

Title: True Wisdom is the Real Power
Text: Matthew 2.1-18
Theme: God refuses to fit into our categories
Series: Advent 2017 #4
Prop Stmtnt: The Wise Men are some of the most unlikely worshippers of Christ.

I saw this Christmas card the other day. I just shook my head. Here is a picture depicting the wise men with a verse from the Bible about the Shepherds. Now, on the one hand, I'm grateful that the card company was depicting a scene that actually had something to do with Christmas, but on the other hand, I wondered, how does something like this get published? Doesn't anyone bother to even check and see if this is accurate? This account in Matthew's gospel is all that we have on these men and when you compare this account about the wise men in Matthew 2 with the account we looked at last week with the shepherds in Luke 2, there is something similar and something very different. What is similar is that here are people you would not expect being drawn to Christ. What is so different is the fact that while the shepherds were local, these wise men were from another part of the world. The advent of Christ was going to affect Bethlehem, and has until this very day. But the advent of Christ was going to impact the entire world, and it has, until this very day. But we also know that this account ends in sorrow. I hope that these men never found out that their visit to Jerusalem lit the fuse of Herod's fury that resulted in the murder of all the male babies in the region of Bethlehem when they did not report back to him. So yes, the coming of Christ is the coming of light, but the history of our world is the history of people who love darkness and hate the light. But the darkness will not win.

Read Text:

The book of Exodus begins with the birth of a baby boy who is rescued from the king of Egypt who ordered that the male babies of Israel be murdered. That baby who is rescued eventually rescues his people. The book of Matthew begins with the birth of a baby boy who is rescued from the King of Israel by going to Egypt because the King of Israel ordered the execution of the male babies of Israel (at least in Bethlehem). Fascination, wonder, joy and worship is contrasted with rage, murder and unspeakable tragedy. The story of Christ is the story of polar opposites. There is nothing neutral about him. If your baby had been murdered by Herod, you would not be inclined to rejoice at the advent of Christ, would you?

We have this account about wise men that trigger the vengeful response of a king that results in the death of all these babies. Well, that is certainly not pleasant to think about, so we tend not to bring up that or other unpleasant aspects of the story. Therefore, our version of Christmas has been sanitized, which only fuels our expectations of having a sanitized Christmas. Our images of Christmas don't always look like the real Christmas anymore than our expectations of life look like our lives. When you look at the cards, the nativity scenes, the dramas and listen to the carols, they all smell like Lysol. But, when you read the actual accounts in Matthew and Luke they are actually raw. Shepherds hanging out with sheep out in the fields all night long? No running water. No showers. No soap. No toothbrushes and toothpaste and deodorant. What do you think they looked and smelled like? It's not like there was a hand sanitizer station at the door outside the manger. My point is this. Christmas can be hard because we are reminded that our life does not match our expectations. Our lives are not sanitized and all smell like Lysol. We struggle. We

hurt. There are family members who have died, others who refuse to talk with us, others who are in a very dark place. We are getting treatment for cancer, or recovering from a surgery or other serious ailment. Life is raw. We all walk with a limp. Some are able to hide it better than others. But that is the point. Jesus was born into a very raw and harsh world, which is a reflection of the darkness, harshness and pain of our lives. He came to us because sin has ruined us. Sin has devastated us. So, the appearance of the wise men (Bam moment) only adds impact to an absolutely amazing event – the advent of Christ. Please understand this! Yes, it is amazing that God would come to earth, but it is jaw-dropping, head-shaking, mind-blowing amazing that he would go through all that he did in order to be our Savior. Our need is that real.

The way Matthew lays out the story highlights the incredible contrast between the leaders of Israel and these wise men and therefore, the two radically different responses to the news of the birth of Christ. As we look at these contrasts, we shake our heads in wonder, because God has done it again. He has gone after some of the most unlikely people in the world and has not only gotten their attention, but these unlikely players are brought in and given a front row seat. And this really ought to speak to us, because as I mentioned, the wise men are a preview of the international impact of Christ. At the end of Matthew's account, Christ sends his disciples to make disciples of all nations. We are those people. We are part of the all nations. We were the outsiders who have been brought in. In that way, the story of the wise men is our story too. God went after them with his light and by means of believing, these who, humanly speaking should not have believed, believed, while those who should have believed, did not. The first contrast we see is ...

