



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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JANUARY 15, 2017
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

No Wise Guys Needed
Acts 4:32-37; Matthew 2:1-12

It is good to be back in worship today. Worship is such an integral part of our lives that when we are not able to be together—as happened last Sunday—the rest of the week feels out of kilter, unbalanced, and somewhat incomplete. I will admit that, just like you, I enjoy an occasional snow day—even on Sunday! When you know most folks are at home, hopefully enjoying a mandatory day of rest, when the world is wrapped in a white blanket that momentarily silences the harsher sounds of life, there is a contented feeling that settles around you. I enjoy having a day like that.

I did miss you—at least a little bit. No, I really did miss you . . . and I missed the Magi. Last Sunday was Epiphany Sunday. That is the Sunday when we read the story of how the Wise Men traveled from the East in search of a baby who was "born king of the Jews." We imagine them majestically arriving aboard their "ships of the desert," elegant robes draping their regal frames as they approach the humble home of Jesus and his parents. All movement in the area stops as they bend to walk through the low doorway and neighbors peer out of windows and hang over stone walls to catch a glimpse of these exotic visitors.

Last Sunday I missed hearing how these mysterious foreigners aroused Herod's interest in this unknown child and then took the back way to the road leading home. I missed that moment when they offered their gifts to Jesus and imagining the reaction of the toddler to the bling of gold and mystical aromas of frankincense and myrrh. Perhaps you missed it too for the story of Jesus' birth is not quite complete until the Magi arrive. Hear the story again:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah

was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1-12

There is no question that Matthew possessed the brilliant ability to tell a story! Through the homage of these sages, he captures the royal heritage Jesus shared with his ancestor King David and the collective hope of the Jewish people that God would raise up a new king for them. The gifts obviously foreshadow his life—gold befitting someone of royal birth, frankincense symbolic of his priestly calling, and myrrh foreshadowing his sacrificial death. Their story fits Jesus into the larger prophetic story of the Hebrew people. The key feature to the story, however, one not at all lost on Matthew's audience, was the fact that these visitors who had traveled a great distance over a long time to honor this Messiah were not themselves Jews. They were Gentiles. Ironically, the Magi bring the Jews the happy news that Jesus came for the rest of the world as well. They remind the Jews of their own calling through Abraham to share the Good News of God's love with all of the world.

The Magi also make us aware that even as a small child Jesus was a threat to the powers of injustice. You can almost hear the grin in his voice as Matthew tells us that Herod "was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him." Although Jesus did not grow up to overthrow the powers-that-be by

intimidation and the sword, his reign of love is still a threat to tyrants and governments who oppress their people in any way.

I missed the Magi last week, but missing them caused me to notice something about them—especially about their gift-giving. Some people are great at giving gifts. They think about a person's interests and needs, their likes and dislikes, and then choose the perfect gift for them. Not so the Magi. Their gifts were primarily symbolic and served a larger purpose, but they were definitely not suited for a two-year old boy. I am certain that Mary and Joseph appreciated the gold, but about all the frankincense and myrrh did was make their home smell rich and exotic. There is something else that stands out as well. The Magi came. They paid homage to Jesus. They offered their luxurious gifts. And they left, never to be heard from again. They came. They saw. They went home.

Luke tells the story of a different response to Jesus. This story is not found in his gospel. There he gives us the simple, heartfelt reaction of shepherds, angels, and parents to the birth of the Christ-child. The story I am thinking of is the one we heard earlier, a story that took place over three decades after Jesus was born, months, in fact, after his resurrection. The story is about Jesus' disciples, the people who followed him while he was alive and who continued to follow him after his death and resurrection. These were people who had seen and heard him, who talked to him and knew him. This is the story of people who were changed by him.

Luke tells us that the followers of Jesus brought gifts for the people in whom his life was manifest. They did not select a gift that was appropriate for a resurrected savior nor one that was proscribed by the laws of their religion. They did not give an amount based on either gross or net income. It was not a gift chosen from a list; instead, their gift was everything. They gave everything they had, they gave themselves, to Christ because they were followers—not just visitors—of Jesus. They gave themselves in service to one another and to the world because that is what they had seen Jesus do for them.

Luke tells us that they gave whatever they had and laid it at the apostles' feet and I imagine a great pile of money and objects growing by the minute as Peter, John, James, and the others looked on in amazement. It reminds me of that closing scene in *It's a Wonderful Life* when George Bailey has pretty much given his life to the people of Bedford Falls. When the unhappy, angry, selfish, and greedy Mr. Potter steals the Savings and Loan's

bank deposit, the people of the town, moved by George Bailey's own self-sacrificing generosity, respond by giving all they have to rescue the Savings and Loan--and George. Such generosity is the difference between being an admirer and being a follower. Wise men may recognize and give honor to a transformative leader, but only followers invest themselves to work with such a leader.

Discipleship is all about service: listening, learning, following, and doing. God in Christ does not ask us to act like the Magi and simply bring a gift to honor the Christ-child and go on our merry way. Jesus invites us to give ourselves completely to serving one another and the world so that it might be transformed into the community of God. Jesus calls us to be his disciples who follow him into daily service to one another, not wise guys who know when it is time to get out of town! He invites us to give the gift above all others, the perfect gift of ourselves. Amen.

January 15, 2017

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Sisters and brothers, let us lift our hearts in faith to the one who hears all prayers and holds close all those in need.

Holy God, we come before you now with humble hearts thanking you for the many gifts you have given. For beauty of the skies, the joy of human love, for family and friends, for music and art. Thank you for the gift of our church and for the light it shines to this community and beyond. Prosper and bless our work ten fold, O God, and help it to always be acceptable in your sight.

God of all nations, we thank you for your great power and might, for you are moving all history toward your good purposes and plans. Though nations wield economic, political and military power that seems to rule the day, we trust that you are stronger still. We pray for oppression and injustice to cease so that people everywhere may live in peace and dignity. We pray for all those who sit in the seats of power to learn your ways of mercy and kindness, Dear God. In our community, teach us to work together for the common good, caring for our neighbors and growing in understanding across the divide.

Gracious God, we know that you are at work among the least, the lost, and the last, in the things that are unseen, and that your heavenly reign does not swagger, but is subtle—coming among us in uncommon and often unnoticed ways. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear how and where you are moving and changing all things. Help us to look for your kingdom in the ways of children and others who are vulnerable among us, to seek you in the margins among those overlooked or ostracized. Humble us so that we can learn from those who are meek in all the earth.

Life-giving God, when our lives are dry and brittle, we trust that you can restore us to life, making us whole. We have mentioned those among us this morning with special needs and we pray for them in a particular way. Be near them even now, Dear Father, and grant them healing of body, mind and spirit and the assurance that you hold all heaven and earth in your loving hands. For anyone living with depression, chronic pain, or long-term illness, we ask for you healing and tender care. For those who have lost employment or the opportunity to be engaged with others in meaningful service, we pray for new opportunities to spring forth. For anyone who has come to an ending, whether sought or undesired, we pray that a new beginning will open that promotes growth and flourishing.

Finally, dear Father, no matter how small our faith is, we pray that you will give us strength in our service to you so that we may be faithful in sharing Christ's love and healing to a weary world. Help us to bring healing to all wounds, make whole all that is broken, speak truth to all illusion, and shed light in every darkness, that all creation will see your glory and know your Christ. Amen.

Amy Shortt, Minister of Music