

“We Have Seen His Star”

Matthew 2:1-21 (NRSV)

By John Gill

To me, the weeks after Christmas are always a little anti-climactic. During the Christmas Season, we usually are rushing around getting ready for the holidays. Finally come the great celebrations of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. And then, on the day after Christmas we all would collapse (at least I know I would), relieved that Christmas is finally over! This year, of course, has been a little different as many of the activities we fill Advent with were not possible, because of COVID-19. But (hopefully), next Christmas we will get back to “normal,” and the season will be just as hectic as ever!

Sometimes we get so caught up in all the trappings of Christmas that we miss the whole point. Maybe that is why the Church Year gives us this day: The Feast of Epiphany – a time for us stop and catch our breath, and reflect.

In one of Dick Van Dyke’s books, he writes of a woman who told him of an especially hectic Christmas Eve around her house when her little girl seemed to be in the way, no matter what she did. Finally the girl was hustled up to bed. As she knelt to say her prayers, she was so keyed up that she accidentally prayed, “Forgive us our Christmases, as we forgive those who Christmas against us.”

I hope we don’t need to ask forgiveness of anyone WE may have “Christmased against.”

Now that Christmas is past, and we have begun a New Year, it is a good time to pause and reflect on what Christmas means to us – NOT what the facts of the Christmas story are – we are all familiar with those. But now that Christ has come into the world, and into our lives, HOW ARE WE GOING TO RESPOND? How shall you and I react to Christ’s presence in our midst? What is the meaning of Christmas – FOR US?

This morning, I chose this Epiphany scripture from Matthew because, within the story of the Wise Men, we can see three very different possibilities of how WE might choose to react to Christ’s coming:

We COULD choose to respond to Christ’s birth like KING HEROD.

Herod’s hostility toward Jesus was so severe that he murdered all the baby boys of Bethlehem, hoping that the Christ-Child would be among the victims. Herod was a ruthless man when he felt that his throne was threatened.

Murdering babies would not be out of character for Herod. The famous historian of that period, Josephus, tells us a great deal about Herod. Josephus reports of many instances when Herod murdered members of his own family because he believed they were plotting against him. In fact, there was a saying throughout the Roman Empire that it was “safer to be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.” We know he had two of his wives and several of his sons killed. On one occasion, Herod had his wife’s grandfather murdered. You see, Herod’s wife belonged to the legitimate royal family of Israel, which would have made her grandfather the rightful king!

Herod would have no rivals to his throne! So, you can see that the question the Wise Men asked would have made Herod very upset! The Magi had come to Herod – the man who had been “appointed” by

Rome to be the “King of the Jews,” and asked him, “Where is he who has been BORN king of the Jews? Herod’s react to that kind of threat to his throne was predictable. The Scriptures tell us that Herod’s response to the birth of Christ was to try and kill him.

Herod was afraid that this little Child was going to interfere with his life – his position – his power and influence – and therefore, his first instinct was to destroy him.

But, before we are too quick to judge Herod and distance ourselves from guilt like his, we’d better consider this: There are many people TODAY who would gladly destroy Jesus Christ because they see, in Christ, One who is likely to interfere with their lives – and of course, they are RIGHT! They want to do whatever THEY want, and Christ will not let them do what they want – so, like Herod, they would like to see him dead (or, at least, treat him as though he never existed).

As William Barclay, the great Bible commentator of the last century, wrote: “The man whose one desire is to do what he likes has never any use for Jesus Christ. The Christian is the man who has ceased to do what he likes, and has dedicated his life to do as Christ likes.”

If you and I are honest with ourselves, I think that most of us must confess that there are times in our lives when we feel that Christ’s presence interferes with the way WE want to live our lives – and that sometimes, we wish that we could just make Christ disappear from the scene – at least for a while. As difficult as it is to admit, there may just be a little “Herod” in all of us!

So, one possible way we could choose to respond to the birth of Christ is with hostility and hatred, like Herod.

The second possibility is that we could choose to respond like the chief priests and scribes.

Their reaction to the news of the birth of the Messiah was really no reaction at all. The response of the Jewish leaders was one of indifference and apathy. They had heard the news the Wise Men brought – they had even been called upon by Herod to recite the prophecy about the Messiah’s birth – yet they didn’t even bother to travel the short distance to Bethlehem to see whether or not the long-awaited prophecy had been fulfilled. They were so engrossed in their Temple ritual, their legal discussions, and their political posturing, that they completely disregarded Jesus. They were indifferent – the coming of Christ meant nothing to them at all.

There are still those today who, like the chief priests and scribes, are so interested in their own affairs, that Jesus Christ means little or nothing to them. They just can’t be bothered with Jesus.” Our world is filled with people like that!

Again, we mustn’t be too quick to release ourselves from the guilt of the chief priests and scribes. How often have WE been guilty of neglecting Christ when we have had the opportunity to encounter him? How often have WE missed his advent in our lives because of our indifference and apathy? We need to ask God’s forgiveness – both for the times we acted like Herod, and the times we acted like those Jewish leaders.

So, we have seen that our Scripture text shows us two examples of how we ought NOT to respond to Christ’s birth. But our Scripture also shows us one shining example of how we OUGHT to respond to the coming of Christ.

And of course, I'm referring to the Wise Men.

It's not by accident the Wise Men are called "wise." I believe we see their wisdom in verse 2 of our text: "We have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him."

