

Matthew 2:1-12 "Back to Bethlehem"

HERE WE ARE- NEARLY A WEEK INTO THE NEW YEAR WITH CHRISTMAS JUST A MEMORY FOR MOST OF THE WORLD. AND YET, TODAY-EPIPHANY, DRAWS US BACK FOR ONE LAST LOOK AT JESUS IN BETHLEHEM, BEFORE WE TURN OUR ATTENTION BACK TO THE ORDINARY THINGS OF LIFE.

TODAY WE ARE DRAWN BY THE STAR AND THOSE WHO SAW AND FOLLOWED IT- TO LOOK AT, AND FOCUS ON, THE CHRIST CHILD IN THE LITTLE TOWN OF BETHLEHEM ONCE MORE. THIS IS AN IMPORTANT STEP FOR US TO TAKE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CALENDAR YEAR SINCE, AFTER ALL-THE MEANING OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IS ALL ABOUT JESUS AND OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM.

EPIPHANY IS ALSO IMPORTANT AS A REMINDER THAT IT WAS ON THAT DAY GOD REVEALED TO THE NON-JEWISH WORLD HIS PRESENCE IN IT AS THE INCARNATE CHRIST. MATTHEW'S RECORD OF THIS STORY IS IN MANY WAYS SKETCHY, IN THAT HE LEAVES OUT MORE THAN HE INCLUDES.

WE KNOW THREE GIFTS WERE GIVEN TO JESUS- GOLD, FRANKINCENSE, AND MYRRH, EACH SYMBOLIZING SOMETHING ABOUT JESUS AND HIS MISSION IN THE WORLD. GOLD REPRESENTS JESUS' KINGSHIP. THE OTHER GIFTS WERE-FRANKINCENSE FOR HIS ANOINTING AS THE MESSIAH, AND MYRRH- TO ANOINT HIM FOR BURIAL. BOTH COULD ALSO BE USED FOR MEDICINAL AND OTHER PURPOSES.

BUT WHAT MATTHEW DOES NOT SAY IS HOW MANY VISITORS FROM THE EAST THERE WERE, WHERE EXACTLY THEY CAME FROM- AND WHO THEY WERE- IN OCCUPATION AND NAME. THE NUMBER AND THE IDEA THEY WERE KINGS, AS WELL AS WISE MEN OR MAGI, ARE MERELY ASSUMPTIONS MADE; AS IS THE SUGGESTION THEY CAME FROM PERSIA OR ARABIA.

BUT WHAT WE DO KNOW IS THIS- THESE TRAVELERS WERE FROM THE EAST. THEY WERE PAGANS AND ASTROLOGERS, SINCE THEY HAD THE SKILL AND INCLINATION TO READ AND BE GUIDED BY STARS. WHAT IS INTERESTING ABOUT THIS IS THAT WHILE PAGANS WERE OUTSIDE OF GOD'S COVENANT WITH ISRAEL, AND ASTROLOGY AND MAGIC IS CONDEMNED IN THE BOOK OF DEUTERONOMY- THESE WISE MEN KNEW SOMETHING ABOUT GOD.

WE ALSO KNOW GOD SPECIFICALLY PLACED IN THE HEAVENS A SIGN ONLY ASTROLOGERS WERE LIKELY TO PERCEIVE AND FOLLOW. THIS IS A REMINDER THAT GOD CAN WORK THROUGH UNLIKELY PEOPLE. IT ALSO A REMINDER THAT THE LORD SEEKS US WHERE WE ARE, IN WAYS WE CAN UNDERSTAND IF WE ARE OPEN TO HIM.

YES GOD MEETS US WHERE WE ARE AND THEN DRAWS US TO WHERE HE IS AND WHERE HE WISHES US TO BE. BUT AGAIN, WE MUST BE WILLING TO FOLLOW, LIKE THE WISE MEN WERE. MATTHEW'S INCLUSION OF THIS STORY AND THE BIRTH OF JESUS IS NOT ONLY USEFUL TO US IN REMINDING US HOW GOD SEEKS US, BUT IT WAS VERY SIGNIFICANT FOR MATTHEW'S CHURCH.

THE CHURCH AT THE TIME THE GOSPEL WAS WRITTEN WAS IN THE MIDST OF CONFLICT OVER JEWISH VS. GENTILE BELIEVERS. MANY JEWISH CHRISTIANS FELT GENTILES- THAT IS NON-JEWISH PEOPLE, THOSE OF OTHER NATIONS- NEEDED TO CONVERT TO JUDAISM BEFORE BEING WELCOMED INTO CHURCH MEMBERSHIP. OTHER JEWISH CHRISTIANS- SAID FAITH IN JESUS AND BAPTISM WAS ENOUGH.

THIS PASSAGE FROM MATTHEW POINTS TO GOD'S INVITATION OF GENTILES TO SEEK AND WORSHIP JESUS, WHO CAME NOT ONLY FOR THE JEWS, BUT TO SAVE ALL PEOPLES IN THE WORLD. FURTHERMORE IT IS NOTICEABLE IN THE GOSPEL TEXT THAT IT WAS THE PAGAN MAGI WHO SAW IN THE STAR A MESSAGE FROM THE GOD OF ISRAEL AND ACTED UPON IT.

