



First United Methodist Church - Moweaqua, Illinois
222 North Hanover St., Moweaqua, IL 62550 Phone: 217-768-4860 www.umcmow.com

Leaving Xmas A Different Way

Matthew 2:1 -12

Welcome to this first Sunday of the New Year. I trust that one of your resolutions for this year is to be in worship every week. Good for you. That's one resolution you've kept so far.

I heard about one poor fellow who decided to make only resolutions he could keep this year. He resolved to gain weight, to stop exercising, to read less and watch more TV, to procrastinate more, to use his credit cards freely, to watch as much football as possible, not to date Jennifer Lopez, and to never make New Year's resolutions again.

Maybe he got something there. Why subject ourselves to more feelings of guilt and inadequacy then we already deal with?

But besides being the fourth day of the New Year, today is also Epiphany Sunday, the Sunday nearest to January 6 when the church observes the festival of Epiphany...the arrival of the Wise men in Bethlehem, the birthplace of the infant Jesus.

Now first of all we need to ask ourselves who were these Wise men? Well no one really knows. In fact we don't even know how many Wise Men there were. We only say three because they brought three specific material gifts...gold, frankincense and myrrh...but who knows for sure. There many have been 20 of them who chipped in on three gifts or two who were extremely generous...However, we do know that the Bible calls these strange visitors from the East: Magi—Wise men...and history tells us that there were Magi in Persia. They were the Harry Potters...the diviners..the wizards..the Gandalfs, the Dumbledores, the Merlins of that day and age. They studied the stars and they practiced magic. In fact if you take the letter "c" off the word magic...you have the word magi. They were a group of Persians who were honored in their society for the special powers they possessed. So there you have it. They were really a strange sort of people to show up at the birth of the Jewish messiah. Weren't they?

The story of the Wise Men is generally lumped into Manger Scenes as if everything happened all on the same night. But if we read our scripture carefully....we will see that the Wise Men probably began their journey the night Christ was born but they did not find the child for several months perhaps even years after Jesus birth. Why do I say that? Well take a look what Herod does...he orders all the baby boys under the age of two murdered. Why the age of two? The scriptures tells us that the age was chosen by Herod "it was in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi." Some scholars think he chose this number because the Wise Man first saw the star two years earlier... Secondly...the scripture clearly says "On coming to the house"

..Mary and Joseph and Jesus were living in a house when the Wise Men arrived. They were no longer located in the stable... So chances are...that the Wise Men arrived several months if not years after the child was born.

And what was the purpose of their coming? To teach the baby the magic arts? No they came with a pure intention. They had read the stars and portents and from them they had learned that the promised Messiah had been born. They came to give the gift of heart felt worship to the child. Nothing more. They weren't there to get anything out of the baby. They just came to worship him. To gaze at the child Jesus in awe and love. They were essentially the wrong people...doing the right thing.

And what about the right people? The priests and the Jewish authorities....Didn't they recognize the signs? Once they were alerted to the baby Messiah's presence didn't they go and worship the child too?

Not according to the Bible. Other than Simeon and Anna.. the two old people in the temple we talked about last week, the right people...the chief priests and elders....the Jewish King Herod...were not to pleased to hear of the Messiah's birth. Which is a curious thing. This was something that all Jewish people were supposed to be waiting for...longing for...and yet when these strangers tell them that the stars have given evidence the Messiah is born they are not eager to seek out or worship the child. In fact Herod wants the baby to be killed. Of course Herod had a little problem with paranoia to begin with. Herod had killed three of his sons because he merely suspected that their mothers were plotting to take over his throne. In fact it was said in Rome that it was safer to be Herod's Sow than his Son...Because a good Jew wouldn't kill a pig..." Herod would book no contenders for his throne and so he did not care if the Messiah was the real thing or not ...he wanted the baby dead.

And as for the chief priests and the teachers of the law...surely they must have known what a monster Herod was...Why did they tell him where the Messiah was to be born? Why didn't they say "San Francisco, South Africa or Paris France, ...anywhere...instead of Bethlehem." Surely they must have known that such knowledge should not be shared with this dreadfully cruel king...(About 30 years later Jesus would say "Don't throw you pearls before swine"...well that is what this strange saying means...Don't waste your wisdom on people who are going to trample and abuse it) Of course, maybe the chief priests and elders had become skeptical and they no longer had any faith in the arrival of the promised Messiah. After all many false Messiahs had come and gone in Jewish History...perhaps they thought that this was just one more. ...who knows? But you have to wonder... Perhaps they had the same problem as Herod and they were worried that if the Messiah truly came...the Messiah might take over their jobs too.

