



**Why Were the Wisemen Wise?
Matthew 2:1-12
December 29, 2013**

Okay, you probably have heard this joke many times before, but I can't pass it up:

Do you know what would have happened if the wise men were wise women? They would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole and brought practical gifts.

Surely one of the great stories of Christmas is the account of the visit of the Wise Men from the East. This delightful tale is filled with mystery and intrigue.

By the way, I heard the rumor that there were actually 4 men, but the fourth guy's gift was fruitcake and he wasn't allowed on the trip.

Well, let's read the story of the Magi. See if we can separate fact from fiction.

Let us begin with Prayer: Gracious God, it is here in worship we are reminded to slow down, to be still and silent, and to listen. Thank you for this sacred time and space, and we ask that you make yourself known to us anew in the reading of your Word. Amen.

I invite you to follow along with the insert that has the scripture passage. The translation I am using is called the New Living Translation. We haven't read from this translation yet. I think you will like it.

Read Matthew 2:1-12

First of all, who were these Wise Guys?

Not a lot of details are given to us in scripture about these men –really, all the Bible says about them is that they were from the East and they were called magi. That's it. Scripture doesn't tell us how many there were; it does not say three. We always think 3 because there were 3 gifts.

It has been suggested that these men were from Arabia or Persia – which is our modern day Iraq. They were probably well educated, and very intelligent, skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. We believe they were highly respected in their Gentile culture and were considered upper class citizens.

The word “Magi” is where we get our modern day word “magician.” In those days, Magi referred to those who were experts in the workings of the heavens and study of the stars. They studied the skies in order to find answers to the great questions of life – questions like: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

They were not particularly prone to faith in the Jewish religion, but apparently, they were sincere seekers of truth. Some people have called them astrologers, others say they were astronomers. Either way, it’s no wonder they noticed the star.

So having heard about these men, think about what God is doing here: God is so determined to proclaim the “good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10) that God is using outsiders to announce the birth of the Messiah.

God didn’t go to the usual suspects, the scribes and teachers of the Jewish law. Instead, God gave the birth announcement to lowly shepherds who probably never came to church, but they in turn made known what they had been told. God gave the birth announcement to some Gentiles who practiced other religions and studied the stars way outside the fields of Bethlehem, and they in turn, announced it to King Herod and the Jewish scribes.

So why did God announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds and magi? Because in Jesus, no one is beyond God’s embrace. Think about how Jesus lived. He ate with outcasts. He spoke publicly to women. He told us to visit prisoners. Jesus touched people who were sick and people who lived with disabilities. Jesus lived up to his birth announcement given by outsiders...by being with outsiders.

So back to the Magi, or to the Wise Men. What made them wise? I believe what made them wise was not their intelligence or their education. What made them wise were their actions.

The wise men were wise for three reasons (I’m going to give you an old fashioned 3 point sermon today, so you may want to write these down in your sermon notes):

One, they knew who they were looking for...even though they didn’t fully understand.

Now, I am sure there were other astrologers who saw the star. Why did this group of men link the star with the king of the Jews (verse 2). Notice they called the star “His star.” Somehow they knew something special was happening. Perhaps, they had enough knowledge of Jewish history and faith to know that a “Messiah” was coming. They didn’t have all the facts when they started, but they had enough to know they needed to seek, to search.

They studied the heavens, and what they saw pointed them to God. And in their study of the stars, because they were seeking, God somehow spoke to them in a way they could understand.

Isn't it amazing how God comes to us where we are? God came to these men in the middle of their work, studying the stars. God came to Moses while attending sheep. God came to Gideon while he was harvesting wheat. God came to Peter while he was cleaning his nets after a night of fishing. God came to Matthew while at his table collecting taxes and counting money.

God can get our attention at the most interesting times in our lives. The One who seeks us can use anything to get our attention. God can use a star, a book, a conversation, a television show, a song, or even a chance comment. To be wise is to pay attention, then begin to act on it even though you may not have all the facts.

What is God using to get your attention?

