

“CHRISTMAS CAROLS: IV - WISE MENS’ SONG”

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Matthew 2:1-12

A couple of months ago, Sandy Wherry and I drove up to Lancaster on a beautiful Friday just for the heck of it. We were going to do a little shopping, but, as all of us who live near there know well, it’s just nice and relaxing to drive around the countryside in that area. So we were going to do some of that too. But little did we know when we left Elkton that morning, that we’d be doing more than our share of driving around the countryside that day!

Let me tell you what happened. We drove up to Lancaster on 896, and on the way up we decided we’d drive all the way up to Park City Mall and start there first. That was all well and good, until we drove right by the exit that we were supposed to exit on! (I think we were talking - what a shock, huh?!)

Well, no matter. We’d just get off at another exit and make our way back to the mall. Trouble was we weren’t exactly sure where we were. We weren’t even sure we had passed our exit - so, we kept on driving for a while. Finally, we figured we had missed it so we got off on an exit, and then tried to find our way back to the mall.

Now, I have a pretty good sense of direction (at least, I usually do). So when we got off the exit I discerned that we should go in a certain direction, because well, certainly the mall was that way. So we drove and drove - up and down the hills and valleys, passing by the buggies with all those beautiful little Amish children peering out at us. Alas, no mall. But, I was certain we had to be heading in the right direction - so just a little further! (Sandy was the height of politeness, she never really told me what an idiot I was!)

Anyway, finally, even I figured out we were out in the middle of nowhere, so I pulled into a parking lot and got out my GPS. Yes, I have a GPS, and no, I wasn’t using it! Anyway, I pulled out the GPS, typed in Park City Mall, waited a few seconds, and then got back on the road under the direction of my British GPS guide.

I don’t know how many of you have a GPS in your car, but it’s an amazing thing! My GPS has never led me astray (although I know some other people have had issues with their’s). So, as always, on that day, I did exactly what my GPS lady told me to do. And what she told me to do led us to the strangest little, windy,

curvey hidden roads you can imagine. At one point, Sandy and I looked at each other when she (the voice) told us where to go, and we knew it just had to be wrong. But I trusted Ms. GPS and followed her instructions, and voila, in minutes we were right smack in front of Park City Mall! (Next time, I think I'll plug in my GPS before I leave Elkton!)

Thank goodness the main characters in this morning's Gospel lesson were more attentive to directions than I was that day in Lancaster. The main characters, the magi (also sometimes called "The Wise Men," or even "The Three Kings") saw a star in the sky, and knew that it meant something, and that's what they should be following, and that's exactly what they did.

Now before we join them on their journey, let me remind you a little about them. They were indeed wise men; very learned, very educated men; men of science, keen observers of nature. They were probably wealthy, and they were most assuredly respected. Most of all, they were seekers of truth.

In this quest for truth, one day they saw this star shining brilliantly. They knew it meant something. They knew they needed to follow it. They felt that the answer to their seeking lay in that star and what they would find should they follow it.

So they followed it, and first, it took them to Jerusalem, to the court of King Herod. Now Herod was the exact opposite of them. He didn't want to know truth, he felt he was the truth. He didn't want anybody taking anything away from him and his position, least of all some supposed king born in a manger. But he was cunning and conniving, and convincingly told the wise men that he did want to see the baby, he did want to worship him, so they were to come back and tell him where to find the baby once they had found him. (All the while, he was plotting the baby's demise.)

So off the wise men went again, still following that star, still seeking. And finally, they came to that place where the baby Jesus lay in a manger, closely guarded by Mary and Joseph. And in that moment, everything came together - all their searching, all their seeking, their quest for meaning - it all came together, and they knew He was indeed the king, and they knelt down, paid him homage, and laid their gifts before him. Then, they were warned in a dream about Herod's true intent, to harm the baby, so they, as the scripture says, "went home by another way." And I want to tell you, that that doesn't just mean they traveled home by another way. I think it also means that they went home changed human beings. They went home children of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Now, any one of you could have told that story, couldn't you? We all know

that story so well. We've seen it played out in Christmas pageants since we were very young. The mysterious men from the East following a star, laying down gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. It's a great story, a mysterious story.

But it's not just a story - there's more to it than what you see at first glance. Actually, there are two things I want to lift up this morning.

The first is this. The story of the wise men only appears in one of the Gospels - Matthew's. Why? Well, Matthew's gospel is written for new Christians, the newly formed followers of Christ. Commentators have pointed out that Matthew had some concerns about those new followers, the most pressing seemed to be that they were closing ranks. Even in so young a church, one person wrote, "it seems that their vision was limited. The boundaries of their community were already closing tightly around them. Matthew could see already that the new believing community was too easily settling into the idea that this new life in Christ was just for them, they were already getting too comfortable with themselves, and too easily willing to put others outside." (On-line, The Rt. Rev. J. Neil Alexander)

Even back then, just when the church started, boundaries were being drawn, and sadly, some of them exist still today - too many of them. Who's right, and who's wrong. Who has a corner on the truth, and who doesn't. Who is worthy, and who's not. (Does any of that sound familiar? It's still happening today.)

