

“Wise Men Still Seek Him”

Let us pray.

God, you are the giver of true joy, joy that the world cannot give and cannot understand, through the light of Christ's coming, help us to know and to live our joy, the joy that is both your gift to us and our gift to you. Through Christ our Lord we pray. Amen.

You may have seen in the past month during the Advent and Christmas season, signs like the one out front, which is the sermon title today, “Wise Men Still Seek Him”, or “Jesus is the reason for the season.”

Well, I heard just the other day that a **pastor in California** put a sign in front of his church during the advent season that said, "**Jesus is the reason for the season. Merry Christmas.**" He received a complaint from a woman in the community who took exception with the message. She closed the conversation by saying, "**I don't think the church should try to drag religion into every holiday.**"

Wow! What a thing to say in preparation for the coming of the Lord. "**I don't think the church should try to drag religion into every holiday.**"

I surely hope her outlook changed by Christmas. And how could it not as we, the Christian church re-read every year the birth narratives of our Savior Jesus Christ - who did not come dragging religion into the world, but came openly to bring a relationship with us into the world.

This is imperative for us to understand as Christians, Christ did not come to be served by the Jewish religion, by God's chosen people of the OT, but to serve AND give his life as a ransom for many.

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And there were eyewitnesses of his life of selfless service, and of his death on the cross for the ransom of many. Those eyewitnesses were His disciples, who wrote the gospel of the NT.

There is a story told about a man who was accused of some wrongdoing and was brought before a judge. When the judge asked if he had an attorney to represent him, the man answered, **"No, I can't afford one."** The judge replied, **"Well don't worry about that. I'll appoint a lawyer to represent you, and I will choose a real good one."** **"I appreciate that, Judge,"** answered the man. **"But if you really want to appoint somebody to help me, what I need most is not a real good lawyer, but several real good witnesses!"** (source: James W. Moore, "When You're a Christian, the Whole World is from Missouri")

A good witness is one who knows something firsthand through their experience, and who can bring the truth to the light.

God doesn't need a couple good lawyers (those who know the law, ie the Pharisees) defending Him and trying to prove Him to a lost humanity. But what He needs is a couple good witnesses that are willing to tell what He has done for them. It's called "Evangelism" ... the telling or announcing/proclaiming the gospel or good news of Jesus Christ.

Matthew (an eyewitness of Jesus' life of selflessness) who we just heard from finds it imperative to write to us this story of the visitation of the wise men.

Because....

This story is fitting for us today, Epiphany Sunday, as it is really about God making himself known to the world through Jesus, His divine Son.

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And as an eyewitness to Christ’s life, he knows that it’s important to share the eyewitness account of Jesus’s birth seen by the wise men. Who were not Jewish, who were not God’s people of the OT, but in fact Gentiles, “pagan priests”.

But their status means nothing.

They were eyewitnesses of the birth of Jesus! And were guided by faith in a message sent to them by God to witness it. **ALREADY GOD IS MAKING ALL THINGS NEW!**

Matthew is reminding us that the saving word of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is not for some, **but for all**. Not for the Jews only, but for all the world. Not for men only, but also for women. Not for the perfect only, but for those whose lives bear the scars of unmentionable human pain. Not for the hometown crowd only, but for those on the other side of the tracks, the next town over or halfway around the world. Not for those who believe just like we do, but also for those who are struggling to believe anything at all, or those who have lost their faith.¹

The star comes and rests over the place where the infant Jesus was born. Keep your eyes on it. Gaze at the star. Focus on it. Fix it firmly in your mind. Because in time you will discover that the points of the star will stretch themselves into the form of a cross, and it will no longer rest over the place of where the child lay, but will come to rest over your life and the whole world we are called to ministry to.²

¹ http://day1.org/919-the_gift_of_the_magi

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However, many people in this culture today are **following stars** that they deep down know will never come to stop at any place they could ever call home, but they unwisely try to follow them anyway. Many today are making **unwise** leaps of **unwarranted** faith to have all the things the culture says represent success and happiness. But after getting all that, I hear people say, "I'm not happy in this job. I feel like a rat on a wheel. But I have this house and the second mortgage and all the other stuff I'm up to my eyes in debt to pay for. I've always been told that when I got all this, I'd be happy, but I'm not." I've heard that before. There's no joy in that, because that's living a life **conformed by the image of the world, and not living a life transformed by the renewal of your mind. Romans 12:2, so that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect, and pleasing will of God.**

But, some of us never have such experiences of joy because we live under the burden of the expectations other people have of us, which keep us from being able to align with our real selves. "I feel like I'm living for everybody else. I've lost me along the way." I've heard that before. And so lots of people live lives of fragmentation because they try to find their center in everyone else they are trying to please rather than within themselves. No wonder people are so dizzy. Their center is out there, in a million different others, with a zillion different expectations; and they live dizzying lives of spinning from one false center to another.³

The Magi were overwhelmed with joy, because they realized, they recognized, that they had arrived at the place where they were meant to be, the place where they were most themselves, the place where they could say that they were at home. They

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had arrived at the place where the divine and the human meet. They had arrived at the place where heaven and earth come together. "Yes, this is it." The joy they experienced confirmed that.

