

"Legacy"

Matthew 2:1-12

A Sermon by Dr. Jim Davis

First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

January 2, 2010

The Wise men. They're the mystery men of Christmas, aren't they? We don't know the country where they came from. The story says only that they came "from the East". And that could mean a hundred places. So their nationality is a mystery.

We don't know their names either. Tradition calls them Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. But tradition only starts calling them that in the 6th century. So their names too are a mystery.

But most mysterious of all, we don't even know how many of them there were. For the number's never given to us. Only the fact that they brought with them gifts. And from these few details, poets, artists, and hymn writers have composed a picture of the wise men. A picture that fascinates and frightens all at the same time.

J. Barrie Shepherd, the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New York City, captures the picture as he tells a story about a Christmas pageant and a young boy who was there to watch it for the very first time. "His parents" he writes, "had carefully seated him on the aisle so he could see each of the characters as they made their entrance.

And soon, the boy caught on to what was happening. He started glancing back over his shoulder periodically to try and see who was standing in the darkness about to come down the aisle. But when he caught sight of the wise men, he spun around in his seat. 'Don't look now' he whispered to his mother, "but God just got here ... only I'm not sure which one He is!"

Majesty and mystery; that's the appearance created by the magi. And it is a little bit like God, isn't it? But no! These men aren't God. God's lying over there in a manger. And these men are called "wise men. Because, well that's what they were. I wonder though. Did the title stick for a moment in Matthew's mind? Did his hand hesitate before he put pen to paper? For after all these three men were gentiles not jews. And besides they were magi. It's shorthand for magicians, spell-casters, stargazers. But in either case the profession of these

men involved a practice God commanded Israel to stay far away from. So you see, in Matthew's mind, they already had two strikes against them. They were pagans and they were astrologers.

But they were wise men nonetheless. For they paid attention to the world around them, and what God was doing in the world. They were wise enough to do that. And they were wise enough to notice when something new appeared. A large, bright star in the dark night sky. They were wise enough to pay attention to it. And they were wise enough to connect its appearance to a promise they had heard, perhaps from Jews who had traveled to their land, a promise that one day "a star would come forth from Jacob, and a scepter rise out of Israel" to rule the nations.

For all these reasons, to Matthew's mind, they deserved to be called wise men. And for one more reason. For once they had seen the star and made the connection, they did one more thing. They left their normal lives behind them and went to search for the one thing they knew they needed to find.

What was it Jesus said once to his disciples? "The kingdom of heaven" he said "is like a pearl of great price. When you find it, give away all you have to give. But get it. For truly I tell you there is no one who leaves anything in this world, houses or lands, who will not receive a hundredfold now ... and in the age to come eternal life."

So yes, these men were wise. But even wise men sometimes do foolish things. For even though they were looking for the right thing, they went to the wrong place. They went to Herod's palace. Why? Because that's where their wisdom led them. They assumed that the place to look for a newborn king would be in a king's house.

But the wisdom of this world is frequently shown to be foolishness in God's kingdom. So at this point the story becomes hugely ironic. Wise men looking in the wrong place and not even knowing it! It's almost humorous. Except that it isn't. It's deadly serious.

Because Herod was a wise man too you see. Wise enough to recognize in the naive request of these three seekers from the east, a potential threat to his throne. Wise enough to call together his trusted advisors and learn the locale of the baby's birth. Wise enough to formulate a political plan that would allow him to use these wise men and their search to his advantage. And the amazing thing is that the wise men never saw it. There's not a hint in the story that they ever suspected Herod's motives until the very end.

So I think you have to ask yourself the question, "Why?" And when you do I think you'll discover the answer is. Because, these three wise men were wise men with a blind spot - just like us.

Oh they had good intentions. They wanted to live wisely. They wanted to act wisely. They wanted to invest their time and their treasure wisely. Just like we do. But in their quest to live wisely they used only their own wisdom. And they ended up getting used. Used to do someone else's dirty work.