**The second reason why these men were wise:
They didn't give up.**

One of the most famous paintings of the Magi is by Leonardo da Vinci. Da Vinci was commissioned in 1480 to paint an 8 by 9 foot work that was to be placed on the main altar of a monastery (San Donato a Scopeto) near Florence. He was 29 at the time, and he worked on it for quite a while. But then he moved to Milan and left it behind, never to work on it again. In other words, he didn't finish the painting of the wise men. Eventually the assignment was given to another artist who finished the painting sixteen years later.

Da Vinci did not finish what he set out to do – to paint the wise men; the real wise men did finish what they set out to do.

It has been estimated that these men traveled anywhere from 500 –1000 miles. The trip could have lasted anywhere from 1 to 2 years. Because the journey took so long, it is assumed that they traveled through the desert with a large caravan. I can imagine such a journey would come at much cost.

Remember, they started out because they saw a star. These were very determined men. They were determined to search until they found the answer. And at times, the star disappeared, so they began to inquire where the child was born, which prompted their inquiries in Jerusalem.

These men probably encountered many other barriers in their search. There was a culture barrier, a distance barrier, a language barrier, a racial barrier, a religious barrier, not to speak of a hostile king. Travel conditions were at times

very difficult due to the weather or the terrain or the threat of robbery. It wasn't easy for them to find Jesus, but they did it anyway. They didn't give up.

The Christian life is often one of perseverance. That is why you hear such admonitions in scripture such as, "So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9). Or, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

Eugene Peterson, who wrote the translation of the Bible called "The Message" describes the Christian life as "a long obedience in the same direction." Isn't that what the wise men did?

Are you persevering?

Which leads to the third reason why these men were so wise:

Their goal was to worship Jesus....

...not for anything He might do for them, but solely for the honor and glory they might render to God.

There is a splendid moment in the movie Jurassic Park, when world-class paleontologist Allen Grant, who has devoted his life to the study of dinosaurs, suddenly comes face-to-face with real, live prehistoric creatures. He falls to the ground, dumbstruck. The reason is obvious. It is one thing to piece together an imperfect image of dinosaurs by picking through fossils and bones. But to encounter an actual dinosaur – well, there can be no comparison.

The wise men had just spent two years searching for this King. All they had was a star. To suddenly find him in flesh and blood...their first reaction was to fall to the ground in worship. Worship is a key word in this passage...it is mentioned three times. The wise men were able to complete their task of adoration.

Think of the contrast. Although the Magi met King Herod, they made no effort to worship him. But when they finally find young King Jesus, these educated and extremely intelligent men fall on their faces before Him. What Herod craved, the baby received.

After worshipping the child, they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts – costly and precious gifts. Back then, gifts were important when approaching a superior.

In the movie, "The Nativity Story," when the first wise man approaches the infant Jesus, he presents the gift of gold and says, "Gold for the King of kings.." Gold is one of the rarest and most expensive metals. It is a gift worthy of a King.

The second king approaches Jesus and offers a gift of Frankincense and says, “Frankincense for the Priest of priests. Frankincense was an incense used in the Jewish temple for both sacrifices and prayer. Its aroma was always present in the temple. It is a picture of praise and worship. It is a gift worthy of a Priest.

The third king approaches Jesus and offers the gift of Myrrh and says, “A gift of Myrrh to honor thy sacrifice.” Myrrh is an aromatic gum resin obtained from several trees and shrubs found in that region. Myrrh was used in Egypt in the embalming process of mummification.

It was myrrh that was poured out on the feet of Jesus just a week before his death. After his death, Jesus’ body was wrapped in linen along with 75 pounds of myrrh and other spices. The gift of myrrh was prophetic – this child was born to die. It is a gift worthy of His sacrifice.

What gift can you offer to Jesus?

The wise men were wise because they knew who they were looking for. They didn’t give up, and when they found him, they worshipped him.

So my friends, I call you to be wise and seek Christ, the One who came looking for you in the first place.

I call you to be wise and don’t give up in your long obedience in the same direction.

I call you to be wise and give Christ homage day after day, not because of what Christ can do for you, but solely for the honor and glory due His name.

May God capture our hearts and minds as He did the wise men, so that from our hearts will pour overflowing love, adoration and gifts of untold value. And may it fill us with great joy as it did the wise men. Amen and amen.