BUT, THE JEWISH RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERS WERE OBLIVIOUS TO THE STAR UNTIL IT WAS POINTED OUT TO THEM. FURTHERMORE, WHEN THE MAGI CAME LOOKING FOR THE INFANT KING OF THE JEWS, NONE OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS SEEMED INTERESTED IN SEEKING HIM.

EVEN AFTER FINDING IN SCRIPTURE REFERENCES TO THE RETURN OF A KING FROM DAVID'S LINE THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS HAD NO INTEREST BEYOND HEROD'S INQUIRY. AND KING HEROD, AS WE KNOW FROM THE REST OF MATTHEW TWO, WAS ONLY INTERESTED IN KILLING THE INFANT WHOM HE SAW AS A THREAT.

THUS WHILE THE JEWS SOUGHT ONLY THE STATUS QUO, IT WAS THE GENTILES WHO FOLLOWED THE LIGHT OF THE STAR, WHICH POINTED TO JESUS-THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO A COMIC BY “FAMILY CIRCUS” CREATOR BILL KEENE EMPHASIZED THIS POINT. HIS COMIC SHOWED THE FAMILY LOOKING AT A LIFE SIZE NATIVITY SCENE-WITH A LARGE PLASTIC STAR ON THE TOP OF THE MANGER. ONE OF THE KIDS IN THE FAMILY MADE A SIGNIFICANT REMARK, SAYING: “THE REAL STAR OF BETHLEHEM ISN’T IN THE SKY. HE IS IN THE MANGER.”

I CERTAINLY THINK THE GOSPEL WRITER MATTHEW WOULD AGREE WITH THAT STATEMENT, SINCE THE REST OF HIS GOSPEL SHOWS JESUS WAS THE TRUE LIGHT SENT FROM GOD. THIS IS IMPORTANT FOR US TO REMEMBER LEST WE GET SIDE TRACKED BY THE STORY, AND FOCUS ON THE LESS IMPORTANT THINGS.

AMONG THOSE ARE THE DETAILS ABOUT THE MAGI, I MENTIONED EARLIER. THAT IS-WHO AND WHAT THEY WERE, WHERE THEY CAME FROM, AND HOW MANY WENT OF THE JOURNEY TO FIND JESUS.

THE STAR OF BETHLEHEM IS ANOTHER AREA SOME PEOPLE GET CAUGHT UP IN- BY TRYING TO EXPLAIN WHAT THE STAR REALLY WAS LIKE. WAS IT AN UNNATURAL PHENOMENA CREATED BY GOD, A COMET, OR AN ALIGNMENT OF PLANETS? THESE CONJECTURES WHILE INTERESTING TO SOME PEOPLE ARE GENERALLY UNIMPORTANT WHEN IT COMES TO THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL STORY.

ONE ADVENT BOOK PUT THE MESSAGE INTO A MORE USEFUL PERSPECTIVE CONCERNING THE CHRISTIAN FAITH: “THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN TO THE CHRIST CHILD REMINDS US THAT JESUS, THE MESSIAH, IS THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD, OF ALL PEOPLE IN ALL PLACES. THEIR STORY ALSO CHALLENGES US TO CONSIDER OUR JOURNEY AND OUR GIFTS. AND TO ASK HOW WE ARE USING OUR TALENTS, OUR TIME, AND OUR TREASURE TO SERVE THE SAVIOR.”

BUT BEFORE WE LOOK AT HOW THE MAGI CAN BE AN EXAMPLE FOR OUR LIVES AS FOLLOWERS OF JESUS, WE MIGHT BENEFIT FROM CONSIDERING MORE CLOSELY THEIR DISCOVERY OF JESUS. YOU SEE THESE WISE MEN, THESE READERS OF THE STARS- JOURNEYED WESTWARD FOR THE PURPOSE OF FINDING THE INFANT KING OF THE JEWS.

PREACHER AND AUTHOR J.B. PHILLIPS POINTS OUT SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT HE FOUND IN HIS STUDY OF MATTHEW TWO. HE SUGGESTS OUT THE WORD USED FOR “WORSHIP” IN GREEK CAN ALSO MEAN TO PAY REVERENCE OR HOMAGE TO, MEANING TO BOW BEFORE A KING.

PHILLIPS FURTHER STATES THAT IT WAS THE CUSTOM IN ANCIENT TIMES FOR MONARCHS TO SEND REPRESENTATIVES TO NEW BORN HEIRS TO THE THRONE TO PAY HOMAGE TO THE CHILD AS A SIGN OF FRIENDSHIP.

IN OTHER WORDS HE SUGGESTS THE ORIGINAL QUEST OF THE MAGI MIGHT HAVE BEEN POLITICALLY MOTIVATED. THEY SEARCHED, AS WE HEARD, FOR AN INFANT KING, BUT THEN MATTHEW TELLS US AFTER THEY FOUND THE CHILD AND HIS MOTHER THEY FELL DOWN AND WORSHIPPED HIM.

