

Matthew 2:1-12
January 3, '10

“FINDING JESUS”

IN THESE 12 VERSES WE GET THE ONLY ACCOUNT OF THE WISE MEN.

THEIR STORY ISN'T FOUND IN LUKE, EVEN THOUGH MUCH OF WHAT WE CELEBRATE ABOUT CHRISTMAS IS FOUND IN HIS GOSPEL.

IT'S NOT FOUND IN MARK OR JOHN.

IN FACT, MARK & JOHN INCLUDE NOTHING AT ALL ABOUT THE BIRTH OF CHRIST.

IT IS ONLY HERE – IN MATTHEW – THAT WE FIND ANYTHING AT ALL ABOUT THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN.

AND YET, THEIR STORY IS SUCH AN INTEGRAL PART OF OUR CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS.

IT'S A STORY THAT IS INCLUDED IN VIRTUALLY ALL RE-ENACTMENTS OF THIS WONDROUS EVENT.

THE WISE MEN ARE FOUND ON GREETING CARDS, IN GREAT PAINTINGS, IN SONGS & IN ALL OF OUR NATIVITY SETS.

THERE ARE SEVERAL INACCURACIES IN OUR COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF THIS STORY.

WE DON'T KNOW IF THERE WERE THREE OF THEM, THEY MOST LIKELY WEREN'T KINGS & THEY MOST ASSUREDLY WEREN'T THERE ON THE NIGHT OF JESUS'S BIRTH.

THAT'S REALLY NOT IMPORTANT, THOUGH, BECAUSE NONE OF THOSE THINGS DETRACT FROM THE TRUTH & THE ULTIMATE MESSAGE OF THEIR STORY.

YOU'VE HEARD THE WONDERFUL TALES BASED ON THIS EVENT.

THERE'S O. HENRY'S “THE GIFT OF THE MAGI.”

THERE'S HENRY VAN DYKE'S “THE STORY OF THE OTHER WISE MAN.”

THERE'S THE STORY & OPERA “AHMAL & THE NIGHT VISITORS.”

THERE ARE THE COUNTLESS PAINTINGS WHICH INCLUDE THE WISE MEN & THEN, OF COURSE, THERE'S THE STANDARD CHRISTMAS CLASSIC “WE THREE KINGS OF ORIENT ARE.”

SINCE WE HAVE BEEN FOCUSING ON SOME OF THE LINES OF FAVORITE SONGS OF CHRISTMAS, MAYBE IT WOULD BE GOOD TO TAKE A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS ONE.

IT WAS COMPOSED IN 1857 BY JOHN HENRY HOPKINS, AN EPISCOPAL CLERGYMAN.

YOU MAY REMEMBER THE STORY OF THE SONG FROM ONE OF EMMA SUE'S ADVENT DEVOTIONAL BOOKS.

“IN 1857, WHILE HOPKINS WAS AN INSTRUCTOR IN CHURCH MUSIC AT GENERAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY IN NEW YORK, WE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR AN ELABORATE CHRISTMAS PAGEANT.

PART OF THE PAGEANT WAS ABOUT THE WISE MEN WHO CAME FROM THE EAST BRINGING GIFTS OF GOLD, FRANKINCENSE & MYRRH.

HOPKINS WROTE A SONG FOR THAT PAGEANT BASED ON THE POPULAR EUROPEAN LEGEND WHICH, UNLIKE SCRIPTURE, NUMBERS & NAMES THE WISE MEN & TELLS HOW THEIR GIFTS WERE USED.

HOPKINS DID NOT MEAN FOR THIS CAROL TO BECOME A FAVORITE OF CHRISTMAS, NEITHER DID HE EXPECT IT TO PERPETUATE THE LEGEND OR TO TEACH THEOLOGY.

HE SIMPLY WROTE IT FOR THE PAGEANT TO HIGHLIGHT THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN TO THE CHRIST CHILD.

ONE MAY WONDER WHY – MORE THAN 2 WEEKS AFTER CHRISTMAS - WE'RE STILL SINGING, WHAT WE CALL "A CHRISTMAS CAROL."

THIS IS A SONG – LIKE OUR OPENING HYMN, "AS WITH GLADNESS" - THAT ISN'T A CHRISTMAS SONG. IT'S AN EPIPHANY SONG.

IF YOU LOOK AT THE SECTION IN WHICH IT'S FOUND IN THE HYMNAL, IT'S NOT THE "CHRISTMAS" SECTION, BUT THE "EPIPHANY" SECTION.

EPIPHANY MEANS "TO SHOW" OR "TO MAKE KNOWN" OR "TO REVEAL."

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE USE OF THIS WORD IN CONNECTION WITH THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN IS THAT THESE WERE INDIVIDUALS WHO WEREN'T JEWISH.

THEY WERE NON-JEWS OR GENTILES & THE REASON MATTHEW INCLUDES THIS STORY IN HIS GOSPEL IS TO HELP THE JEWS UNDERSTAND THAT THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS IS NOT CONFINED TO THEM.

HE WAS "SHOWN," "MADE KNOWN," "REVEALED" TO THE GENTILES AS WELL.

