

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Matthew 2:1-12

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.

SERMON

I know a man who took a six month leave of absence from his job. He spent 3 months in a monastery, and three months in France at Taize, a protestant retreat center. His time was spent in prayer, and the reading of scripture. He called his time a quest, a search for God.

I recently heard of another man who quit his job at 52 and enrolled in Seminary, not to become a pastor, but in order to find the truth about God.

Every year hundreds of people trek across the U.S. to the Cascade Mountains of Washington to spend time at Holden Village, a Lutheran retreat center. Many of those people are hoping to have a spiritual experience.

At the time of the birth of Jesus a group of scholars from Bagdad, perhaps Zoroastrian astrologers, journeyed across the desert following a star. This was not a matter of

doing research; this was not a sabbatical. They believed that a divine king was soon to be born and they wanted to experience it firsthand. Perhaps like those of us who go to work, come home, take care of our families and property, they said: Isn't there more to life than this...more than three meals a day, 8-10 hours of work and doing chores around the house?

Have you ever been or are you now in the midst of a search? Let's see what we can learn from the Magi, however many they happened to be. Matthew doesn't tell us there were three, only that there were three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh. Here are some observations.

They traveled as a group. They were a part of a small community. I think searching with others makes a lot of sense, rather than doing a solo. We need support in our journey. If you decide to go on a search, find one or more companions.

There were clues to the meaning of the universe in what we call nature, in this case, in the heavens. Philosophers and theologians refer to this as a general revelation. Rather than a voice speaking to an individual, the revelation, the sign, is available for all to see. It simply needs interpretation. The Psalmist puts it this way: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the skies proclaim his handiwork." (Psalm 19) In this situation it was the stars that alerted them to the birth of a new king. When you look at an ocean, or a mountain or even look at the sky on a clear night, you sense there is something, someone behind it all. However there is a limit to what nature can tell us. Though it gives you a sense of the scale of the world it doesn't name the source. It leads you wondering who the Creator happens to be. Though the stars gave the Magi general directions, they were unable to get them to the exact locale. For both of these concerns we need to do as the Magi did, to consult scripture.

Nature continues to give us a sense of the grandeur of God in the world, but the skies and the oceans can't teach us much about forgiveness. Nor can they teach us much about grace, something that is not a part of nature.

In the court of Herod the Biblical scholars answered questions about the place of the birth. Here is what the teachers said: He will be born in Bethlehem: for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

There are a number of puzzling or even ironical aspects to this story. The first is the response to the announcement from the Magi that a new king had been born, for they had seen his star in the east and had come to worship him. When King Herod heard this he was disturbed and all of Jerusalem with him. To summarize: The Magi were thrilled, and Herod was troubled. Isn't that always the

way it is with change? Some cheer change, others dread and oppose it. If you are on the bottom change means you may be able to alter positions. If you are on the top change usually means one thing: you will drop down. Mary addressed this before the birth of the new king: He will bring down the mighty from their thrones, and will lift up those of low degree.

This week there has been change in Madison and Washington D.C. on the political front. Some cheered it; others dreaded it. It depends on who holds the gavel. I hope we are all among those for whom the birth of the new king is good news. I trust we all understand that his birth brings new hope and new possibilities. Who will save us from our sins? Who will help us face death? Who offers possibilities of reconciliation between races and diverse people? The answer to all of this is: the new king.

In 1944 the poet, W.H. Auden, wrote a long piece called *The Christmas Oratorio*. In it each of the Wisemen tells why he follows the star. Melchior says: To discover how to be truthful now. Gaspar says: To discover how to be living now, and Balthazar chimes in: To discover how to be loving now is the reason I follow the star. Then all three speak together: "To discover how to be human now, is the reason we follow the star." That sounds about right. We follow God, we follow Christ, in order to know what it means to be fully and completely human. We follow God because we believe there is something more than our 9-5 world.

Here is another puzzling piece. Once the scholars identified the place of the birth why was it that none of them traveled with the Magi? Once the Magi left what did they do? Did they go back to their books? If you had studied all of your life and knew the answer to one of the most important questions a Jew could ask wouldn't you think you would get a horse and go the seven miles (yes it is just seven miles from Jerusalem to Bethlehem) and find out for yourself? What kind of scholarship is it that wants to keep the world at arm's reach?

When people tell you they are on a search, or when they tell you they are trying to understand God, is it a book thing or a life thing? Is it pure information, or do they intend to do something with their information?

The story has at least two endings. The Magi, with the help of the Hebrew scriptures and the light from heaven found the manger, found the young couple and found the baby. They were surprised that he was not born in a palace, that a barn was his home. They gave him their gifts because they were convinced that He was the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation and that in him all things in heaven and earth were created, things visible and invisible, including thrones, dominions, rulers and powers...that all things have been created through him and for him. He himself was before all things and in him all things hold together.

They believed the amazing claim that the one they were looking for could be found in the manger of Bethlehem. What we are all looking for, what we want, need

and hunger for is the babe lying at the breast of Mary. End of search.

The gifts they offered were, gold, incense and myrrh. Growing up I heard that each of these gifts had a very specific meaning. Gold symbolized virtue and kingship, incense symbolized prayer, and myrrh, suffering. It is possible that this explanation is right. However, not long ago I read an article about Zoroastrian priests. The article said that all three of these items were used in their religious rituals and their prayer life. If this is true, we might find a different meaning to the gifts. It might mean that we offer to God the ordinary things that we use in our lives. It means that you who are carpenters, plumbers, masons, and electricians can offer the tools of your trade, the tools that allow you to do honest and quality work. You who are teachers offer your lesson plans and your computers. You who are cooks offer your soups, your desserts and your special dishes. You who are parents offer your hands and your heart, the great gifts with which you guide and care and touch the lives of your children, the most important task you will ever have in your lifetime.

In the marvelous story called the *Juggler of God Barnaby*, an old vaudeville performer, finds himself living in a monastery at the end of his life. He watches how all of the artists prepare a special gift for the Christ child, a gift that is to be unveiled on the night of Christ's birth. Barnaby, who works as a custodian, has nothing to give. Finally, he takes all of his juggling tools, pins, balls and assorted items, and performs a juggling act on Christmas eve in the chapel of the church. He does it so well that the statue of the baby Jesus comes to life and claps his hands. The one man who observes it all says: Everything sings of the glory of God. That is true. Therefore, the gifts we offer God are the gifts we have been given, our hearts, our skills. We offer all the gifts of love that are at our disposal.

I said that there were two endings. The second ending comes as a warning. There are those who oppose the birth of the new king and want to do him damage. God warns the parents of the new king via a dream, and both the Magi and the parents flee.

The same response continues today. Some cheer the birth of the new king, some oppose it. Opposition may come in the form of ridicule, or it might come in the form of persecution, the kind that took place recently in Alexandria, Egypt. Just know this: not everyone sees the birth as good news. We do. We celebrate his birth. We announce it to the world. A new king is born, he is the king of peace, the king of hope and the king of love. Alleluia. © 2011.