

## “Were the Wise Men Really Wise?”

Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany Sunday and Renewal of Covenant in the Wesleyan Tradition: January 2, 2011

A homily preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2011, I. Peden

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“Behold, wise men came from the East.” Were the wise men really wise? Let’s consider this question. Somehow I doubt that there is a simple “Yes” or “No” answer.

Most people today, not unlike the era when Christ was born, regard educated people as knowledgeable, wise, and insightful. “Were the wise men really wise?” Viewing the astrologers as educated people of their day, we would answer: “Yes, these are wise men.” However, the decision to make a southerly nine mile trip from Herod’s court in Jerusalem to the stable in Bethlehem, I believe, would have received a mixed reaction from the world. Let me explain ...

First, there were many Jews (at the time Jesus was born) who hated and distrusted Herod whom they considered a puppet of Rome. I doubt that the political cynics of the day would have considered the wise men wise for traveling to Jerusalem for a *tete-a-tete* with Herod. I suspect they would have seen the three astrologers as Herod’s “lackeys.” I guess there would have been a group of people who would have seen through the sly and deceptive response given by Herod to the wise men: “Go over to Bethlehem and see if you can find this new king so that I can worship him.” Herod’s intention was not to worship but to kill any potential rival to the throne. The so-called wise men had been duped by Herod. I doubt that Herod took kindly to the idea of a bunch of sagacious visitors – foreigners at that! – coming to pay homage to some new king.

Second, I think it is also safe to assume that there would have been scholarly critics or contemporaries of the wise men who would have laughed at what they might have considered the “incompetence” of these wise men. They would have asked: Why did they not follow the star and go directly to Bethlehem, especially since they knew from their studies of the Old Testament prophets, and the prophet Micah in particular, that someone [I quote] “who is to rule Israel” would come forth from Bethlehem? The distance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is nine miles. I can hear these skeptics questioning the knowledge and ability of the wise men for misunderstanding and miscalculating signs of the birth of a new king by nine miles.

But I would like to think that there was a third group of people who, like the wise men, had an “epiphany,” which is defined as “a sudden manifestation of the essence or meaning of something.” An “epiphany” is an “aha!” moment. When we say, “I get it!” – to express that we comprehend the meaning of something subtle or profound, simple or complex – then we have had an “epiphany.” It is what happens when something that has remained hidden to us suddenly becomes manifest.

The season of Epiphany that we are now entering takes its name from the manifestation of the divine nature of Jesus to the Gentiles as represented by the wise men or magi. I would describe this third group’s epiphany in this way: rarely does one find the beauty and majesty of God in the midst of evil, conniving people and in the intrigue and corruption that inevitably exist in places of power and prestige. But that is what the wise men, and those like them, found and still find: God in the midst of all the garbage of the world!

*Kudos* to the wise men for not lingering in Jerusalem assuming that the power to rule Israel would come through the powerful and be found in a powerful place like Jerusalem! It seems they were granted wisdom that went beyond their astrological research and human insight.

*Kudos* to the wise men for being prepared to make the journey to the modest town of Bethlehem! It takes guts to admit you’re wrong and to correct a mistake and move on. Their studying the stars had taught them that things are not always like they seem; the wise men had a humble, teachable spirit and that goes with true wisdom.

*Kudos* to the wise men for recognizing that a baby lying in a feeding trough represents a very different way for God to choose to get things done in the world than through a powerful king on his throne! This epiphany opened their eyes to grasp the alternative future for Israel posed by Micah who understood God in a different light: in particular that God tends to slip in at odd times, in odd places, taking the future out of our hands and away from our control.

*Kudos* to the wise men for not returning to Herod! After they had laid their gifts before the manger, they were warned by an angel not to go back to Jerusalem and King Herod. They were given a kind of spiritual wisdom which comes when one discerns God’s will. The wise men listened to the angel; they followed God’s guidance and went home another way ...that’s proof of their wisdom.

Were the wise men really wise? No, not in the world's eyes because it's dangerous to enter a den of iniquity; it's difficult to cross cultures; it's dumb to stoop to lowly, humble levels when one can stay in upper levels of power and prestige.

Were the wise men really wise? Yes. As dangerous, as difficult, as dumb as it may have seemed ...what they did was wise, profoundly wise, in God's eyes. God led them to a place they would not choose, and they found Christ in the midst of chaos. They also found true joy in the midst of a community that included family and strangers, poor and rich, educated and uneducated, lowly and proud ...oh yes, and animals, too! How do we know they were truly wise? Touched and transformed by the Babe of Bethlehem, they went home another way!

Bishop Will Willimon writes: "I suppose that one reason we call these men wise is that so many, many people who *thought* they were wise, completely missed the birth of baby Jesus. But the magi got it. They found their way to the child and his parents and worshipped the child Jesus as the long awaited Messiah."

As we renew our Covenant in the Wesleyan Tradition and prepare to come to the Table of our Lord and to bring our lives again as gifts to Christ, let us ponder these questions: Are we prepared to make the nine mile trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and admit that we are not in control, not on the top? Are we prepared to meet the new King – God in raw human flesh – in a cow stable, and other odd places, rather than in a church, or in a palace, or places we consider sacred or powerful? If so, if we can answer these questions affirmatively, we, too, will be truly wise and we'll also go home another way!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.