1. Outside vs. Inside

The wise men are from the east. They are called magi, which is related to our word magic or magician because these were spiritual advisors who studied the stars. But these guys were from Persia and most likely were either from Babylon or their forefathers were. Israel does not have fond memories and pleasant thoughts about Babylon. The Babylonians destroyed them 600 years before this scene and Israel never quite recovered. The Babylonians were pagan idol worshippers and their magi would have been the caste of priests who led this. Leaders of a pagan religion of the people who were the historical enemies and hated foes of Israel, are about the most unlikely people you would ever think who would want to follow Christ. And yet, here they are showing up in Jerusalem inquiring about where the king of the Jews had been born because they want to worship him.

These outsiders, these unlikely converts want to worship Jesus. So, obviously this is a preview of how the message of Christ is going to blow past the borders of Israel and go to the uttermost parts of the world, but it is also a warning. These outsiders probably traveled 800 miles while Herod and the chief priests and scribes were 5 miles away from Bethlehem. Those who were far away saw what those who were so close, completely missed. Those who should have been looking did not see, while those who shouldn't have seen, were looking. Who is the most unlikely person you know to trust Christ? The second contrast is between the...

2. Knowledgeable vs. Ignorant

As astronomers and astrologers from Persia these guys held powerful positions in the Babylonian empire because they were consulted on a regular basis by the king. They studied the stars believing that the movement and positioning of the stars gave omens of warning, or notices of favor. So, when a new star appeared in the sky, these men took this to be a very important divine message. In this case, they were right. I think that it is safe to assume that Daniel's presence in Babylon left a mark. He obviously had a copy of at least some of the Old Testament because these men associated the appearance of the star with the king of the Jews, which is what is predicted in Numbers 24.17. My guess is that in studying the sky, they saw a new star appear and then began to study all of their documents. One of them came across Numbers 24.17, which says, "*I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel;*" They agreed that this star must be referring to that star, so they headed to where you would expect a King of Israel to be born, and that is in Jerusalem. It is really amazing, isn't it? These outsiders come to Jerusalem in order to inform Jerusalem something that Jerusalem is ignorant of. They assumed that this was common knowledge. Their question in v.2 reveals this. Your king has been born. Pagan astrologers from the hated "outcasts" have informed the Jews that their king was born. That's rather embarrassing, don't you think? These are not the guys who are supposed to know this sort of stuff. Can you imagine being on a tour of Buckingham Palace and informing your tour guide that the King of England had just been born. You aren't supposed to know that and the ones who are supposed to know that sort of stuff – don't. The story of God's dealings with us is the story of how the wisdom of God confounds the wise and how the ignorant and marginalized people become key figures in his kingdom.

3. Responsive to revelation vs. Threatened by revelation

When the wise men realized what the appearance of the star meant, they responded by being prepared to go and worship. Somehow they knew that the birth of this king was important to the world. So, they show up in Jerusalem, and ask Herod concerning the whereabouts of "*he who has been born king of Jews.*" Matthew records this conversation in such a way that it is clear that when the wise men ask this, they emphasize the word "born." Notice that they do not say that he is born to be king, but that he is born king. He is already king! If you are Herod, the ground just shook. You are in deep weeds. Your game is over. Your cover is blown. Given the fact that Herod was not born king, but rather usurped the throne through shrewd diplomacy, and held on to the throne by killing anyone that he perceived to be a threat to him, including his own sons and wives, this news absolutely blew up his world. Herod has a dark resemblance to Denethor, the steward of Gondor in Tolkein's Lord of the Rings. There is a telling conversation that Denethor has with his son Boromir. Boromir asks his dad how much time must pass before a Steward could become a King, the King did not return. Denethor replied, "Few years, maybe, in other places of less royalty ... In Gondor, ten thousand years would not suffice." And in Judah, how long would it take for a king, who is not from the line of David, to ever really be king? Never! Herod is the pretend king, and therefore he is threatened by news of a real king.

