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West Bound and Down
Sermon for Epiphany Sunday, Matthew 2:1-12
January 6, 2019

Today we wrap up our sermon series on Christmas People. We've been looking at the different characters of Christmas and discovering how their stories are also our stories. We've zoomed in on Zechariah and Elizabeth, the elderly parents of John the Baptist. We've spent time with Joseph, Mary, the shepherds, the angels and even King Herod. On this Epiphany Sunday, we ponder the wise men who journeyed from afar to find the Christ child.

[Depending on your age, you have undoubtedly given or received at least one or twelve or possibly hundreds of Christmas cards throughout your life that show three men with crowns on their heads, riding camels, with their silhouettes against the night sky and a giant star gleaming overhead, even though we have no evidence that the wise men were kings, or that there were three of them. We ASSUME three, because there were three different gifts. Something about these men captures our imaginations—who were they, where did they come from, how did they find out about a Jewish savior and what made them go looking for him?]

We don't know any of that, but here's what we do know: we know from the Greek Matthew uses that the men were magi, which is where we get the word "magic." They practiced a form of astrology, which is the study of the movement of the stars and other celestial objects as a way to understand human events, and which is not really compatible with traditional Jewish and Christian teachings, at least not today's forms of astrology.

We know they must have come a LONG way from home, because nobody local, nobody even remotely familiar with the way things stood in Judea, would have been naïve enough to knock on Herod's front door and ask where the king of the Jews was. We talked last week about

how paranoid Herod was, and how he did anything it took to stay in power, including having his favorite wife and three of his sons killed.

Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews, are you kidding me? You don't ask him that! You could brainstorm for a week and you would not come up with a more dangerous question to ask Herod than that.

As far as how many wise men, there were either a bunch of wise men, or they had a sizable caravan traveling with them, providing protection, because three men alone on the road carrying treasure chests wouldn't last long, no matter how mean and tough their camels might be. And caravans were not cheap, so they must have had means.

So here we have these wise men, however many they are, taking on the incredible expense, danger and inconvenience of a long road trip at least part of which had to go through treacherous desert territory, not to mention the hazards of talking to Herod. They continue on to Bethlehem, just five miles south of Jerusalem, and what do they do when they see that the star has finally stopped? Everything they've been through, to what purpose?

They enter the house, they kneel down, they open their treasure chests and offer this child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And, scripture says, they were overwhelmed with joy.

They came all that way, to give the best they had. To a toddler who could not possibly appreciate the costliness of what they offered. Who had no idea yet who he was or what he would grow up to do. No miracles or healings to offer in return, not yet. No words of wisdom or wise teaching to share yet, couldn't even say thank you, yet they gave him the best they had. . .

I can't read this story without recalling one of my favorite scenes from the classic book, [The Best Christmas Pageant Ever](#), by Barbara Robinson. I've probably quoted this book before. It was first published back in 1971, and it opens like this:

The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken-down toolhouse.

It continues a page or two later:

They were just so all-around awful you could hardly believe they were real: Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys—six skinny, stringy-haired kids all alike except for being different sizes and having different black-and-blue places where they had clonked each other.

The story is told from the point of view of one of Imogene Herdman's classmates, and the essence of the story is that one Sunday, all the Herdman kids show up at church, because they have heard a rumor there will be candy and cake. They hear about the church's annual Christmas Pageant, and decide they want to be in it. The other kids are so terrified of the Herdmans that they don't dare raise their hands for any of the main parts, so Ralph and Imogene become Joseph and Mary, Leroy, Claude, and Ollie get to be the wise men, and to the horror of all the little boys assigned to be shepherds, Gladys, the youngest and the meanest of all the Herdmans, volunteers to be the angel of the Lord. The whole town is in an uproar.

The Herdmans know only that Christmas is Jesus' birthday. They've never heard the Christmas story before. They are outraged to learn about King Herod, who wants to kill a baby, and horrified by the fact that Mary has to put the baby in a feedbox for animals. Imogene says she would have named the baby Bill, not Jesus. Gladys is delighted that the angel of the Lord shows up in the middle of the night and gets to scare the shepherds half to death. And they are all disgusted to hear about the gifts that the wise men bring to Jesus. When they learn that frankincense and myrrh are precious resins and fragrant oils, they want to know why three kings can't come up with better gifts for a young family than that.

There is a disaster of a dress rehearsal, when the fire department comes because the church ladies see smoke coming out of the women's room and don't realize it's just Imogene taking a smoke break. Then the night of the pageant arrives, and everybody comes, because they want to see what these kids will do to the Christmas pageant. Ralph and Imogene finally show up late as Joseph and Mary—Imogene has a black eye, her veil is crooked, and she's wearing giant hoop earrings.

Instead of cradling the baby Jesus doll, Imogene carries him over her shoulder and burps him a few times before putting him in the manger. Gladys as the angel of the Lord, makes the most of having the only speaking part in the pageant, and yells at the shepherds for all she's worth, "Hey! Unto you a child is born!" and the shepherds tremble because they are sore afraid of Gladys.

And then, finally, Leroy, Claude, and Ollie march down the aisle as the wise men. None of them is carrying the fancy bath-salts jars that had always been used for frankincense and myrrh. Instead, Leroy is struggling with something heavy, and everyone watches as he drops a large ham in front of the manger. We learn that the ham has come from the Christmas food basket that the church had given to the Herdmans. It still has the ribbon around it, saying, "Merry Christmas." What with that and a few other things, which I won't share because I don't want to spoil the book, everyone concludes this really was the best Christmas pageant ever. At the end of the night, the Herdmans refuse to take back the ham. The narrator says, "As far I'm concerned, Mary is always going to look a lot like Imogene Herdman—nervous and bewildered but ready to clobber anyone who laid a hand on her baby—and the wise men are always going to be Leroy and his brothers, bearing ham."

And whether it's gold, frankincense and myrrh, the story of the magi invites each one of us to ask these questions: When it comes to giving, what does OUR best look like? And to whom are we giving it? What does Jesus want US to give in the coming year?

More and more of us are growing in our financial giving. More than 40 families and individuals in this congregation increased the dollar amount of their pledge over and above what they pledged in 2018, and at least ten families are pledging for the first time. Only you can know for sure if you are giving your best.

But there's also our time, our talent, our energy and priorities, which are just as valuable, just as treasured, as our gold. As I ask myself what my best looks like, and what Jesus might want me to give in the coming year, something that came to mind immediately for me is that too often I'm giving the leftovers of my time and attention to my husband, and not my best. In other situations, I'm too often giving what's easy for me to give to people, or what I feel obligated to give, rather than giving my very best. Too often I make that common mistake of giving my best energy to what seems urgent, instead of what's truly important to me. And that's too bad, because when we're only giving leftovers, or giving out of obligation, we will not know overwhelming joy. . .

When the wise men offered their treasures, there was no deduction for their tax return . . . their names were not written down in programs or placed on a plaque for people to see . . . they did not receive a carefully crafted thank you note outlining all the ways their gifts made a difference. No guarantees that Mary and Joseph wouldn't take their gifts and blow them on a wild weekend in Jerusalem. Only the joy of knowing they had given their all to seek Jesus and honor him. What a great mission. What a fabulous purpose.

What does your best look like? What part of yourself is Jesus asking you to give in this new year? As we continue living into our mission statement of “Loving God, loving neighbors and living with purpose,” may the wisdom of the magi be our wisdom, too. May this church light the way, like the star that led them to Christ. Amen!