

THE PERSEVERANCE AND WORSHIP OF THE WISE MEN

December 20, 2015

By Pastor Stan
Matthew 2:1-12

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SERMON SERIES: CHRISTMAS' EXAMPLES

SERMON TITLE: "THE PERSEVERANCE & WORSHIP OF THE WISE MEN"

SCRIPTURE TEXT: MATTHEW 2:1-12 (P. 807)

TOPIC: CHRISTMAS

DATE: DECEMBER 20, 2015

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INTRO.

-- Every year the PNC Wealth Management Group releases a calculation of what the items in the "Twelve Days of Christmas" song would cost. As you recall those items are a partridge in a pear tree, 2 turtledoves, 3 French hens, 4 calling birds, 5 golden rings, 6 geese-a-laying, 7 swans-a-swimming, 8 maids-a-milking, 9 ladies dancing, 10 lords-a-leaping, 11 pipers piping, and 12 drummers drumming. So, how much do you think all of that would cost? This year's the total cost comes to "34,131.

-- Here's another question - and I have a key tag for free Wendy's "Frosties" for the first person who can answer: what are the 12 days of Christmas all about? Where did the idea of 12 days of Christmas come from?

-- The 12 days of Christmas refer to the period from Christmas to January 6, which is observed in some Christian traditions as "Epiphany," and Epiphany commemorates the revealing of Jesus as the Savior to the Wise Men. That event is described by Matthew in the second chapter of his Gospel.

Cf., Matthew 2:1-12

I. The Wise Men's Journey

A. A "Clouded" Story

-- The story of the Wise Men is clouded with more myths, traditions, and misinformation than any other part of the Christmas story.

1. Kings

-- For example, the Wise Men are often called "kings," as in the Christmas hymn "We Three Kings." But the reality is that they were not really kings. The Greek word that Matthew uses for them is "magi," which probably refers to an elite group of men in ancient Persia (modern-day Iran) who were a hybrid cross of priests and political advisers. Magi were held in high esteem because of their wide range of knowledge, including a specialization in studying the stars.

2. Their Number

-- And how about their number? How many Wise Men came to find Jesus? We don't really know. We always refer to them as "the Three Wise Men," but the Bible never says how many there were. All we know for sure is that there was more than one. There could have been two or perhaps twenty. The idea of three probably comes from the fact that they presented 3 gifts to Jesus.

3. Their Arrival

-- And then there's the matter of when they arrived. The Wise Men are always pictured as arriving at the stable along with the shepherds on the night that Jesus was born. But Matthew actually says when the Wise Men arrived, Mary and Joseph were not in a stable but were living in a house, and Jesus wasn't a newborn infant but a small child, possibly about 2 years old, since Herod later orders the execution of all males two years and under in an attempt to eliminate this new King of the Jews.

B. The Most Important Feature in the Story

-- But we must avoid getting hung up and sidetracked by these peripheral details. The most important feature in the story is that men who are not Jewish undertake a journey to find and worship Jesus.

1. A New Star

-- That journey was prompted by the appearance of a new star. In the course of their observations and study of the night sky, the Magi discovered a new star in the direction of Israel. Since there was a large number of Jews living in Persia from the time of the Babylonian Exile, the Magi were likely familiar with the prophecy of a Jewish king who would be a descendant of the great King David and whose reign would be even more glorious than David's.

The Magi understood the appearance of the star as a sign that the promises of the Hebrew prophets were being fulfilled and that the long-awaited Messiah had been born. The Magi decided that an event so momentous that God would herald it with a new star was an occasion that they couldn't miss; so they resolved to travel to Israel to find this newborn King.

2. A Persevering Journey

-- It was a journey that required a great deal of perseverance. They had to travel a thousand miles over difficult terrain, including stretches of desert and mountain ranges as high as 15,000 feet. Altogether, from the time that they first saw the new star until they arrived in Jerusalem, the Wise Men had spent 1-2 years preparing for and making the journey.

-- When they finally arrived in Jerusalem, they began inquiring about the newly born King of the Jews and surprisingly found that no one had any idea what they were talking about. Their inquiries, however, quickly caught the attention of the current ruler of Judea, the insanely paranoid King Herod. Without hesitation, Herod sent for these foreign dignitaries to examine them and to assess what threat this talk about a new king posed to his reign. While detaining the Wise Men in the palace, Herod conferred with the religious leaders concerning the whereabouts of the Messiah's birth. Then, summoning the Wise Men, Herod sent them off to Bethlehem, a small village just 5 miles south of Jerusalem to search for the child who would one day become king. Cleverly, Herod instructed the Wise Men to return and report back to him once they had found the child so that he could also supposedly go to pay homage to him.