But at that moment, the Magi had a decision to make. You see, as soon as they stopped and bathed in the delicious joy that confirmed their arrival at the right place, they remembered their secret meeting with Herod, and they knew that they had to decide what they would do with what he had asked. And at that moment, they were caught in between their joy and their fear. After all, it's not every day that King Herod the Great asks something of you. And if you don't do what he asks, you could be in trouble. It's not a good thing to cross a fearful and threatened King.

We all know what it's like to be caught between our joy and our fear. "Every human being has both sets of forces within. One set clings to safety and defensiveness, hanging on to the past," moving in a backward direction, "afraid to grow, afraid to take chances, afraid to jeopardize what [one] already has, afraid of independence and freedom. The other set of forces impels [one] forward toward wholeness and uniqueness of Self, toward...confidence in the face of the...world" (Abraham Maslow, *Toward A Psychology of Being*). And so the Magi, like every one of us, had a decision to make. They are in a free choice situation, between the joy of the King and the fear of the king, and they had to choose between the delight and joy of one and the anxiety and fear of the other. They had to choose between the forward movement of one and the backward movement of the other. In that way, they mirror what is true for all of us, afraid to grow and afraid not to grow.⁴

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Well, verse 12, the verse that closes this story, may be one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible, because it is a verse of hope and courage and life; and as I sat with this passage, this is the verse that opened up the whole experience of the Magi to me. "Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."

The Magi refused to go in the direction of their fears. Through the language of their dream, which is another way of saying that through their own God-given, inner voices, they chose life and growth and joy. They trusted their own inner experience of joy, even if that experience flew in the face of the power and authority and expectations of the world. They went in the direction of the Divine, even though Herod wanted them to go in another direction. They did that because that inner joy, the inner joy they experienced, is worth trusting and worth following and worth building a life around. That inner joy you experience when you're who and where you're meant to be is the still, small voice of God, beckoning you to live and move and have your being in the Self God has given you and not in what the world expects.⁵

Herod has a thousand faces. He is alive today in anyone or anything that leads you away from being overwhelmed with the joy God wants you to have, the joy that comes from being who you really and truly are, where you really and truly want to be, and doing what you really and truly want to do. I know what it's like to capitulate to Herod. I also know what it's like to be flooded by joy. And I think I'm finally

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learning that any fear I have of Herod is not worth comparing to the delights of trusting my inner experience of joy that is the gift of God and moving courageously, confidently, in that direction.⁶

That's what God wishes for you. I do know it's a tough move. Herod's pull is strong. But on this Sunday of Epiphany, when once again we watch a few stargazers offer some gifts to the child who is a king, perhaps we can recognize as well that the Magi bring a gift today to you and to me. What they bring is the gift of their example. It's the example of saying "No" to Herod and "Yes" to Christ. It's the example of saying "No" to fear and "Yes" to joy. It's the example of saying "No" to the painful past and "Yes" to the joyful future. It's the example of trusting your joy enough to build an entire life around it, whether the rest of the world understands and approves or not. And if we can receive that gift, then out of the experience of our lives joyfully lived, we will be more fully and richly able to offer our own gift to the Christ child. And I can think of no gift that would grace him more than for us to trust and to live each day in the joy that is the reason he came in the first place.⁷

Prayer:

Gracious God, today we thank you for making yourself known to us in Jesus Christ. Thank you for helping us to know your character, your glory, and your grace.

All praise be to you, O God, because you have revealed yourself to us.

All praise be to you, Lord Jesus, because you have shown us the Father and because you have embodied divine grace so that we might receive it.

All praise be to you, Holy Spirit, for helping us to live in that grace each day.

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Fill us afresh with your power, Spirit of God, so that we might share the good news of Christ with the world . . . beginning with our friends and neighbors. Amen.

⁸Prayers of the People:

Your majesty is beyond
imagination
The eternal King
high and lifted up
to whom the angels worship.
Your power is beyond
understanding
The Creator God
who shakes the heavens
yet holds us in his hands.
Your mercy is beyond
our deserving
The Saviour God
once born for us
now sacrificed in love.
Forgive the smallness
of our faith
the magnitude
of our need,
the depth
of our sorrow.
Raise us up to new life
and new ways of service
through Jesus Christ
Your Son, our Lord. Amen

⁸ http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Epiphany.htm#ixzz5bqJxYn4x
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