

The Wise Ways - Sermon Based on Matthew 2:1-12
by David Hindman on Sunday, January 2, 2011

Every Christmas at our house we read *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. It's the story of a church's Christmas Pageant taken over by the Herdmans, the six absolutely worst children in the world. They intimidate the church's children into letting them be Mary, Joseph, the Angel of the Lord, and the three wise men. But they know nothing about Jesus' birth so the rest of the yarn revolves around the Herdmans learning the story and how that changes them.

The Herdmans think the Magi's gifts of gold; frankincense and myrrh are utterly stupid. The gold is OK. But fragrant oils? What baby needs them? So in the pageant, three Herdmans carry the usual gift props. But they also bring the ham donated to their family by Social Services.

We might think the Herdmans have a point: a ham makes a lot of sense as a useful gift to a family in need. Except Jesus is a Jew, so ham's not really kosher. But that wouldn't matter to the Herdmans. He could always trade it for some lox and bagels.

But Matthew's Christmas is not meant to be taken literally. It *is* meant to be taken seriously. The gifts point us to the end of the story and hint at who Jesus truly is. Already the shadows at the end of Matthew's story fall across the opening pages. Both at beginning and end Jesus is

called the King of the Jews and both times religious and political leaders troubled by that good news. And here already we are given clues to who Jesus truly is. The Magi bring gold – a gift fit for a king. Frankincense is a fragrance used only in Temple worship. The gift tells us two things: Jesus is God in our midst and is worthy of our love and respect. And he is like a priest connecting and restoring us to God' friendship. And myrrh is a spice used in burials and already points us to Christ's death on a cross that will bring new life to us.

Take the story seriously, but not literally, including the legends and traditions that built up around the basic story. The assumption they were kings is based mostly on the Psalm and Isaiah text we read today, not Matthew. We assume there were three wise men because they bring three gifts. The Magi were astrologers. Perhaps because there are 12 Zodiac signs another legend tells us there were 12 wise men, not just three. We just don't know.

Legend gives us three names – Melchior, Balthasar and Caspar. There's no basis for this, or the assumption that one of them was black. One legend even tells us the three wise men were descendants of Noah's three sons and so represent all of humanity. We just don't know.

Whoever and however many they were, they came seeking the King of the Jews to worship and pay him homage. It's interesting that the wise men are outsiders who don't know the story or the scriptures. But they see what others do not. They see a star not noticed in Jerusalem. They see a sign that God is doing something new and stupendous in the world. They choose to get on the road to see for themselves what's up. But those closest to Bethlehem, who should notice, do nothing. They know the scripture and prophecies. But instead of going to see for themselves, they stay put. At best they're indifferent. At worst they're hostile and resistant to this new thing God is doing.

Every church should be blessed with a doubter, a questioner, or someone for whom the Jesus story is completely new. An acquaintance of mine tries to have at least one non-believer or new Christian in every Bible study he leads. They see things others don't see. They ask great questions and probe others to think in new ways. And sometimes they ask questions that make us see how hard it is to follow Jesus. They think Jesus actually expects us to forgive those who wrong us, to love our enemies, and to love God more than our stuff. And if we Christ followers don't take him seriously, they ask what's up with that. *That's* a good question.

Once when our campus ministry at William and Mary hosted a group of Russian students, we met daily for Bible study. It was all new to them. One day I was telling them the parable of the prodigal son, truly one of Jesus' masterpieces about love, forgiveness and generosity. They'd never heard it and as I told the story I heard it almost like the first time, too. The wise men are full of wonder and hope because the story is fresh and new for them. They hear the promise for the joyful gift it is. God preserve *us* from being dull or bored, or threatened by the good news here.

The Magi go where you'd expect to find a newborn Jewish king – Jerusalem. They're only off by 5 miles. But it might as well be a million miles because King Herod and King Jesus are so different. I love the fact that the wise men are so close and yet so far away. They don't know scripture. They're not Jews. But they seek something greater than themselves. They look to the heavens and see something divine at work and want to know more. The Magi remind us that there's a God sized hole in all of us. God reaches out to *all* people - Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or none of the above. God is revealed in a variety of ways, not just scripture— through nature, through the orderly processes of creation, through wondrous discoveries of science. God's fingerprints are all over the universe if we have eyes to see. Pay attention to divine splendors around us

and we can draw us closer to God. We Christians believe Jesus is the clearest and most focused picture we can have of God. He is the way closest to the heart of God. But to see and to get all the way there and not miss it by five miles we need scripture as a map and a community to help us understand what we're seeing. The wise men get close to Bethlehem. But without scripture's added guidance they never would have found the Child. With that added help they see for themselves what the folks in Jerusalem missed. And why did they miss it? They knew things in their heads. But their hearts just weren't in it. You see, faith is not a hand me down. We have to get on the road and look for Christ ourselves if we're going to find the Christ child and know the joy of seeing and paying him homage. If we seek with all our hearts through prayer and scripture study and worship and serving the poor and pay attention to God's quiet signs, we will find surely find him. We will see for ourselves what a blessed gift he is. The story of the Magi tells us there is room at God's table for all of us. Everywhere people are seeking God and following whatever sign or star they can find. There's room for them. But there's room for us to do our part, too. If Christ is our joy, invite them to go five more miles to Bethlehem to see for themselves. Tell them the great good news - the face of God is there for all to see in this humble, vulnerable Child.

Apparently God will move heaven and earth for that to happen. Don't try to give a scientific explanation for the star - that's not Matthew's angle. This star acts like Tinker Bell: it shows up, disappears, and then stands directly over the house –almost with an arrow tail pointing straight hovering a few yards above. God wants the child to be found and to be worshiped by all people and even uses nature to help us find him. Here even nature's laws of nature serve the law of love guiding us to God.

The wise still seek God. And when we find God we certainly go home a different way because we aren't ever the same. God still seeks us and wants to take us a new way. So tell the story we know. Invite others to travel on to Bethlehem and see for themselves. That's the best gift we can offer a neighbor or friend – better than gold, frankincense or myrrh – or even a ham.