

Wise Teachings

Matthew 2:1-12 NIV

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the Sunday in the liturgical year that reminds us of the visit of the wise men to Jesus, who is Immanuel: God with us. These wise men are mysterious characters. Some versions of the Bible identify these visitors as kings, but the truth is that we don't know much about them. Tradition has taught us that there are three Magi [may-jeye] and this is the reason why Epiphany Day is also known as Three Kings' Day. 440-412-8567

Being faithful to the biblical tradition, we have to recognize that if three wise kings came to visit Jesus they were not alone. At least a caravan of people were traveling with them, which is more in line with the Biblical text from Matthew 2. When the magi first visited Herod, scripture says that *ALL* Jerusalem was disturbed about the visit of these wise, famous kings. There was something obvious, something impending about their visit, and perhaps it was the amount of people that were traveling together.

But the purpose of Epiphany is not to remember the kind or amount of celebrities that came to visit Jesus. Epiphany is about celebrating the time when the first gentiles (non-Jewish people) worship the King of the Jews. It is about celebrating the moment when the light bulb comes on in the head of people outside the Jewish community as they realize that God, in the person of Jesus, is revealing himself, not to a selected group of people, but to all humanity. Epiphany is about celebrating the manifestation of God's love to the whole world in a very personal, palpable way-- in the person of Jesus. Epiphany describes how people outside the Jewish religious circle responded to this manifestation with great devotion. Today, I want to talk to you about the lessons we can learn from these wise men.

Before we go to the lessons let's take a moment to see who they are. Tradition calls them kings and wise men. But, their profession in contemporary language could be astronomers and astrologers; people who study and have some knowledge of the stars. Older sources suggest that they were priests. So, in a way, they were a combination of priests and scientists with some recognized authority.

What lessons can we learn from the Wise Men?

First, the Wise Men began their journey because of their beliefs. When meeting with King Herod, the wise men said, "*Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him*" (Matthew 2:2 NLT). The Magi had the assurance and the conviction that the celestial sign they were seeing was announcing the birth of the Messiah. This is what faith is: conviction and assurance. The Magi undertook their journey because they had the conviction and assurance that the star was announcing the birth of the Messiah.

The Magi not only knew the truth about the birth of Christ, they put that truth into action by setting out to see the Messiah. When you have faith, you not only know; you are on the go. Faith is a perfect mixture of knowing and doing. The things we know about God should prompt us to

act. For instance, because:

- I know God cares, I trust in God's provision for my life
- I know God is calling, I respond
- I know God is leading, I follow
- I know God is asking, I serve
- I know God is sending, I go where I am sent
- I know God is blessing, I receive as well as impart that blessing to others
- I know and I do, and in doing I learn even more

Here are some questions for us to ponder this morning. Where is our faith going to lead us in this New Year? Where is your faith calling you into action? How can we live in ways that are consistent with our faith? Do you have a sound balance between knowing and doing? Or, do you need God to help you see the areas where you need to grow? I know we all need to grow in both, in what we know and what we do. In my own life, when I have found myself waiting for God to do something, God has spoken to me through the Holy Spirit and has said, "Make a commitment, then put some effort into that commitment." When I do that, I discover the hand of God guiding my life. It is my prayer for God to give us the mind of Christ and the strength to put our faith into action in this year's journey.

Here is the second thing that we can learn from the Wise Men. The Magi [may-jeye] were willing to follow the star all the way.

When the Magi began their expedition, their journey took them outside their homeland. The word homeland has this intrinsic meaning of familiarity, things that are comfortable, well-known and customary to us. One of the things that I see in this story is that the Magi were willing to travel beyond the borders of comfort. They were willing to be exposed to and try new things. What are you willing to do? Are you willing to stretch your limits and see what God can do with and through your life? Are you willing to leave behind a known reality for an exciting, but still uncertain, mysterious future full of God's provision? **Say "Amen" if you are ready.**

Here is the third lesson. The Wise Men were committed to the journey and they permitted their faith and experience to shape their expectations.

The Wise Men set out to find a newborn King by following a star. They went to the palace and did not find the newborn king in the expected place. It would have been easy to give up and stop their search, but their journey continued because they were committed.