It was like that, you know, for Werner von Braun. He was one of the first wise men of the "space age." And his life began with the best of intentions. At the age of thirteen, a relative gave him a Christmas present, a book about rockets. And he began to dream of building rockets to help humans explore space.

Though he hadn't been a particularly good student in either physics or math, he dedicated himself from that point on to rocket science. And by 1934 he had built rockets that went higher than any that had gone before. But 1934 was also the year that von Braun began to be used by the Nazis. They flattered him and offered to fund his continuing research. And all they asked was that he share his discoveries with them.

According to his biography, Von Braun believed usable military rockets were at least two decades away in 1934. But that was his blind spot. For before the war's end the V-2 missile became operational. And the only way von Braun could prevent himself from being used further was to get himself arrested. So he did.

Later, in 1971, reflecting back on his "blind spot" and the way the Nazis had used him von Braun wrote, "Science by itself has no moral dimension. The drug which cures when taken in small doses may kill when taken in excess. Thus it makes no sense to ask a scientist whether his drug is "good" or "bad". Everything depends on how it is used."

And von Braun's right. Good isn't a product of good intentions. It's a product of good intentions put to good use. Good isn't produced by taking good intentions and using our own wisdom to try and turn them into good actions. Going ahead with what we think is right. No good, my friends, true good is produced by using another kind of wisdom. The wisdom that comes from giving our attention to God.

And that's what finally saved the wise men. For after leaving Herod, they gave God back their undivided attention. And what happened? Well three things actually.

First they received guidance. For the star they had rise began to move. Now, "it went," the Bible says, "ahead of them." They hadn't expected it. Who could have predicted such a thing? But when they gave God their attention, that's what happened. And the star gave them better direction than their own wisdom. For it led them to the place they were really trying to reach. All because they gave their attention back to God.

Second they received joy. Exceeding great joy, the King James Bible says. Our version says simply, "they were overjoyed." Why? Because the good they discovered was more than the good they thought were looking for. That's why. They were looking for a king. They discovered God. But that's how it is with a God who's always waiting to give to us more than we can ever imagine or hope for. And that's what happens when stop living life with our own wisdom and give our attention back to God. We get joy. First we get guidance and then we get joy.

But there's third thing the wise men receive in the story. It came to them, Matthew says, in a dream. It was a warning. And because of the warning the wise men were finally about to see through their blind spot. They were able to recognize where things were going. They were able to see how their lives were being used by Herod. They were able to understand what would happen if they simply stayed on course and followed their own wisdom in their lives.

So what about us? Wise men and women of 2011? Wise men and women with the good intentions for our lives. But with blind spots too. Some we know about and some we don't. How will we try to do the good we want to do in the year ahead?

Will we trust in our own wisdom? If so then we may find our good intentions still with us at year's end. And discover that all year long our time and talent and treasure has been used to do someone else's work.

Or will we take a different direction? And seek to give our attention to God. And ask God to tell us how we can do far more with our lives than we could have ever thought possible by ourselves.

You see, my friends, those are the questions I hope you'll think about with me not only this morning but throughout this year. That's why our theme for worship in 2011 will be something we're calling "Legacy."

A few years ago now, someone important to me said to me, "You can decide Jim. You can decide to live a life. Or you can decide to leave a legacy. And the way to leave a legacy is to give your attention to what God is doing in the world and find a way to take part in it."

That's the wise men did, isn't it? They gave their attention to what God was doing in their world. They found a way to take part in it. They found a way to do that personally. And they received guidance. And they received joy. And they received a warning that changed their lives. And I believe God is offering those same gifts to each of us this morning.

I believe He is calling us beyond the continuation of our lives. I believe He is calling us to a transformation of our lives. I believe He is asking us to recognize what He is doing in our world and begin to play a larger part in it.

I believe God is asking us to move past living. I believe He is asking us to leave a legacy. I believe He is asking us to think together and to reflect individually about how to do that. I believe God is trying to say something very personal, very powerful to each of us this morning through the story of the magi. And I hope we have ears to hear.

Let's pray ...