THE GOOD NEWS IS FOR ALL.

WHEN WE USE THE WORD "EPIPHANY," THOUGH, WE USUALLY MEAN IT IN THE SENSE OF FINALLY "GETTING" SOMETHING.

WE REFER TO THE "AHA!" MOMENTS OF LIFE AS AN EPIPHANY.

PERHAPS THERE'S AN "AHA!" FOR US AS WE CONNECT THE VISIT OF THE WISE MEN MORE TO OUR CELEBRATION OF THE NEW YEAR THAN TO OUR CELEBRATION OF CHRISTMAS.

WE HAVE JUST CROSSED THE THRESHHOLD INTO NEWNESS.

WE STAND NEAR THE BEGINNING OF A NEW DAY, A NEW WEEK, A NEW MONTH, A NEW YEAR & EVEN A NEW DECADE.

WE ARE VERY MUCH LIKE THE WISE MEN AS WE STAND WHERE WE DO TODAY.

LIKE THEM, WE STAND AT THE BEGINNING OF AN UNKNOWN JOURNEY – ONE WHICH, LIKE THEM, WILL TAKE US PLACES WE'VE NEVER BEEN & OFFER EXPERIENCES FILLED WITH BOTH HOPE & FEAR.

LOOK AT HOW RIDICULOUS THE JOURNEY OF THE WISE MEN REALLY WAS.

I REMEMBER TITLING A SERMON "THREE COURAGEOUS CRAZIES" BECAUSE YOU CAN'T HELP BUT SEE THEM AS BOTH – THEY WERE COURAGEOUS & THEY WERE CRAZY.

THEY SET OUT ON A JOURNEY TO FOLLOW A STAR.

THEY FOLLOWED IT TO PLACES THEY'D NEVER BEEN BEFORE.

THEY FOLLOWED IT DOWN ROADS THAT WERE DIFFICULT TO TRAVERSE & INTO VALLEYS FROM WHICH THEY DIDN'T KNOW IF THEY WOULD EMERGE.

THEY SURELY EXPERIENCED TIMES OF DARKNESS & DANGER AS WELL AS EXCITEMENT & ECSTASY.

YES, THE JOURNEY ON WHICH WE ARE ABOUT TO EMBARK IS VERY MUCH THE SAME AS THAT OF THE WISE MEN.

YES, OUR JOURNEY INTO THE NEW YEAR & THE NEW DECADE WILL TAKE US TO PLACES WE'VE NEVER BEEN BEFORE.

I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT I LOVE BEING SOMEWHERE I'VE NEVER BEEN BEFORE.

I DON'T CARE IF IT'S ANOTHER COUNTRY OR ANOTHER STATE OR EVEN SOMEPLACE IN EVANSVILLE – I LOVE BEING ABLE TO SAY, “I'VE NEVER BEEN HERE BEFORE.”

I THINK IT MAY STEM FROM THE FIRST JOB I HAD IN DOWNTOWN DETROIT.

I WAS WORKING AT THE J.L. HUDSON COMPANY MY FIRST SUMMER AFTER HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION.

MY MOTHER HAD BEEN WORKING THERE FOR SEVERAL YEARS & I'D RIDE TO WORK WITH HER.

NEARLY EVERY AFTERNOON, ON THE WAY HOME, SHE'D TAKE A DIFFERENT ROUTE.

I DON'T THINK WE EVER REPEATED THE SAME ROUTE A SINGLE DAY THAT ENTIRE SUMMER!

SHE'D EXIT I-94 AT A BRAND-NEW EXIT & SAY, “WE'VE NEVER GOTTEN OFF HERE BEFORE. LET'S SEE WHERE IT TAKES US.”

MAYBE THAT'S WHY I ENJOY BEING SOMEWHERE I'VE NEVER BEEN BEFORE.

2010 – THE BEGINNING OF THE SECOND DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY – IS SOMEWHERE NONE OF US HAS EVER BEEN BEFORE.

WE'RE EMBARKING ON A JOURNEY INTO A BRAND-NEW LAND.

LIKE THE WISE MEN, WE WILL FOLLOW THE PATH OF THE NEW YEAR DOWN ROADS THAT WILL BE DIFFICULT TO TRAVERSE & INTO VALLEYS FROM WHICH WE WON'T KNOW IF WE WILL EMERGE.

AND ALSO LIKE THOSE “THREE COURAGEOUS CRAZIES” WE WILL SURELY EXPERIENCE TIMES OF DARKNESS & DANGER AS WELL AS TIMES OF EXCITEMENT & ECSTASY.

THERE'S A BIG DIFFERENCE, OF COURSE, IN *OUR* JOURNEY & *THEIRS* – A DIFFERENCE YOU HAVE PERHAPS ALREADY CONSIDERED.

THE DIFFERENCE IS THAT THE WISE MEN HAD A CHOICE.

THEY COULD CHOOSE TO EMBARK UPON THEIR JOURNEY TO THE HOLY LAND, BUT THEY COULD ALSO CHOOSE TO STAY WHERE THEY WERE.

OUR JOURNEY – A JOURNEY IN TIME – DOESN'T COME WITH AN OPTION.

