



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“OVERWHELMED”

Scripture Lessons: Matthew 2:1-12

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, January 3, 2010.

Just a few weeks ago on the second Sunday of Advent Dr. Massie shared with us the parallels between preparing for the arrival of a baby and preparing for the birth of Jesus. And while I certainly consider Dr. Massie to be an expert in preparing for the birth of a child, that is an area where I don't have much experience. However, this past Tuesday I was able to visit with some friends who just welcomed their second child into the family. How wonderful it was getting to meet their daughter Lily. I am not sure their son was too sold on the idea of sharing his mother with someone else, but he was learning. Since I have a younger sister, I can certainly relate. During our time together, I was impressed by the calm confidence and easygoing manner of our friends in the midst of a growing family and amazed by the wonder of new life. The day of our visit, their daughter Lily was only eleven days old.

And when I picture the story of the Wise Men visiting the Christ child that is about the age I have in my mind. Maybe it's because there are twelve days from Christmas Day to Epiphany. Or maybe it's all of the Christmas pageants and plays where the Wise Men seem to arrive just after Mary gives birth. Whatever the case, I picture the baby Jesus as, well, a baby, a newborn. This fits well with Luke's account of Jesus' birth where the shepherds find the baby Jesus still in the manger. But Matthew's account doesn't tell us that the Wise Men arrive so soon. In fact some Biblical scholars believe that Jesus was almost two years old when the Wise Men came to worship.

Unfortunately, we try to harmonize Matthew and Luke's birth stories. Maybe it's for the sake of being able to tell just a single Christmas story. Bringing together the shepherds and the Wise Men certainly makes a great nativity scene and Christmas pageant. But this morning, let's bookmark the Gospel of Luke and focus ourselves on the story as presented by Matthew. According to Matthew, there is no long journey that has brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem; they are simply living there. The text does not hint of a stable. In fact, the Wise Men find the family in a house, where they probably have lived all along.

This Wednesday we will be celebrating Epiphany. The word epiphany means appearance or manifestation, and this celebration marks the first manifestation of Jesus to the Gentiles, specifically the Wise Men. Interestingly enough in the early church, Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany were the important holy days. The importance of celebrating Christmas came along later. While it does not receive the attention that Christmas does, Epiphany is meant to be a time of great joy. The savior of both Jew and Gentile – the savior of all has come! Did you hear the joy in the reading from Isaiah? “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...your heart shall thrill and rejoice.” Did you hear the joy in Matthew? When the Wise Men saw the star, they were overwhelmed with joy. They had found the location of the one who has been born king of the Jews. Like the merchant in Jesus' parable who found a pearl of great value, and the women at the tomb on Easter morning, the Wise Men are filled with great joy. Epiphany should be a time of rejoicing.

Then why is this post-Christmas Day time of year depressing for so many people? I am not talking about clinical depression, but instead the overwhelming feelings of sadness that occur during this time

of year from the bills that have accumulated, the end of Christmas celebrations, the weather, and for me, the end of the college football season. I believe that January is one of the most depressing months of the year. Dr. Cliff Arnall, a U.K. psychologist, believes that January 24 is the most depressing day of the year, and he has the research to prove it. His model is: $[W + (D-d)] \times TQ / [M \times NA]$. Did you catch that? Okay, let me break that down for you. The equation has seven variables: weather (W), debt (D), monthly salary (d), time since Christmas (T), time since failed quit attempt (Q; referring to New Year's resolutions), low motivational levels (M), and the need to take action (NA). The formula was developed to help a travel company analyze when people book holidays and holiday trends. From his research Dr. Arnall realized that the majority of people break their healthy resolutions six to seven days into the New Year (that will be this Wednesday or Thursday), and even many of the most dedicated have failed by the third week. By January 24, the last warmth of the holiday season has ended. Dr. Arnall says, "Following the initial thrill of New Year's celebrations and changing over a new leaf, reality starts to sink in. The realization coincides with the dark clouds rolling in and the obligation to pay off Christmas credit card bills."¹ January is not an easy month for many to be sure. What are we to do? One article I read says the only solution is planning a trip to some warm Caribbean location, although that certainly wouldn't help with the bills. While the beach would be great, instead let's learn from the Wise Men.

We certainly have heard this story before haven't we? We know it well! We even sing a hymn about the story: "We Three Kings of Orient Are." Three kings come to worship Jesus. Wait a minute, Matthew never said anything about the number three or the men being kings, but instead that Wise Men or astrologers came to worship Jesus. As you may know the traditional number of three probably comes from the three gifts that are brought to Jesus, and the title of king comes from a later application of Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72. And while the Wise Men weren't kings themselves, they came to worship the child who had been born "king of the Jews." Even though they are probably unfamiliar with Micah's prophecy of a Bethlehem born ruler, their study of the stars has led them to Jerusalem. I don't doubt that the Wise Men are wise in their study of the stars. Their arrival in Jerusalem confirms this. But who would go into King Herod's territory inquiring about the birthplace of the one who is a threat to Herod's power? Herod was known for his violence; who would come into Jerusalem asking about Jesus' birth? Evidently these Wise Men.