And those are pretty much doctrinal issues. Add to that, those issues that have reared their ugly heads over the years - like only the right color or denomination or age or gender or - well, you get the picture . . . only the right ones are included.

Guess what, folks? According to that argument, the wise men, the magi are the wrong people. They're foreigners, after all. They're not part of the chosen people, the Jews. They're scientists, men who read the stars. They're not who the religious people would choose to be the stars of the show. Yet Matthew does, and he does it for a reason - to show that God loves all people - all people. And He sent His Son to save all people.

That's what makes Matthew's gospel so special - the doors are flung wide open for God's love to embrace all people, everywhere. He wanted the early church to hear that message loud and clear lest they become too exclusive and keep people away from the saving love of Jesus Christ.

He even did it in another interesting way earlier in his gospel. Notice the genealogy with which Matthew begins his Gospel - it includes the names of some women. In that day and age, genealogies did not include women's names, and even

more, the women who he included had some pretty interesting life stories - they were not squeaky clean. Which means that God came in Christ Jesus even for people who have had some rough experiences in their lives!

So, one writer notes, “Matthew reminded his readers - and he continues to remind us - that the saving word of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is not for some, but for all. Not for men only, but 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.” (Ibid)

So first, that is one of the most important things we can learn from Matthew’s story of the wise men - that Christ came into the world for all people - all, even these foreign scientists, these men outside of the faith, and all people, everywhere, since that day and time. No one is beyond the love of God our Father, which was poured out in Jesus Christ.

Which then brings me to the second thing that the story of the wise men tells us so powerfully - that all people ultimately want to know the truth in life. All of us do. All of us want to know the purpose of life, and our purpose in life. All of us seek to know that answer.

Remember a few years ago Rick Warren wrote a book called “The Purpose Driven Life” that flew off the shelves? People want to know what life is all about, what’s the meaning, what’s the purpose. Too often they seek to find that meaning and purpose the wrong way - in the pursuit of money and status and degrees and things - stuff.

When the wise men wrestled with those questions, the star guided them to the answer - Jesus. “He alone,” as one pastor has put it, “answers the deepest longings of the human heart.” (Adam Hamilton, *Catch*, p. 17)

My friends, all around us people are still seeking and searching today. People are still seeking an answer, and you and I know what that answer is - His name is Jesus. He’s right here for them, here for the asking. As close as a whisper.

I was reminded this week how easy it is for people to not see that, by way of a story about William Randolph Hearst. You may recall that Hearst was a man of vast wealth, he could have anything he wanted, and pretty much did. However, one day he was looking through a catalog of priceless art, and he saw a piece he wanted to have. He absolutely, positively had to have it, but no one really knew where it

was. So Hearst sent one of his men to Europe to find it and buy it for his collection. Months went by while the man searched and searched. And finally, he sent a report back that he had located the whereabouts of this priceless painting. To the surprise of Mr. Hearst, the masterpiece was stored in none other than the warehouse of one William Randolph Hearst. (On-line, Crosswalk.com)

He had it, it was there the whole time, right there, and he didn't know it.

For so many people, so many seeking, searching people, Jesus is right there, and they don't know it. They're seeking and searching in all the wrong places, in all the wrong ways, trying to find meaning in so many ways that ultimately don't matter, and Jesus is right there.

Maybe they can't see him because they too, like the wise men, feel like outsiders. Maybe they can't see him because they are burdened by a sense of unworthiness, maybe because we in the church have made them feel that way. Maybe they can't see him because they feel different than "church people" or look different or speak different. Maybe they can't see him because they have secrets in their lives, they've done things about which they're ashamed, or maybe they're still doing them.

For whatever reason, so many people are searching, and they're in our lives friends. They live in our neighborhoods, they work with us, they're even related to us. They're searching, and Jesus is right there, but maybe they need a star to guide them, and maybe the star is you.

The Good News of the Gospel is that God sent His only begotten Son into the world to save sinners - all of us - no matter who we are, what we look like, where we've been, where we are now - God sent Jesus for all of us - there are no outsiders. The Wise Men's story, their song, reminds us so beautifully and majestically of that - there are no outsiders in the eyes of God.

Before I finish, I want to challenge you to do something in the new year ahead. I want to challenge you to invite someone to worship with you here. Pray about it, ask God to put on your heart the name of someone who needs to know how much He loves them, how He sent Jesus for them. And then pick up the phone and invite them to come to church with you sometime soon.

Be a star! Help someone find the way to Jesus Christ! It's one of the most precious things you'll ever do!.

Amen.