This is huge because this is what Jesus does. The very presence of Christ exposes the fact that we are not really in charge. We try to pretend that we are and we try to portray that to others. Christ exposes the truth about us. He exposes us for what we really are. He exposes our insecurities. He exposes our sin. He exposes our emptiness. He exposes our brokenness. He exposes our fears. He exposes all of that so that he can rescue us from it. But most people do not want to give up

the idols they are hanging on to and are threatened by Christ. Herod was and perhaps you are too. How do you respond when the sins you are most tempted to hold on to are exposed? How do you respond when things that have been believed are revealed by God's Word as not being true? Do you welcome correction? Do you welcome being enlightened? Or do you bristle and get angry?

Adding to the intensity is the fact that there were way more than 3 guys who showed up. There may have been two, three, or four or more actual wise men, but you do not travel from Babylon to Jerusalem with gold, frankincense and myrrh without protection. The scenes that depict these royal looking figures with crowns on their heads and arrayed in costly gowns elegantly traversing the sands all by themselves on camels are a joke. You might as well carry a flashing neon sign that says, "Rob me, please!!" The trade route was notorious for highway robberies. These guys have protection, quite possibly a small army with them, which when they show up in Jerusalem asking about the king who was born would certainly get the attention of Herod.

So when Herod realized what the appearance of the star meant, he responded in a very different way than these men. The word is translated "*troubled*" in verse 3. Herod was troubled, but it could easily be translated as being in turmoil, or being terrified. Adding another layer of terror to his extreme insecurity is the news that "*we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*" Even here, the contrast is striking. The wise men travel for hundreds of miles in order to worship the king while Herod's insatiable desire to be worshiped and respected has driven him to pursue being a king and he is not going to give that up without a fight.

4. Desire to worship vs. desire to be worshipped

You desire to be worshipped because you think that you are worth it and you think that you are worth it because you think that you are god. And if someone tells you the truth, you resent them and if you have the power, you try to eliminate them, even if that person really is God. The fact is, you are not God. Acting like you are God and demanding that others do the same is living a lie. Herod is living a lie. His world is full of lies. He lies to the wise men and pretends that he wants to worship Christ, when in reality he wants to destroy him. He lies to himself thinking that he can actually do that.

These wise men had no idea that when they showed up in Jerusalem and announced the reason for their visit that they had just brought to Herod a declaration of war. Herod was going to use every weapon at his disposal to keep himself on the throne. The contrast could not be greater. Verse 11 is one of the most incredible verses in the Bible. It just about takes our breath away. Here are sophisticated, successful, distinguished and learned men laying on the ground before a poor child. When they saw the child with his mother, the text says that they "fell down." They held nothing back. These men are king-makers. These men know protocol. These men know manners and customs and yet here they are in all of their regality laying flat out on the ground in worship. And I doubt that this was over in about 30-45 seconds. They had traveled for hundreds of miles for this, and their faith was now made sight.

5. Wise vs. Fool

These really are wise men, aren't they? A wise person knows where true power really lies and it is not in us whereas the fool promotes himself and demands that others go along. Wise people recognize who God is and are humble before him. Fools promote themselves and live shallow lives because they so desperately desire to be respected. They will do anything for that. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, whereas the person who demands to be feared is the fool.

Do you demand respect? Do you get offended when you are not given the attention that you think you deserve? Are you easily angered when you have to wait in line, when someone else is preferred over you, when you are not recognized as being as gifted as you fancy yourself to be? In this account, everything that is said about these wise men reflects a life that is focused on pursuing Christ and obeying God. Everything that is said about Herod is focused on pursuing himself and destroying others. The next contrast shows us the result of that.

