**First Sunday after Epiphany**

**Sunday January 9, 2022**

**“Lessons from the Wisemen” (Matthew 2:1-12)**

In the calendar of the church year, January the 6th was *Epiphany,* the holy day that marks the end of the Christmas season. *Epiphany* gets its name from the Greek word (*epiphaneia*) which means *manifestation* or *appearance,* so it celebrates the revelation or the manifestation of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In Western Christianity, the story of the visit of the Magi to the Christ child is contemplated for it marks the moment when Jesus was revealed the Gentiles (non-Jews). Epiphany, then, retells the story of these foreign sages who followed God’s sign, were instructed by the Scriptures, and worshipped Jesus. The message of Epiphany is that this heavenly Child belongs to the whole world. Hence, there is a strong mission focus to Epiphany, challenging us to reach out the world beyond our doors, outside the walls of our church building. For instance, the rector of an Anglican church where I once gave a series of talks told me that at Epiphany, he rearranges the chairs in the sanctuary to face toward the doors to remind his congregation that they are called to go out into the world. At the same time, the actions of the Wisemen can teach us a great deal about faithfully responding to God. So, this morning I want to reflect on the lessons that we can learn from the Wisemen in relation to our commitment to God.

The opening verse of Matthew chapter two sets the stage what follows by indicating the time, the place, and the main characters of the story, “*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem*” (2:1). Matthew’s emphasis on *Bethlehem* as the birthplace of Jesus is significant since it was the ancestral home of King David. So, Jesus fulfilled the messianic hopes for a Davidic king who would shepherd God’s people (2:6). This passage subtly shifts from the actual narrative of Christ’s birth to depict the actions of the Magi and King Herod in response to the birth of the Messiah. Matthew begins by giving the motivation for Magi’s actions in a series of statements. When they arrived in Jerusalem after their long journey, they asked, “*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?* *We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him*” (2:2). Their quest for the newborn king of the Jews was the result of their observation of a rising star and their subsequent interpretation of its significance. Based on this knowledge they journeyed to Jerusalem “*to worship*” the newborn King (2:2). *The Wisemen were earnestly seeking Jesus and they took considerable action to find him*. This is an important lesson for us in our faith journeys. *If we are serious about having a more vital relationship with Jesus, then it will require real effort and action on our part*. Matthew does not tell us exactly where the Magi came from, but it is implied that they were stargazers from the east who had travelled from distant lands in search of the newborn King. They observed the star, but they acted upon this knowledge. They simply didn’t remain safe and comfortable in their homeland, but they took an arduous and dangerous journey in their quest for Jesus. It was a bit of an inconvenience for them, to say the least. Their example gives us a noteworthy challenge: *if these outsiders to Judaism were willing to undertake this onerous and lengthy journey to find the Messiah, how much more should we be willing to take decisive steps in order to grow closer to Jesus. Like the Wisemen, we need to be seeking Jesus with effort, action, and enthusiasm.*

The Wisemen were earnestly seeking Jesus, but *they also paid careful attention to God*. God gave them a sign in the heavens, a star, and they discerned enough from that to go to Jerusalem and to seek the newborn king of the Jews. Upon their arrival in Jerusalem, they inquired about the newborn King, and they were given much more information to help them reach their destination. But this information came from an unlikely source. When the Magi began asking about the newborn King, Herod and the people of Jerusalem reacted with terror at the news (2:3). Threatened by the possibility of a rival to his throne, Herod hatched an evil plan to get rid of this threat.

The cruel King first summoned the leading priests and the teachers of religious law in order to gain information about the Messiah’s birthplace (2:4). Herod asked them, “*Where is the Messiah to be born*?” and the religious experts replied, “In *Bethlehem*,” and they cited two passages from the Old Testament (Micah 5:2 and 2 Samuel 5:2). After getting this information, he then dispatched the Magi to Bethlehem to search for the child (2:7-8). Herod was attempting to manipulate the Magi’s faithful quest to suit his own horrible scheme, even pretending to share their desire *to worship* the newborn King (2:8), yet his true intent was murder.

Again, the Magi, the religious outsiders of the story acted upon this important news, and they immediately departed for Bethlehem. The religious leaders, on the other hand, did nothing except cite these Old Testament passages and make their exit from the scene. They had access to this special revelation from God, yet they failed to act upon this knowledge. The Wisemen, however, heard God and acted accordingly. When they left for Bethlehem, God gave them another sign, the guiding star appeared to them once again and led them to the house where Jesus was (2:9).

At the conclusion of the story, after their visit to Jesus, the Magi once again paid close attention to God’s direction. In verse 12 we read, “*When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod.*” Unaware of Herod’s ill intent toward the newborn King, the Wisemen likely planned to return to him with the report of what they discovered in Bethlehem. But God intervened and communicated to them in a dream. He directed them to return to their homeland by a different route and to avoid all contact with the wicked King. Once again, the Wisemen listened to God and obeyed his instructions. Throughout this passage the Magi serve as examples of a faithful response to God. They demonstrated a perceptivity of and an openness to God at several key junctures of the story. God guided the Magi by means of a star, the Scriptures, and a dream and at each stage they followed to where he was leading them. The Wisemen’s response to God offers an instructive spiritual lesson for us. Each of us must ask ourselves some important questions: *Are we listening to God*? *Are we discerning his direction for our lives? Are we following where he is leading? Like the Magi, we need to pay careful attention to God, take action, and follow his guidance.*

But ultimately, it is the main purpose for the Wisemen’s journey that is the most pressing thing for us to do. When they arrived in Jerusalem they asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and *have come to worship him”* (2:2). They took that long and demanding journey for the sole purpose of *worshipping Jesus.* Following God’s guidance, they fulfilled that sublime goal as we read in verse 11, “*They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh*.” Their worship of Jesus was evident in two ways: a posture of submission and a sacrificial offering; they knelt before him, and they gave him gifts. This makes me think of Paul’s words in Romans 12:1 and 2. Listen to his words as I read from Eugene Peterson’s translation of this passage, “*So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you*.” This is what true worship is all about. It is not just what we do on Sunday morning, it involves every day, every moment of our lives. *Like the Wisemen, we need to worship Jesus by offering him our gifts.*

At the dawning of this New Year,

• Let’s learn from the Wisemen

• Let’s earnestly seek Jesus and draw closer to him

• Let’s be attentive to God’s guidance and faithfully follow him

• Let’s truly worship Jesus and offer him our very lives

May the Light of God guide you to Bethlehem so that you may find your kneeling place.