

## **Sermon: EPIPHANY SUNDAY, January 3rd, 2016**

In the Name...

After the holidays, a teacher asked her students what they had done on Christmas Day. Some told about opening their presents or seeing visiting relatives. But, one little boy, whose father ran a toy shop, said that after breakfast, his family went down to the shop, looked at the empty shelves, and sang "What a friend we have in Jesus."

In the 2nd Book of Kings, we find the story of Naaman, the Syrian general who travelled to the prophet Elisha in the hopes of being cured of his leprosy. We read that when he appeared with his large and splendid retinue outside the prophet's humble abode, Elisha did not even go to the door to greet him, but, sent a servant to tell this visitor to go and wash in the Jordan seven times. Naaman, the Bible says, then left in a rage, furious that Elisha had not offered a lengthy and passionate prayer, waved his arms about dramatically, and caused a first-class miracle complete with earthquake, thunder and lightning. After all, General Naaman was an important man, the master of mighty armies, renowned and feared. He deserved to have his expectations met in a grand manner.

Well, while looking at Nativity scenes in movies and plays over the years, I've always been struck by the contrast in appearance between the townsfolk and the three wise men. Everyone else seems to wear plain, homespun robes, but, the wise men positively glitter, like Liberace, and I wonder about the stir the original wise men must have created two thousand years ago when they descended upon the sleepy little town of Bethlehem.

These were important men who had travelled far to celebrate a royal birth. Coming from the imperial court of Persia, what would they be expecting to see? Doubtless, the young child living in a palace, wearing silk, surrounded by slaves. Certainly, when they arrived in Jerusalem that must have been in their minds. But, to their query, "Where is the new-born King? We have followed his star." the old-born King, Herod, has no answer. In fact, he's quite perplexed. Perhaps, his star is slipping.

The Holy Books are consulted, an obscure verse is found, and these splendiferous visitors are packed off to a humble village where, in no palace, but, a simple house, they find the toddler. And there, we read, they fall down before him, worshipping, and presenting precious treasures.

Now, why didn't they react like Naaman - angry and disappointed? Why were they not offended by the obvious lack of majesty about the situation? Why did they not turn and go away complaining that the star was false and their valuable time wasted? Why? Because, they believed in God more than they believed in themselves. Even though God revealed himself to them in a manner different to what they might have imagined, they accepted what they found. And, that is the wisdom of the Wise Men and the lesson they teach us today.

For, if we are truly following God's will in our lives, then we should not be surprised or upset when events turn out in ways more or less different or even contrary to our expectations. After all, if there is one thing the Christmas story teaches us, it is that God loves surprises.

Now the Gospel is clear that the wise men followed a real star, some sort of physical phenomenon in the sky. I'm sure we've all heard various explanations of it as a super-nova or some planetary alignment, or a combination of constellations and comets, whatever. The point is that it was something a lot of people saw, but, it only held meaning for these men.

So, what gave them the insight to see a hidden message in something obvious? Clearly, they must have started with something. Well, during the Babylonian Exile from 587 to 539 BC, when the Jewish people were relocated to Babylon, their sacred texts and prophecies about their Messiah came to the attention of the priestly classes of Persia and the East. And, long after the Jews returned to Israel, the Jewish Scriptures became a part of Persian priestly study. So this story teaches us, first, that God's Word must be studied.

After all, nobody who has not studied medicine would, one hopes, presume to perform surgery and no reasonable person would presume to drive a car without at least a few lessons, yet it never ceases to amaze me how many people presume to pronounce with authority on religious matters after only a glance at the National Enquirer. No, we need to study God's Word to hear his words and find his guidance.

The wise men found the guidance and then they did something about it. They travelled. The wise men were intellectuals, but, having seen and recognized what the star meant, they were not content to sit back and speculate, lounging on couches in their palaces. They put their thoughts into action. And that is the second great lesson they teach us. When God has something to say to us, He usually wants us to do something about it.

And thirdly, the words of the wise men themselves direct us to the point of it all, to what seeking God's will is all about. "We have come", they say, "to worship him". It is worship which the journey of the wise men reminds us is primary in a relationship with God. When the wise men reached the culmination of their study, the end of their action, they didn't congratulate themselves on a job well done. They fell down and worshipped despite the unexpected simplicity of the surroundings.

No palace, no cushions and silks, no slaves or soldiers. This was a strange king, but, king nonetheless. And, as ridiculous as they probably looked, all gussied up in their finery, they didn't feel in the slightest bit embarrassed. They were true to the star and the One who put it there.

Sometimes the truths of our faith, the guidance of the Lord, these lead us to places and situations which we find surprising. Naaman and the Wise Men both found themselves in such situations, but, they reacted very differently.

May we share then, with these very wise men, the wisdom to study the truth, the motivation to seek the truth, and the humility to worship the truth. Wherever it may be found.

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