

SERMON: The Wisdom of Following

TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12

You know, just because there were three gifts, does not mean there were only three wise men. But, it is a natural assumption for a polite society, as no one wants to arrive empty-handed when welcoming a new baby.

That's part of what made them wise, I guess. However, had these men been wise by a woman's standards, they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, and brought practical gifts!

But, seriously, why do we call them *wise* men? They've also been called kings or Magi. According to one commentary, the term Magi "suggests that [they] were priestly sages from Persia, who were experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams." In the same paragraph, though, they are also described as, "almost naive," about Herod and the danger of inquiring of him about the birth of a rival king. (Brueggemann, Cousar, Gaventa, and Newsome, ed., *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary*

Commentary Based on the NRSV - Year A)

That certainly doesn't seem like a wise move. Nor does the fact that the star led them to Jerusalem, rather than Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Granted, they're not Jewish, so they are likely unfamiliar with the prophecy that the new ruler and shepherd of Israel would come from Bethlehem.

So far, their apparent ignorance and lack of proper research is making me hesitate to characterize them as *wise*. In fact, among the dictionary definitions of wise, we find, "exercising sound judgment, possessing inside information, aware of or informed about a particular matter." Hmmm. So far, not so good for these three amigos.

We expect a wise person to be a leader, don't we? Someone who knows what to do and isn't afraid to do it. Someone who is insightful about people. Someone who considers all the options, sees all the different perspectives, thinks through all the pros and cons. A leader is someone who can inspire others to follow.

On the other hand, perhaps the wisest leader of all, is the one who knows when and what and whom to follow. More than anything else, the wise men taught us about THE WISDOM OF FOLLOWING.

At first, the wise men are following an unusual star that shines in the sky for all to see. The Magi have studied the skies; they know when they are witnessing something exceptional. And they know that the star beckons them to follow where it leads. They are confident that wherever the star leads them will be worth the journey.

When they arrive in Jerusalem, they begin to ask around, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Through the grapevine, Herod learns that these visitors are asking questions. So he asks the religious leaders, and they quote the prophet Micah who named Bethlehem as the place where a shepherd for Israel would be born. Herod then shares this word with the wise men, and tells them to let him know when they find the child.

So, the wise men aren't really following Herod, as it may seem. They are following the Jewish scriptures; they are following the word of the prophet. They had already been searching diligently, and they certainly would have continued, whether King Herod commanded it or not.

After finding and worshipping and bringing their gifts to the child, the wise men follow the warning they received in a dream not to return to Herod, but to take another road back home.

In school and in the professional world and in organized sports we hear about being good leaders all the time. What it takes to be a good leader, how to develop leadership in others, and on and on. But I can't think of a time when I learned about how to be a good follower. Well, other than in church.

Jesus had disciples. Followers. Students. God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and scripture from Genesis to Revelation are all about living what you say you believe. Faithful following.

So even - or especially - in our leadership, if we are the one everyone else is looking to for answers, for guidance, for direction, we need more than ever to be wise followers and stay closely connected to the one we profess to follow.

My favorite story about the wise men is actually an extra-biblical account: the story of *The Fourth Wise Man*, written by Henry Van Dyke. As the story goes, Artaban, the fourth wise man, was late the day the others departed, and they left to follow the star without him. Undeterred, Artaban set out alone.

He had three priceless gems to give as a gift to the newborn king. But along his journey, he came upon people who needed his help. One was sick, and Artaban

offered one of his gems to provide shelter, food, and medicine to bring the man back to health.

In another village he came upon a woman who was in danger of losing her newborn baby to Herod's soldiers who were ordered to kill all the infants in that place. Artaban lied to the soldiers, telling them there was no child in the house, and paid them with the second of his jewels to leave the woman alone.

Thirty-three years went by and Artaban still had not found the king for whom he searched. He arrived in Jerusalem to find a young girl being dragged away to be sold as a slave. So he used his last gem to pay for her freedom. Just then there was an earthquake and Artaban was hit in the head with a stone from a collapsing building. As he lay dying, he had a vision of Jesus who assured him that his gifts were rightly given, saying, "As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me." The fourth wise man had spent his life searching for a king. But his search was not in vain as he feared.

In all those years of searching, he was already following Jesus. And serving Jesus. And loving Jesus. Without ever meeting Jesus. He feared he had failed to achieve his lifelong goal, always placing the needs of others before his own. But Jesus assured him, serving others *was* the goal. Healing the sick, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, visiting the imprisoned.... “As you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.”

To worship him. To honor him. The wise men took a long desert journey to a foreign land, following the light of a star, to worship Jesus. To honor Jesus. To present costly gifts to Jesus. They weren't even Jewish. They had no concept of a Messiah. They didn't even understand what it meant to be saved.

Sometimes we may not really understand what it means to be saved, beyond the promise of eternal life. But what does it mean for us right now? Before we die?

To follow the light is to overcome the darkness. To follow the scriptures and the Holy Spirit is to hear the voice of God.

To seek Jesus is to find him. As we seek him in the eyes of every person we meet, we will find him. And as we seek to share his love with every person we meet, we become like him. And as we strive to follow in his footsteps - to find the outcast, the downtrodden, the forgotten - we serve him.

May we be like the wise men who taught THE WISDOM OF FOLLOWING... to the glory of God!

AMEN.