2010 – THE SECOND DECADE OF THE 21ST CENTURY – IS HERE WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT.

OUR JOURNEY INTO THE NEW YEAR CAN'T BE HALTED.

IT'S SIMPLY A MATTER OF WHAT WE WILL DO WITH THE TIME WE'RE ALLOTTED.

HOW WILL YOU TRAVEL ON YOUR JOURNEY?

WILL YOU DO SO GRUDINGLY, FEARING & DREADING EVERY DAY, OR WILL YOU BURST INTO IT WITH CONFIDENCE & ENTHUSIASM, LOOKING FORWARD TO THE ADVENTURE THAT AWAITS YOU?

LET'S BE HONEST.

THERE ARE THINGS TO FEAR.

LOOK AT THE JOURNEY OF THE WISE MEN.

AS MATTHEW RECORDS THEIR EXCURSION & THEIR EXPERIENCE, NO FEWER THAN 5 TIMES, HEROD IS SPOKEN OF IN THESE VERSES.

HIS REIGN PROVIDES THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE WISE MEN'S QUEST & DISCOVERY TAKES PLACE.
IT'S HEROD WHO IS THREATENED BY & RESISTANT TO THE NEWS OF THE BIRTH OF THE NEW KING.
IT'S HEROD WHO CONSULTS WITH RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES AND THEN RECEIVES & DECEPTIVELY ADVISES THE WISE MEN CONCERNING THE BIRTHPLACE OF THE MESSIAH.

IT'S HEROD ABOUT WHOM THE WISE MEN ARE WARNED IN THEIR DREAMS.

LIKE SO MANY OF THE HURTFUL & PAINFUL POWERS IN OUR OWN LIVES, THIS TYRANT KING PLAYS A SIGNIFICANT ROLE.

BUT HE DOESN'T PLAY THE LEADING ROLE IN THIS STORY.

IF YOU WERE MAKING A MOVIE OF THIS STORY IN MATTHEW, HEROD WOULD SURELY BE UP FOR A "BEST SUPPORTING ACTOR" AWARD.

BUT AS IN ANY DRAMA, THE SUPPORTING ACTOR (HEATH LEDGER ASIDE) DOESN'T UPSTAGE THE MAIN CHARACTER.

IT DOESN'T MATTER IF IT'S A BROADWAY STAGE, A HOLLYWOOD FILM OR THE DRAMA OF OUR LIVES THAT IS LIVED OUT EVERY DAY.

THE TRUTH IS ALWAYS THE SAME.

THE DARKNESS SHALL NEVER HAVE THE LAST WORD.

IN THE DRAMA OF THE WISE MEN & THE DRAMA OF OUR LIVES, THE MAIN CHARACTER IS THE SAME.

IT IS JESUS CHRIST WHO STANDS AT THE END OF THE JOURNEY.

EVERY ROAD THAT WAS TRAVELLED BY THE WISE MEN WAS A SEARCH FOR CHRIST.

EVERY VALLEY INTO WHICH THEY DESCENDED, EVERY MOUNTAIN THEY CLIMBED WAS AN EFFORT TO FIND JESUS.

SO, TOO, FOR US AS WE EMBARK UPON THE JOURNEY THAT AWAITS US IN THE NEW YEAR & THE NEW DECADE.

SURELY THERE WILL BE VALLEYS OF DESPAIR THAT AWAIT US.

THERE WILL BE MOUNTAINS OF JOY.

LET ALL OF OUR TRAVELLING, THOUGH, BE DONE WITH A SINGLE PURPOSE AT ITS CENTER.

LAST WEEK, WE LOOKED AT MARY & JOSEPH "SEARCHING FOR JESUS" IN JERUSALEM.

TODAY, WE FIND THE WISE MEN "FINDING JESUS" & KNEELING BEFORE HIM IN AWE & WORSHIP.

MATTHEW TELLS US THEY WERE "*OVERWHELMED WITH JOY.*"

I THINK THAT'S THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION'S WAY OF TRYING TO FIX A CONVOLUTED PHRASE.

IT HAD PREVIOUSLY TRANSLATED IT AS, "*THEY REJOICED EXCEEDINGLY WITH GREAT JOY.*"

I THINK MATTHEW INTENDED IT TO BE CONVOLUTED.

HE WAS TRYING TO CONVEY SOMETHING THAT WORDS SIMPLY CAN'T EXPLAIN.

AS YOU EMBARK UPON YOUR OWN JOURNEY INTO THE NEW YEAR, MAY YOUR EYES BE CENTERED AS CLEARLY ON "FINDING JESUS" AS WERE THE EYES OF THE WISE MEN.

AND MAY YOU, TOO, FIND YOURSELF "REJOICING EXCEEDINGLY WITH GREAT JOY" IN THE KNOWLEDGE THAT HE'S THE MAIN ACTOR IN THE DRAMA OF YOUR LIFE.

MAY YOU DISCOVER THAT NO MATTER HOW DEEP THE VALLEY INTO WHICH THE FUTURE TAKES YOU, THE DARKNESS OF LIFE WILL NEVER OVERCOME THE LIGHT OF CHRIST. AMEN.

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