YES, IN VERSE ELEVEN PHILLIPS TRANSLATES THE WORD AS WORSHIPPED- AS ONE WOULD A GOD, RATHER THAN A KING. SO THESE EASTERNERS CAME SEARCHING FOR A POLITICAL FIGURE, BUT FOUND GOD INCARNATE-AND RECOGNIZED JESUS FOR WHO HE IS.

HERE WE ARE REMINDED THAT GOD CONTINUES TO DRAW PEOPLE TO JESUS. SOMETIMES THEY AT FIRST SEE HIM AS ONLY A GREAT TEACHER, AN ETHICAL LEADER, AND EVEN SOME SEE JESUS AS A KIND OF REBEL. BUT THE FORTUNATE ONES, LIKE THE WISE MEN, SEEK WHO OUT JESUS AND FIND HIM, THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH, SEE HIM FOR WHO HE IS-THEIR SAVIOR AND GOD.

AND SO FROM THE WISE MEN WE CAN LEARN TO BE OPEN TO HAVING OUR EXPECTATIONS CHANGED DURING OUR FAITH JOURNEY. INDEED, WE HEAR FROM THE STORY THEY EXPECTED TO FIND THE INFANT KING IN THE COURT OF KING HEROD, BUT THERE THEY WERE DISAPPOINTED.

THEN WHEN THEY FOUND THE EXPECTED KING IN BETHLEHEM, THEY DISCOVERED SOMEONE BEYOND THEIR EXPECTATIONS. THEY ALSO REMAINED OPEN TO GOD’S GUIDANCE, IN LISTENING TO THE DREAM AND NOT RETURNING TO JERUSALEM.

THIS IS REAL-PRACTICAL WISDOM THE MAGI MODEL FOR US: FIRST, THEY DID NOT ALLOW A CHANGE IN THEIR EXPECTATIONS TO END THEIR JOURNEY. THEY ALSO WERE OPEN TO NEW DISCOVERIES-AND PAID ATTENTION TO ADDITIONAL SIGNS GOD SENT THEM, SHOWING THEY WERE NOT FOCUSED ONLY ON THE MOST OBVIOUS SIGN.

ONE OTHER THING WE CAN LEARN FROM THE WISE MEN IS TO FOLLOW THEM OUT OF BETHLEHEM INTO THE REST OF THE WORLD-CARRYING WHAT WE LEARNED THERE WITH US. YES INDEED OUR CALL IS NOT TO LINGER IN BETHLEHEM ANY MORE BUT TO STEP OUT IN FAITH AND OPENNESS TO GOD'S WORD.

AS CHRISTIANS WE ARE CALLED NOT SO MUCH TO FOLLOW THE MAGI AS WE ARE CALLED TO FOLLOW JESUS OUT INTO THE WORLD, WHERE HE AWAITS US TO WORK WITH HIM. YES, CHRISTMAS IS OVER FOR ANOTHER YEAR, BUT THE RAMIFICATIONS OF JESUS, THE WORD MADE FLESH CONTINUES.

A POEM BY HOWARD THURMAN, FOUND IN THE PRESBYTERY NEWSLETTER, AND ON A CHRISTMAS CARD, EXPRESSES IT THIS WAY:

“WHEN THE SONG OF THE ANGELS IS STILLED,
WHEN THE STAR IN THE SKY IS GONE,
WHEN THE KINGS AND PRINCES ARE HOME,
WHEN THE SHEPHERDS ARE BACK WITH THEIR FLOCKS,
THE WORK OF CHRISTMAS **BEGINS**:

TO FIND THE LOST,
TO HEAL THE BROKEN,
TO FEED THE HUNGRY,

TO RELEASE THE PRISONER,
TO REBUILD THE NATIONS,
TO BRING PEACE AMONG PEOPLE,
TO MAKE MUSIC IN THE HEART.”

TOGETHER, LET US BEGIN THE WORK TO WHICH THE MIRACLE OF CHRIST'S COMING CALLS US. AND FOR HELP IN THIS TASK LET US RESPOND TO CHRIST'S INVITATION TO SHARE IN THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY COMMUNION, HE INSTITUTED FOR OUR BENEFIT.

THIS SACRAMENT, IS LIKE THE LIGHT OF THE BETHLEHEM STAR, AND IT ALSO IS SOMETHING MORE. LIKE THE STAR IT LEADS US TO SEEK JESUS AND WORSHIP HIM. AND IT PROVIDES US NOT ONLY THE GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, BUT ALSO EMPOWERS US TO BE CHRIST'S CONTINUING LIGHT IN THE WORLD. LET US THEREFORE REJOICE IN THE LORD AS WE ANSWER HIS INVITATION TO DRAW CLOSER TO HIM.

LET US PRAY: HEAVENLY FATHER, WE REJOICE IN JESUS WHOM YOU SENT TO BE THE LIGHT AND SAVIOR OF ALL PEOPLE. WE THANK YOU FOR MAKING HIM KNOWN TO US, AND PRAY YOUR SPIRIT MAY CONTINUE TO DRAW US CLOSER TO CHRIST, IN WHOSE NAME WE PRAY. AMEN