-- When the Magi finally left Herod's palace, it must have been late in the day because there in the sky once again they saw the star that had started their search. They set out immediately for Bethlehem, and amazingly this time the star began to move and to travel ahead of them. Like a celestial GPS device it led them to the exact location that they were looking for - the house where Mary, Joseph, and the child were living.

3. A Providential Journey

-- All along, from the appearance of the star to the arrival at the house, the Wise Men's persevering journey had been directed by God's providence. God's providence means that He is in control, that He is sovereign and opens any door that is necessary to accomplish His will.

Think of the doors God opened when He sent Jesus: He opened the elderly Elizabeth's womb barren womb that had been sealed shut with infertility and age to give birth to John the Baptist as the fore-runner of the Messiah; He opened Mary's virgin womb to conceive and give birth to the Son of God; He opened the heavens to announce the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds; He opened the spiritual eyes of pagan stargazers to seek out and worship the newborn king. And He continues to do the same today. He sovereignly opens whatever doors that are necessary to accomplish His purposes and to provide for you as you pursue His will.

II. The Wise Men's Purpose (vv. 2, 11)

A. One Purpose

-- The journey of the Wise Men was a providential journey with a singular purpose.

v. 2b, "For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

v. 11a, "And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him."

-- There are many details, some rather puzzling, that are reported but otherwise ignored in the story: we're not told anything about the nature of the mysterious star that suddenly appears in the sky and that can travel and somehow lead the Wise Men to a particular house and stand over it; we're not even told much about the Wise Men themselves. The focal emphasis of the story is on the fact that the Wise Men came to worship Jesus.

B. Two Implications

-- There are two important implications in the Wise Men's worshipping Jesus.

1. Jesus Is God.

-- Matthew is a Jew and is writing a Gospel primarily for Jews, and if there is anything that Jews are clear about it's that only God is to be worshipped. And yet Matthew tells this story where the entire point is that Jesus is worshipped. The inescapable implication is, of course, that Jesus is God. That should be no surprise. The same passage that the religious leaders used to identify the Messiah's birthplace also identifies the Messiah's divine nature.

Micah 5:2 (NASB) But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Too little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity."

-- That's what John declared at the beginning of his Gospel.

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2. Jesus Is the Savior for All People.

-- The story of the Wise Men is the story of Gentiles (non-Jews) worshipping Jesus.

What Matthew wants us to see is that Jesus is not only King of the Jews but also Savior of the world.

-- Again, this should be no surprise, for the prophets had declared that the Messiah would come for all the nations.

Isaiah 60:1-3 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. ... **³**And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising

-- In the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' instruction is:

Matthew 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations

CONCLUSION

-- This past week Larycia Hawkins, a political science professor at Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian school, made headlines when she was suspended by the college after announcing on Facebook that during the rest of the Advent season she was wearing a hijab, the head covering worn by Muslim women. College officials said that Professor Hawkins had not been suspended because of her decision to wear the hijab but because of the statement that she had made when announcing that decision. In her Facebook post the professor wrote:

"I stand in religious solidarity with Muslims because they, like me, a Christian, are people of the book. And as Pope Francis stated last week, we worship the same God."

While I couldn't find the Pope's recent statement that she refers to, I did find something similar made by Pope Francis a couple years ago:

"Jesus Christ, Jehovah, Allah. These are all names employed to describe an entity that is distinctly the same across the world. ... we are all children of God regardless of the name we choose to address him by."

-- The idea that Christians and Muslims worship the same God is, of course, dangerously misleading and absurdly wrong, and something that hardly any Muslim would ever make the mistake of declaring. Christians believe in a Triune God, one God who exists eternally as three separate persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Additionally, Christians believe the Christmas story - that God the Son became flesh and dwelled among us. Both of those beliefs about God - that He is a Trinity and that He took on a body of flesh and was born of Mary - both of those beliefs are considered blasphemy in Muslim teachings.

And you don't have to look any further than Matthew's story of the Wise Men to know that not all peoples worship the same God. If that were true, then God would not have caused the Magi to leave their homeland and travel to a foreign land to find and worship Jesus. If Professor Hawkins is right, then all that the Magi needed to do was to worship the pagan gods of Persia.

But God led the Magi to worship Jesus because He is God come in the flesh to become the one - and only one - who can save us from our sins.