let me give you a little background about this gospel at this point. Matthew is writing this gospel to Jewish people who are living away from Israel. His purpose is to convince them that Jesus is the Christ predicted in the Old Testament. That’s why he makes so many references to it. And what he is saying to these people to whom he is writing is that they should be like the magi, not like the Jewish religious leaders. Wise men still seek him. Check him out. Do whatever it takes to convince yourself that Jesus really was born King of the Jews.

Wise men and women still seek him. What about you? These men teach us that perfect theology is not required to come to the conclusion that Jesus is God’s son who came to earth for you. When you seek him with all your heart you will find him.

Are you seeking for something to fill the void in your life this morning? Let me suggest to you that there are a lot of ways to fill that feeling of emptiness. But there’s only one way

to fill it in a way that will last. God sent Jesus to fill that void. He came to earth as a man, lived a perfect life, died for our sins and rose from the dead. He offers you forgiveness, fulfillment and peace happiness. What you have to do is first to recognize that you have sinned against him. Ask him to forgive you for your sins and be the lord of your life. Your life will never be the same and you will be on the road to being a wise man or woman.

For many of us, we've made that commitment. But it's important that we continue to seek him, to know him each day and to know his Word. Wise men still seek him.

Second, wise men still serve him. While on their journey the wise men stopped in Jerusalem to find out exactly where Jesus could be found. There they met King Herod. He must have been enraged by their question and statement. "Where is he who is born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him." "Born king of the Jews?" Kings are not born. Herod had to murder, commit acts of deceit and treachery in order to become king. Who in the world could be born a king? And why would he have a star? And why would these men want to worship a baby? Herod must have been beside himself. But he kept calm and tried to make a deal with the magi.

"Tell me where he is so that I too, can come to worship." The magi knew through supernatural means that he was lying to them. But now they had a choice. Who would they serve? The little tiny helpless baby born king of the Jews or the full grown, murderous treacherous Herod? After all, if they served Herod, he might reward them greatly. Jesus was just a baby. Maybe they could worship and serve him later in life. Maybe they could serve Herod now and Jesus later. Maybe they could have the best of both worlds, have their cake and eat it, too.

But that's not what they did. They went to find this little tiny baby. And then when God warned them supernaturally in a dream and they understood what he wanted them to do, they were faithful to serve him regardless of the danger of disobeying the murderous King Herod.

Wise men still serve Him. Are you serving Him? What has He called you to do? I don't claim to know specifically, but I do know that serving God involves serving others. There are a lot of opportunities to serve others here in our church. Examples: backpack Buddies, DAK, habitat, mission trip.

We'll call ourselves to give time to serving God either through our church or other avenues of service. God blesses those who serve him. Wise men still serve him.

And finally, wise men still worship him. These men had one come all this way with one purpose in mind. That purpose was to worship the one who was born king of the Jews. They came to worship the Son of God. They did it with confidence. They did it with the certainty of hope. Look at some of the language. "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him." They didn't just set out for a leisurely ride in the desert, show up in Jerusalem and say,

“we heard something was going on in this area. What’s happening? We saw some bright stars and thought maybe they meant something. What do you think?” No. They were definite and they were certain. “Where is he? We have come to worship him.”

And they brought with them expensive gifts, gifts fit for a king. They brought gold, a gift of wealth for royalty, frankincense, a gift for a man living a hard working life, and myrrh, a gift suited for one’s burial. Did they appreciate the significance of their gifts? We don’t know. But what we do know is that they didn’t just wander out, find a little baby and then decide that they needed to find a mall to pick up a gift. They brought gifts, expensive gifts, because they knew they were going to worship a king.

Wise men still worship Him. Are you a wise man or woman? Are you spending time worshipping him? I’m not just talking about attending church. You can attend church and still not worship. Worship is a lifestyle. Worship involves praising God both in speaking and in singing. Worship involves hearing the word of God taught and responding by changing our lives. And worship involves giving of our gifts to God. How are you doing in your worship? Are you taking time to praise, to confess, to study and to grow? Are you giving generously, extravagantly to God’s work? In faith they gave gifts to a baby. In faith we give gifts to our risen Lord.

And so, as I close, I think of the words of the great Anglican Bishop, J. C. Ryle, who said of these men, “We read of no greater faith than this in all the Bible. It is a faith that deserves to be placed side by side with that of the penitent thief. The thief saw one dying the death of a malefactor and yet prayed to him and called him ‘Lord.’ The wise men saw a newborn babe on the lap of a poor woman, and yet they worshipped him and confessed that he was the Christ.”

The magi really were wise men. And today, wise men still seek him. Wise men still serve him and wise men still worship him. My prayer for us is that we will be a church of wise men and women, seeking him, serving him and worshipping him as he leads us every day to become more and more a growing family of believers being transformed to wholeness and joy.