

Wonder, love and praise. A sermon preached on January 7, 2018 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder.

Lessons ISAIAH 60:1-7

JOHN 1:1-7

MATTHEW 2:1-12

From the middle Ages on, Christmas pageants include the wise men or the magi which Matthew describes in this morning's Gospel Lesson. They are usually pictured in capes, hats and carrying beautifully tooled presentation gift boxes – **treasure chests** Matthew says.

By the 8th c, tradition gives them obscure and mysterious sounding names – Balthazar, Melchior and Gaspar

Tradition fills in details like – they were learned men in the sciences – astronomy, astrology – the

notice and following of the star leading them
toward Bethlehem.

They take seriously dreams and visions.

Matthew does not detail their journey from
the East.

But in Bible times,

Any journey was dangerous

I wonder, were they tempted to give up.

20th c poet T.S. Eliot believes this was a real
possibility – his first stanza of his Journey of the
Magi

**A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed,
refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.**

**There were times when we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the
terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor
and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack
of shelters,
And the cities dirty and the towns
unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high
prices:
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears,
saying
That this was all folly.**

Yet the sense of folly or not,

Something within them will not let them give in or
give up in following the star.

Upon their arrival in Jerusalem,

Their enquiry about the star and the child to whom it points succeeds in throwing King Herod into panic and suspicion

For these wise men from the East are not the usual itinerant wanderers

They are Very Important People

Secretly (a detail in verse 7 not to be missed) – the

Wise Men are given what few others receive – a private audience with King Herod

To them then is given a request

Go, and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word that I may also go and pay him homage (vs. 8)

I wonder how long it took the wise men to see through Herod and his seemingly legitimate request.

We are not specifically told.

But as the story unfolds

The wise men do not question the subsequent
warning dream about not returning to see Herod

The wise men leave Herod's palace, continue
to follow the star

When the star stops – so do they!

What happens next as described by Matthew
is wondrous,

Magical and mysterious

There is no question in their minds that this is
the object of their journey

Out therefore come the safely secured and hidden
gifts

--the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (vs 11)

Definitely not baby friendly gifts – but in the plans
and purposes of God – necessary gifts

As mysteriously as the wise men come onto
the main stage of the Christmas drama

They move off with equal mystery

They left for their own country by another road

What does this story say to us?

What important things are highlighted in this visit
and actions of the mysterious wise men?

Come back to 11th verse

**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. (vs. 11)**

We do not know for certain one way or the other whether the wise men were believers in 'the promised Messiah.'

Yet, here in the presence of Baby Jesus – **they kneel down and pay him homage**

Both are behaviours and actions of *respect* and *humility*.

The wise men say NOTHING

Everything is conveyed by their actions

They are in the presence of One greater than them

One before whom, one need not speak

The *meeting with the Holy*

To use John Wesley's hymn phrase, the wise men are *lost in wonder, love and praise*

It is a time and place where the only right response is RESPECT, HUMILITY, AWE, and SILENCE AND WONDER!

It is a time and place where they realize that all their worldly power,

Learning and authority are as nothing compared to what they see before them in the manger

What they see is more than just a little baby!!!

It is no secret that our world is inundated with noise, busyness, hurry

Awe, silence, humility, respect for and

understanding that this world is not centred on us

and our agendas are at low ebb.

Part of this is caused by the technology and social media revolution.

For example – when I began parish ministry, I never had to announce at the beginning of funerals and weddings – please either turn your cell phones off or set them to silent.

Both my girls set their cell phones down on restaurant tables and are prepared to text throughout most social gatherings – after all, someone might need them,
Someone might need to tell them a funny story,
Or they might have to Instagram someone!!!

The technology and the social media are with us – so this is not a diatribe against either.

But what a sad commentary it is that we have to be reminded to turn away from our need to be connected all the time.

How sad it is that even for short bursts of time so many cannot fully engage in wonder, awe, listening for and marveling about the holy

About God,

Why? Because someone might need us OR we might need to share a story!!!

An eagerness to seek out and to expect evidence of the Holy – you cannot do that if you are wired or connected all the time

Thin places – where God is especially present do not happen as often to the ones who are always texting, waiting for texts

For texting all the time, makes most of us twitchy.

And twitchy is not among the Spiritual disciplines – the disciplines are designed to help us move away from twitchiness and anxiety

To a place where we can see God more clearly, be more expectant in listening to him.

I believe that 11th verse of Matthew 2 also reminds us of some *giving basics*.

The wise men displayed a generosity Baby Jesus that we *would do well to try and follow*.

Basic #1 – *these were not second best, regifted any old thing will do gifts.*

Even by mysterious Wise Men standards – the gold, frankincense and myrrh were lavish gifts.

Question: when we give, whether that is of our time, our expertise or our capital – what motivates that giving?

Seeing a need we believe we can help alleviate?

Thankfulness to God for his many gifts to us?

Or – guilt,

because we want to look good.

The former will always result in lavish generosity,

The latter will always result worrying whether we will have enough.

Basic #2 – *giving to God is not measured by amount or figures in a ledger – it is about the heart.*

Frankly, I am not as convinced God wants our money as much as he wants our hearts.

For when God has our hearts – everything else will flow from that – our priorities,

Our perspective,

How we spend our time,

our money and in what we invest our lives!

When we give God our hearts

Say yes, to Jesus as Lord and Saviour and act as this is in fact the case,

One of the things that happens is we begin to *see and recognize* examples of his provision.

We see our lives as more richly blessed than we thought them ever to be.

We become more sensitive to the marginalized, the disenfranchised,

We are prepared to say without arrogance or one upmanship as we look at the marginalized – there but for the grace of God go I.

We pay closer attention to God's promises

We cease being apologetic or rationalize seeking his will.

God no longer is that disengaged remote deity we may once have thought him to be. ..

But rather One who has always been GOD WITH US.

I like to think the gold, frankincense and myrrh were heart gifts from the wise men.

I like to think that the Wise Men did not remain silent about what they had seen, experienced and how they felt in the presence of the Holy.

I like to think that they were changed by being in the presence of Jesus.

Yes, that is all conjecture, but it is not beyond the realm of possibility is it, when one considers what God can do in a life....

In Giving God our hearts –we really do open ourselves in a new way to becoming the people God so eagerly wants us to be.

That question remains open ended -HOW WILL
WE RESPOND TO THE GOD WHO HAS GIVEN
US SO MUCH IN JESUS CHRIST.

However brief the moment

Presently as you take the symbols of broken body
and shed blood,

HOW do you RESPOND TO THE GOD WHO HAS
already GIVEN and continues to give US SO
MUCH IN JESUS CHRIST.

Today? as you leave this place

And tomorrow?

And the day after that and so on.

That's the call and that's the challenge!!!