The Wise Men remind us that we too need to take risks in searching for Jesus. These astrologers were not even in the Jewish faith community – they were outsiders who left their homeland in search of the Christ child. But nevertheless, they studied the stars and interpreted them better than anyone else in the world. And using their information, they took the risk and followed the star to wherever it led them, even stepping foot into King Herod's territory and inquiring about Jesus' birth. As followers of Christ, we must be studying God's Word and willing to use our knowledge of the Bible to lead our search for God's presence among us. Are we willing to be like the Wise Men and take risks to follow where God is leading?

About a year and a half ago, one member of our church took a big risk in following where God was leading him: he signed up to be a high school youth advisor. God had been calling him to work with youth through the encouraging words of his wife, but he had been hesitant to accept the call, not knowing if he had the right skills for the job. After a year of working with the youth he told me that it would be difficult to imagine not serving as a youth advisor; he enjoyed it. He took the risk and followed the star to where God was leading him, and he and our youth are the better for it.

Another member of our church saw God's star rise in the sky and decided to follow its leading. At first the star appeared to be stopping over the Teach for America program that would enable her to serve in

¹ Carlile, Jennifer, "Jan. 24 Called Worst Day of the Year," [http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6847012/], December 31, 2009.

United States schools and help educate children facing extreme poverty. However, the star kept rising and eventually God called her to teach kindergarten in the Dominican Republic. This year she is teaching children and sharing the love of Jesus Christ. She took the risk and followed the star.

Of course, King Herod gets word of the Wise Men and is greatly disturbed along with all of Jerusalem. Herod feels threatened by the divine kingship of Jesus. So Herod consults the Jewish religious leaders, as he himself is not a Jew, and learns that the Christ child will be born in Bethlehem, according to the prophet Micah. In secret, Herod calls for the Wise Men and shares with them the location of the Christ child. Once they find the boy, they are to send word to Herod so that he too may visit and show his respect. Just in case the Wise Men fail him, Herod finds out the exact time when the star had appeared. It's this information that Herod later uses when he orders for the death of all children in Bethlehem under two years old. Following Herod's instructions, the Wise Men followed the star and were overwhelmed with joy when it stopped in the sky. They entered the house and saw Jesus and Mary and worshipped the child, opening their treasure chests and offering gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These are surely strange gifts for a child, however they point to Jesus' future. Gold is a gift fit for a king. Frankincense is used in temple worship and myrrh is anointing oil – both perfect for a priest.

For most of us, gift giving is an important part of our celebration of Christmas. Even before the season of Advent, we are making lists and purchasing gifts. The Christian tradition of giving gifts began with the Wise Men and is a reminder of the best gift that was given: God's gift of his Son Jesus Christ. The Wise Men remind us that we too have gifts to offer the Christ child. No doubt most of you have heard O. Henry's story "The Gift of the Magi," where a young couple in a tough economic situation exchanges gifts at Christmas. The young woman sells her beautiful, long hair to purchase a chain for her husband's watch. Ironically her husband sells his watch in order to buy her a set of combs. Henry closes his story with the following:

The magi, as you know, were wise men – wonderfully wise men – who brought gifts to the [Christ child]. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.²

Despite the irony of the story, the young couple offered to each other their best. We too are called to offer our best to God, using our time, talents, and treasure to worship our Lord. Nothing but our best will do.

I can certainly relate with anyone who is hesitant to share his or her gifts with Jesus. When I was in high school, I began to learn how to play guitar. Anyone who has learned how to play a musical instrument knows how slowly improvement seems to come. I would learn one guitar chord and then it would take me ten seconds to move one finger at a time to the next chord's locations. It was frustrating and a little embarrassing. To my horror a girl in the youth group found out that I was learning how to play guitar, and she told my youth director who then asked me to lead worship music on Sunday nights. My first thought was, "yeah, right!" But how thankful I am that I took that risk, followed where God was leading me, and shared my gift. And God has certainly blessed me for it.

² Henry, O., "The Gift of the Magi," [http://www.auburn.edu/~vestmon/Gift_of_the_Magi.html], December 31, 2009.

After worshipping the Christ child, the Wise Men leave for home. But God's guidance in their lives has not ended. The God who led them to Jesus by the star warns them not to return to Herod, but instead to return to their homeland by another road. And that's just it. When we take risks in seeking Christ with our lives, kneel down in worship at his feet, and offer him our best gifts we always return home by a different road. Our lives have been changed.

Our reading of God's story reminds us that Epiphany isn't just about joy. Isaiah speaks of the darkness that shall cover the earth before God's light shines. Matthew details the slaughtering of the innocent children in Herod's attempt to remove any threat to his kingship. Herod's actions are replayed today by the resistance of this world to the divine kingship of Jesus. And we Christians cannot forget that it was the chief priests and scribes in Jerusalem that quoted Scripture telling of the location of Jesus' birth, but who then failed to make the journey.

The coming month will be filled with its own challenges. The credit card bills from Christmas will be due. We'll struggle with keeping our New Year's resolutions. The special times spent with friends and family will be a memory. The weather may be cold and bleak. Some of us will even battle sickness and death or hold hands with those who do. But if we take the risk of searching for Christ with our lives, kneel down and worship him, and offer him our best, in midst of it all, how can we not be overwhelmed with joy, just as when the Wise Men realized they had found the Savior of all?