6. Joy vs. Fear

Every year about this time, there are accounts of astronomers who try to tell us that this star was a comet or some similar phenomena. The appearance of this star is a big deal and these guys who know stars and who are from a long line of astronomers and astrologers have the benefit of hundreds of years of observations. They knew that something was different and they obviously believed that this star was now there to lead them to a king. And yet, what happens when they get to Jerusalem? No one knows what they were talking about. As far as Jerusalem is concerned, no king has been born. 800 miles over the course of 4-7 weeks is a long trip to make for nothing. So, after meeting with Herod, they are probably perplexed. Did they misread the revelation? Was this really a sign from God? *"After listening to the king (9) they went on their way."* What way was that? Was that the way back home? Was that the way to where they were lodging? I think that we can assume that these men were perplexed and probably frustrated. In the middle of verse 9 Matthew uses the word "behold" again. It appears twice in chapter 1 in reference to Gabriel's appearance to Joseph. It shows up at the beginning of chapter 2 to describe the appearance of the wise men in Jerusalem and now Matthew uses it to describe the renewed appearance of the star to these men. What an amazing confirmation! What a message from God, right?! This was more than validating and exciting, this had to be humbling. Based on what had just happened in Jerusalem, these men had to now realize that God had revealed something to them that so many others did not know. Christ had come.

When these men saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. When these men realized that God was leading them, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. When these men realized that they were going to see the king, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. What do you rejoice about? What makes you clap your hands and be overwhelmed in your spirit? If you withhold your joy from God, you will waste it on something else. Unless you pursue your joy in God, you will live in fear because unless your joy is in God, your joy will never be safe.

7. Wealth vs. Poverty

There are a couple of more contrasts to note that only add to the dramatic setting. There is the contrast of these wealthy, powerful men worshiping and giving away their gifts to this poor

child. Matthew is clear. They do not worship Mary and neither do they give her the gifts. “Opening their treasures (which leads us to believe that there were some serious hardware here), they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.” And yet, the truth was, Christ was actually the rich one, right? But, for our sakes, he set aside his riches in order to become poor and here he is, accepting gifts from these men, not as one who needed them, but as one who gives us the privilege of worshipping him in such a way. Another contrast is

8. Persia vs. Bethlehem

Bethlehem was never impressive. There were seats of government or palaces in this tiny village and yet, here was where the star shone. Here is where God was looking. Here is where God was. He came to a people marginalized and hated. He was born in a village that had nothing to commend to it. And yet, that is how God has always functioned, while the world places value only on those it perceives to have value or to add to value.

I watched a video this week from the Dutch National Institute for Public Health where a man with Down’s syndrome is told how much he costs society annually. How could the Dutch who themselves suffered under Hitler’s tyranny not remember that Hitler’s final solution did not begin with killing the Jews, but with killing the handicapped? Hitler’s plan was not new. Every generation that does not know God will marginalize and attempt to subjugate or eliminate those it does not deem important. The birth of Christ in Bethlehem is a profound statement to every person who is overlooked by our world. You are not overlooked by God.

9. Generous, sacrificial worship vs. paranoid, furious murder

The portrait we are left with is of the wise men satisfied in their quest to find Jesus and affirmed by a dream from God that protected them from returning to Herod. They were generous and sacrificial in their worship. They worshiped the King of a nation they conquered. They gave up a considerable portion of their life to go and seek this King. Herod on the other hand did not want to see Christ; he wanted to kill Christ and his slaughter of the little babies was another testimony to his paranoia and rage. It would be tempting to think of Herod as a sociopathic anomaly. But Herod and the leaders of Israel are not unusual. These men are doing what most of us do when our hearts are threatened with exposure, and our security and comfort is at risk of being taken away. We panic. We get angry. We threaten and we retaliate. And since Jesus is the ultimate agent of exposure, he is always hated.

But, here is the irony. Christ doesn’t expose our need to belittle us. He exposes our need so that we will admit it. Your idols are worthless. Your ego lies to you. Your reputation and comforts have no eternal value. You need to be honest before God. You need a Savior. And Christ is the only One who can rescue you from your sin and from its condemnation. Christ was born in order to live and he lived in order to die and he died in order to rise again and he rose again in order to ascend to heaven and he ascended to heaven in order to return in glory. These wise men are part of the most unlikely worshipers of Christ. And the fact that the gospel has made it all the way to us should cause us to rejoice with exceedingly great joy.