If there is one thing that can be said...It is that all the right people did all the wrong things. They were too busy protecting their territory...they were busy defending their traditions...they were not about to allow the Spirit of God to intervene...and horrors of horrors... change things.

Only two things would save the Messiah from Herod and the blindness of the religious authorities.....the first was the good hearts of the Magi. And the second was the good and obedient heart of Joseph. The Wise Men and Joseph could have made different choices...They could have ignored the leadership of God. They could have snuggled up to the status quo. They could have followed convention... the way things have always been done... and if they did we would not be here today because the baby Jesus would have slaughtered with the rest of the baby boys of Bethlehem, some 2000 years ago.

So what does this Epiphany story mean to us?. Actually it has a lot to say. It reminds us that we need to be looking to God for the instructions, the signs and portents that will lead our personal lives and the lives of our church in 2009. We need to let go and let God. Instead of protecting our little bailiwicks and territories we need to open ourselves and our church up to the leadership of the Lord. But in order to do that we need to give God the gift of our time and our obedience. That's two gifts that the Wise Men gave the child that are not mentioned specifically in the Bible...but they are well documented.

Which verses? Which passages? Well just think about it...the Wise Men didn't just jump on their broomsticks and arrive in Judea. They took time off of their day jobs...they left their families...they went out of their way on a long uncomfortable journey... perhaps for several years...to find Jesus. We seem to think if we spend an hour in church on a day that has been set aside for worship that we have made a big sacrifice. But just think what the Magi did. Are we not willing to make just a fraction of that same sacrifice? To give God an hour every week of worship ...an hour of every day in Bible study and prayer? Now I know that that probably seems like a lot...especially with the hectic lifestyles we all lead...But surely if we cannot manage one hour out of 24 for the Lord...then perhaps we can work out ½ hour or even 20 minutes. The point is ...we need to spend time with God on a day to day basis if we want to have a good relationship with the Lord. Suppose you were married and you only spent one hour a week with your spouse...and during that time you struggled to stay awake...would that be a good relationship for you? Of course not. Well, the same goes for your relationship with the Lord. If you want to spend eternity with Jesus after you die...than shouldn't you get better acquainted with him while you still alive?

The Bible tells us that the Wise Men brought three other odd gifts to the child: Gold, frankincense and myrrh. Not hardly the kind of thing we give babies nowadays is it? Yet there was great significance to the gifts. The frankincense was a incense believed to bring God close...the myrrh was a expensive...almost priceless herb used to embalm the dead...and the gold...well the gold was what it is now... a sacrifice of wealth.

And because of those gifts the whole present giving thing that we do at Christmas began. It's the fault of the Wisemen that we overspend every Christmas lavishing expensive presents on family and friends... but is that what the Wise Men really did? Did they give their presents to a family member or friend or did they present their priceless treasure to a poor family ...whose baby despite all outward appearances...they believed to be worthy of worship and sacrifice?

Okay now that's 6 gifts that the Wise Men brought, the gift of obedience to God, the gift of their time, the gift of heart felt worship, and then there was the gold, frankincense and myrrh...but there is one other gift that the Wise Men brought that is not specifically mentioned in the Bible. By following God instead of the instructions of King Herod.. by paying attention to the voice of God they heard in a dream...they abandoned their itinerary. and returned home a different way and in so doing gave Jesus the Gift of Life...for if they had ignored the voice of God and stuck to THEIR PLANS...the child surely would have died.

Folks...I got news for you Ask the people who invested in the stock market this year...THE PLAN can go bottom up real fast. The things we think are stable can become real shaky in a moments notice....unless we have invested our lives and our future with God.

And that is an important thing to remember as we enter this New Year and take stock of our lives. We not only need to evaluate our health and our finances but we need to ask ourselves: How are things with going with our souls? How are our spiritual lives developing? If we have hit a dry patch in our spiritual lives then we need to be doing something to change that. My guess is that there are some here today who are like Joseph and the Wise Men...they need to scrap their plan ... to give it upin order to follow the light and the instructions of God.

After all, today is the only time we that God gives us to get it right. If we are just playing footsie with God, putting off a deeper commitment to the Lord ...than we are just deluding ourselves... because if you ever glance at the obituary section of the newspaper then you know that none of us knows how much time we have left. John Travolta's son who died Friday was only 16 ...he slipped, fell...hit his head on the edge of a bathtub....just like that... full of life one moment..gone the next. That could happen to any of us and if it did.. would our souls be prepared? So tell me again...what is more important than committing ourselves to God?

If we are going to have success in our lives then like the Wise Men we need to read the signs...and to leave Christmas a different way. What we need, of course, is not another New Years resolution, but a Christmas revelation .. Like the wise men of old we need to catch a glimpse of a guiding light, and we need to follow that light to a new life in Christ.