There are three points to this "wise" response to Christ's birth, contained in this verse: 1) We have SEEN; 2) We have COME; 3) So that we might WORSHIP. THIS is what made the Wise Men "wise!"

First, the Wise Men said that they had SEEN his star.

This past week, I came across a great quote by a United Methodist pastor, John Partridge, who had preached a sermon on this scripture text. He made this great observation: "When the star appeared in the heavens, everyone saw exactly what their focus and biases guided them to see."

This I believe, is the first step to a wise response to Christ's coming. To be sure – the star was in the heavens for ALL to see, yet only a few actually SAW it! The Wise Men saw the star because they were looking for a "sign."

You know, in deference to the famous hymn based on this text, the Wise Men were not actually "kings." They were the sages of the Eastern Kingdoms. We would probably call them "astrologers" today – men who watched the heavens for signs from the gods. They knew the pattern of the stars and their movements, so whenever something out-of-the-ordinary happened, they believed it marked an important event on earth.

To the ancient world, a new and rising star in the Eastern sky would indicate that a great king had been born. In fact, it was written that at the birth of Julius Caesar, a new star appeared in the heavens. And we still use that phrase – when a new unknown politician catches the attention of America, we still say he/she is a "rising star" in the party. And the stellar actors and actresses, we call "stars," don't we? The Wise Men saw a "rising star" in the heavens, which brought them to Judea searching for new King.

This revelation from God – this remarkable star declaring the Good News of the birth of a King – was there for ALL to see, but most people weren't looking for signs from God. They didn't realize that "you will miss seeing the Savior of the World if you are not looking for him." You must LOOK if you expect to SEE. You SEEK after something if you want to FIND it. Many people today are not looking – or at least, they aren't looking in the right place – for a sign from God.

Friends, if you don't know Jesus Christ, you must ask yourself: "Have I sought him that I might find? Have I failed to find Christ because I haven't been searching for signs of his presence in my life? Have I failed to look in order to see? Have I been so blind as not to see his Star?"

If we are wise, we will notice the signs of God's presence in our lives which are all around us every day because we are looking for them and expecting to find them.

Which brings us to the second thing that made the Wise Men "wise" – THEY CAME.

Not only were they seeking for a sign and open to the revelation of God, once they had seen the star and determined it's meaning, they set out in faith on a long and uncertain journey. **THEY PUT THEIR FAITH INTO ACTION.**

In their own words, "We have seen his star . . . and have come." They believed the star beckoned them to follow, and so they did. Harold Phillips, a Baptist minister, put it like this: "It's not the light we see, but the light we follow, that makes us wise."

Just seeing the star would have had little meaning if the Wise Men would have chosen to stay where they were and not follow its light. They never would have encountered Christ, had they not ventured out in faith.

Some people today, are like that. They light of Christ shine, but they shut their eyes and refuse to see. They hear the message of Christ proclaimed, but they close their ears and ignore it. They fail to act on what they have heard. And so they miss their encounter with God.

When you and I believe that God has revealed his will to us, we must be willing to act in faith. We must follow God's star wherever it leads. We must "put our faith into action" if our faith is to have much meaning. The Wise Men were wise because they acted on their faith.

Finally, once the Wise Men had seen his star and had come to the Christ Child – they **WORSHIPED.**

How truly wise **WE** are when we realize that God's purpose in revealing things to us in signs is to invite us to Christ! And the purpose of coming to Christ is that we might fall down and worship him!

Worship is the natural response when Christ comes into our midst. And worship always involves giving of ourselves. When we encounter Christ, we want to give him the best that we have. The Wise Men brought the Baby Jesus rare and valuable gifts "fit for a King." But those gifts symbolized something of far greater value than gold. Because they were presented to Christ in a spirit of worship, the gifts the Wise Men brought became symbols, representing the givers themselves. As they worshiped on their knees, the Wise Men gave their hearts to Christ – and their journey was complete.

Unfortunately, there are many people today who make the journey of Advent, and even to the manger on Christmas Eve, but that's as far as they go. They "see" the star, and "come" to Jesus – only to stop short of giving their heart. Sadly, they have missed the whole point of Christmas.

One of my favorite carols is "In the Bleak Mid-winter." It speaks about the true gift of the Wise Men:

What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part.
But what I can, I give him – give my heart.

That, my friend, is the secret to "Wisdom:" 1) to Seek out Christ, 2) to Come to him, and 3) to Worship him. That is what made the Wise Men "wise." And that is what can make **US** wise, as well.

In closing, I'd like to share a poem entitled: "Who Are the Wise Men?" (by B.Y. Williams)

Who are the wise men in the long-ago?
Not Herod, fearful lest he lose his throne;
Not Pharisees, too proud to claim their own;
Not Priests and scribes, whose province was to know;
Not money-changers running to and fro;

Who were the wise?
Three who traveled, weary and alone,
With dauntless faith, because before them shone
the star that led them to the manger low.

Who are the wise men NOW when all is told?
Not men of science;
Not the great and strong;
Not those wear a kingly diadem;
Not those whose eager hands pile high the gold.

Who are the wise?
Those, amid the tumult and the throng,
Who follow still the star of Bethlehem.

Let us pray:

O Lord, grant us the wisdom of those men of old
Who were wise enough to see your star,
To follow your guidance,
And to discover a Savior to worship and to serve. Amen.