Many times, I have seen how people don't reach their goal because they get discouraged when they hit the first bump in the road. You probably have given up goals and dreams because things did not go as you expected them to go. Let me tell you, you are not alone. Through life we encounter disappointing situations, but we need to be committed to the task. We cannot abandon

our mission at the first appearance of setbacks. We have to stick to the journey. It's our commitment to the journey, our discipline to get up and going, that is going to help us face disappointments with fortitude. Along with God's Grace, what we need to complete the journey ahead of us is commitment and discipline.

Perhaps, the disappointments for the wise men did not end at the palace. The Magi went to Bethlehem and found a baby born to young, relatively poor parents! Not exactly what they expected. And, the setting was not exactly what befitted their dignity as priests, kings, or prominent scientists. Most likely, they would have not been able to recognize Jesus as the King of the Jews if they had a preconceived notion of what the King would look like or where he would be found. Yet, the Bible tells us that when they found him, they bowed down and worshiped Jesus.

Are we willing to part with our preconceived ideas, paradigms and preferences in order to receive God's blessings in whatever forms they are presented to us?

In this coming year, may we look to heaven for guidance and comfort. May we accept God's blessings in whatever forms we find them, just as the Wise Men accepted that their long, expensive journey led them to a baby born to young, inexperienced parents who lived on the poor side of town.

The Wise Men brought gifts...

They did the thing that people in the East or in Africa or in India would do when visiting royalty. They brought gifts.

- Gold was the kind of gift that you bring to a king.
- Frankincense was the kind of gift that you bring to a priest.
- Myrrh is given to someone who is about to die.

On this Three Kings Day, otherwise known as Epiphany, think of the gift that you will offer to God in the coming year. The gift of time? The gift of your talents? Your service in the community? Your witness and testimony? The gift of undying love and devotion? The gift of total surrender? You are the gift the Lord wants. Are you ready to offer yourself? Are you ready to give yourself to God and others?

Here some of the things you can give God and people. You can give of your: love, respect, attention, understanding, commitment, loyalty, wisdom, friendship, accountability, your willingness to be your best version at all times, smile, honesty, etc.

The Magi were willing to change...

Not only were the Magi willing to travel beyond the borders of comfort, these men risked the consequences of disobeying Herod and returned to their country by another, most likely, more difficult path. Taking another route is not only giving us the idea that the Magi used a different way to go back home. It tells us that these wise men were willing to change and that they were

also transformed by their encounter with Christ.

The Christian journey often takes us through strange and at times bumpy roads. Sometimes, Christ leads us on the road of service and compassion to those who have hurt us, and this is not easy. At times, we are invited to set foot on the path of acceptance. We are always called to travel the road of forgiveness no matter how much we are hurt. We are called to love enemies, do good to people who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who mistreat us (Luke 6:26-27). These are not roads that are easy to follow, but we know that narrow is the road that leads to life. The question is, are we willing to step, as we follow Jesus, on what we may consider a difficult terrain for us to walk? It is my prayer for God to give us the courage to follow all the way.

Summary...

The Wise Men were the first Gentiles to recognize that Jesus belongs to everyone. This Good News is for everyone, not just a select few. As we launch this New Year, may we:

1. Live in ways that are consistent with our faith and have a sound balance between knowing and doing.
2. Follow Jesus all the way.
3. Be committed to God's way and be opened to his blessings in whatever form we find them.
4. Offer all we are and have to the service of the King of kings.
5. Open ourselves to God's transforming power.

Benediction

As we move into another new year, let us commit to God our yesterdays of regrets, our anxieties and our failures, and any other burden that belongs in the past. But let us also look to the past as a source of learning and inspiration for the future. We cannot go forward if we do not know from where we have come. We cannot go forward with any expectation of effectiveness without the power of God guiding our steps. Without God, we will be careless, impetuous and self-seeking. We will lack the capability to turn our yesterdays, however broken and incomplete they are, into the fruitful works that we know God has in store for us. Let us move forward in the New Year, together as the church, because God intended us to be together, to bring glory to his name this New Year. Amen.