

Sunday, January 2, 2022

Sermon: “Qualities of True Worship”

I’m not sure who gave me this wonderful little book this Christmas Eve, I am grateful. Clem the Clumsy Camel...all about Clem, a clumsy camel traveling from distant lands to meet Jesus at the manger. I love camels.

Clem carries one of the wise men. So, this book also features the wise men seeking Jesus.

One of my favorite hymns, “We Three Kings”. It’s probably not very accurate but I love the tune. And I love the wise men. Somehow, they have captured my interest.

Together, Clem and the wise fulfill the goal of their journey.

Each week we have watched the wise men move around our sanctuary.

Each week they have traveled closer to Judea, closer to Jerusalem, to Bethlehem, to that stable. Carried forward by their burning question...proving their desire to worship the correct one.

Carried by their driving and clear purpose, **“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.”**

They sought Jesus so that they may worship him.

We’ve used them to externalize and make concrete our spiritual journeys. We too are on a journey to seek Jesus so that we may worship him.

As we seek to respond to the Lord’s continual invitation to draw nearer, draw closer. The Lord invites us into an ever- deepening relationship where one characteristic of that relationship is worship.

I know I should worship; but what should that worship look like. What would please God? What kind of worship does the Lord desire from us?

And that is why, in my opinion, we have the wise men. What do they bring? What can they teach us? They show us, by example, what true worship looks like. They exemplify qualities of real, reverent worship.

Grateful for Dan Darling’s book Characters of Christmas, offers us much to ponder and respond to in our own worship of Jesus.

So, who are these wise men?

I’m not trying to be a Grinch or pick apart favorite parts of the Christmas story. There has been certain cherished traditions built around these travelers.

But we must admit, the Bible is somewhat vague, lacking details for these wise men.

We get the phrase “wise men” from a Greek word *magos*. Meaning something like “those who have wisdom through investigating and interpreting the

heavenly bodies”. It is where we get the word “magi” sometimes a title that is used for them.

Matthew says they come from the East, maybe ancient Persia? Now called Iraq. Maybe?

Were there three of them?

We think three because of how they are depicted in art, in threes.

And probably because of the three gifts given....gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But it's more likely these expensive gifts were given by a whole entire delegation pooling together their resources. And probably more than three because of the stir they caused when they arrived.

When they came they were very bold and public. They came asking questions about another king, quickly gaining them access to King Herod himself, stirring up paranoia and murderous rage. And they also stirred up the whole of Jerusalem according to the text.

What is clear is that they were earnest in their true desire to find the one born king of the Jews. They searched the skies and they searched old documents, the Old Testament of a religion not their own.

They wanted to worship the rightful king; showing us our first quality of worship, that their worship was discerning.

So, they set off on a 900-mile journey, maybe 4 months to find this new king. Committing themselves to a long and difficult journey, a dangerous journey, and maybe unpopular journey.

Just keeping it real. Maybe this has been a difficult Advent season for you. Maybe it has felt like a long journey already. And this season is probably just starting.

We already have more snow fall than all the snow that fell last year. And the bitter cold that has just descended on us...ugh!

Maybe this has been a dreary and dark winter,...like how the author puts this, **“maybe your not feeling all the Christmas feels”**, feeling lonely, or out of sorts, flat and exhausted and a bit checked out, maybe grieving.

But know this: if you are in Christ, God at one point, leveraged the entire universe to shout to you His message of love.

God drew you to himself through the star, through these wise men, to this manger, to this holy altar...that we might experience the deep joy of worshipping the Son.

To worship this Son.

All told, Jesus had the longer and more costly journey. In Jesus' love for us, he was willing to leave heaven, leave the Father's side, lay aside his glory to be born and suffer.

So that we might be reconciled to God in relationship and friendship and join God in help a hurting world know God's love. We have been given a glorious purpose.

Our wise men, we don't really believe they were kings. But there are kings in the Christmas story.

Matthew's gospel is all about Jesus as King. He starts his book with a long genealogy proving Jesus as the rightful heir of King David's throne. And then Matthew sets up a contrast with another king.

King Herod the Great, did he give himself that title? The bloodthirsty ruler of the Jews appointed by Caesar in Rome. Herod kept power by killing his political enemies, killing family members, even killing all the baby boys Jesus' age.

Herod would have no rivals. He wanted all the worship.

The wealthy and prominent men from the East traveled far to worship the true king. And they bowed before an infant in a poor house in a backwater town called Bethlehem.

Don't think Herod didn't notice. Don't think for a minute that Herod was okay with that!

Matthew is clearly showing us that discerning worshippers worship the true king. And I love how God is perfectly at peace with that. Come worship Jesus or don't. You are free to choose.

They left the comforts of their own homes and cultures and religions, where they had become wildly successful and as wealthy as kings. Seeking, looking, asking, and offering worship that cost them time, effort, personal safety, and money.

Earlier I gave a definition, not my definition, but a common definition for "wise men". But there is another way we could define why they were called wise. Their wisdom was not based on their own intellect or even their knowledge of the stars.

Their wisdom was based on their willingness to know where the true source of wisdom is found. And their wisdom was based on their willingness to seek the source until they found him.

Matthew includes the wise men and their journey to the cradle as an example to us, to show us qualities of true worship. To show us how to respond to the coming of Jesus.

Did the wise men have to come? Did they have to be included? Mark doesn't include them. Neither does Luke or John. Caesar would still have called for a census. Jesus would still have been born.

The innkeeper still would have rejected them, the angels would still have sung, and the shepherds would still have showed up in awe.

So, technically, the wise men are not needed, right?

But Matthew includes them. He talks a lot about their journey, their purpose, and their worship. To give us something to ponder and an example to follow...if we too would like to be wise.

Their inclusion shows us qualities of worship that we might want to copy in our own lives. Their worship was marked by commitment and perseverance, preparing and traveling for months even up to a year.

Their worship was bold and public because all of Jerusalem was stirred and jostled.

Their worship was discerning and wise, they sought the true king.

And their worship was costly, not just based on the gifts they brought but in humbleness. These men were powerful, cultured and sophisticated.

They were connected, comfortable with prestige, intelligent and wealthy. They were king-makers if not kings themselves. Their worship might have cost them their pride and some prestige or respect.

They embraced humility to kneel before a poor toddler.

They bowed in reverent and real worship.

Inviting us to do the same.

It's that time of year again, in which historically many people either formally or informally look back on their year and think about the next.

I've been working with a free online resource to guide my reflections and to help me make some intentions for the new year. I'm not great at making goals.

But I understand the necessity of developing a deeper rudder for one's life and to embrace intentionality. This is one way we can be wise before God in how we spend our lives...because one day we will have to give an account.

And this is where I have been reminded, by the author, that these men and their hunger and openness to God...had to have been Spirit-inspired. They were guided and helped by God and empowered with God's strength.

And that gives me hope. Because I cannot, we cannot draw near to God without his empowering Spirit wooing, inviting, encouraging us in grace and love.

As we enter into a new year, maybe we would like to consider what the wise men have to teach us? Maybe we would like to consider the quality of our own worship and at least be open to being open to worshipping more like these wise men?

If that is true for us, we will need God's help. Would you allow me to pray for us?

Dear God,

We come humbly, asking for Your Spirit's help to offer you wise and true worship from our hearts this coming year. The faith of the wise men is impressive. Their faith shines so bright, their desire to offer worship that was true, discerning, costly is challenging.

Refine us and renew us, make your face to shine on us that we might live and praise You. Restore our hearts to worship You.

We humbly ask this in the name of the one the wise men sought...Amen.