

A Lesson from the Wise Men  
Matthew 2:1-11a  
December 4, 2013 – Advent 1

*After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.*

There is a story that floats around the internet at Christmastime. It goes like this. A lady was passing a store front and noticed a nativity scene in the window. This woman, her arms loaded with Christmas presents, was outraged. "Can you believe it?, she said. "Now those silly Christians are trying to drag religion into Christmas."

That story would be funny if it weren't so true. And there's more. What used to be called Christmas vacation is now winter break. In schools, true Christmas carols have been replaced with winter holiday songs. No more *O Come All Ye Faithful* just *Frosty the Snowman*.

We used to assume that everyone understood the Christmas story. Not any more. We live in a post-Christian America. Today, people know more about the story *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* than they do about the story of the babe in Bethlehem. Jesus, who is the true star of Christmas, has heavy competition from Santa Claus, Rudolph, Charlie Brown, and even Scrooge.

Tonight, we are going to look to the Wise Men, who came to visit the Christ Child, so we might learn a few lessons that will help us focus on the Lord of Christmas. Tonight, we don't care about whom these men were or where they came from. Our focus is on the fact they recognized a meaning of Christmas that seems to going by the wayside today.

To begin with, **these men were paying attention**. The wise men had done their homework. When the star appeared, they knew what it meant. They understood the prophecy of God's Messiah coming to earth. Not only had they done their homework, they were watching for the coming of God's Son.

Do you see the irony in this story? The Jews, who had been waiting since Adam and

Eve first sinned, the people to whom the Savior had been promised, the people who prized God's Word as their most valuable possession, the people who were looking for the Messiah, missed the Messiah. The foreigners understood and responded. God's chosen people were clueless.

There is a parallel to be drawn between the Jews of the first Christmas and the Christians of 2013. We, too, can get so caught up in the trappings and traditions of Christmas that we miss the Christchild. We, who know the story so well, we who have heard the story so often, can become immune to the impact of Bethlehem and just float past the manger while we function on "auto-pilot."

So, it's good to ask ourselves, "Are we paying attention this Christmas or do we have our cruise control on?" It's good to ask ourselves that question over and over. We can be so hypnotized by the presents, the paper, the lights, the glitz and the glamor that we miss recognizing who that baby in the cattle stall really is? This year, be a wise Christian and pay attention.

Our second lesson is that **the wise men were active and not passive**. The wise men witnessed a miraculous event – the one-time appearance of an unmistakable star. And they reacted to that miracle. They didn't react as people might react today, but they reacted.

Let's look at what they didn't do. When they saw the star, they didn't write a book or start bargaining for a movie deal. They didn't even go on the talk-show circuit. The wise men didn't assume their good fortune was a handy way to garner wealth or status.

However, they did understand that seeing that star made them special. They felt so special they packed up and began a journey that would take around two years. These foreigners, these non-Jews, these outsiders, actively responded to the gift that had been given to them. These men packed up gifts of their own and set out to honor and worship this newborn King. They weren't content with just the information about this King, they wanted a personal encounter with the baby King.

Is that our reaction? Do we wait around for Christmas to come to us or do we actively seek to bring ourselves to Christmas? Too many people spend too much time waiting for the Christmas spirit to strike them. Doing that almost guarantees another Christmas will pass by leaving you feeling like you missed something. You feel that way because you did miss something. You missed the Christ of Christmas.

As children, we would start looking forward to Christmas as soon as Thanksgiving was over. We would make lists and dream about the treasures that would be ours on that magical day. As adults, we tend to lose that excitement because we aren't receiving the presents – we are buying them. Too often, Christmas becomes just another job.

That attitude spoils our Christmas because we are passive about Christmas. We can't sit around and wait for Christmas to "happen to us." We have to actively pursue

Christmas. We have to want a personal encounter with the Christ of Christmas more than anything else. When that encounter appears at the top of your Christmas list, you will find more joy than you ever imagined in the gift that comes in a manger.

The third thing the wise men did right was **they resisted the inevitable distractions.**

Two weeks or so before Christmas we might believe in the “magic” of Christmas that we hear so much about in television specials and in advertising. But as the day grows closer and we begin to feel that “crunch time” pressure, the magic of Christmas can become the nightmare of Christmas. Presents still need to be bought or, at least, wrapped. Meals need to be planned and prepared. Parties need to be thrown and attended. All the distractions make us painfully aware of the fact that Christmas “magic” is just an illusion.

How many distractions do you think the wise men had to endure. A two-year journey, on foot, camels, and donkeys, through the desert land of the mid-east, isn't what I would call the ideal vacation, and I bet the wise men felt that way, too. Robbers, heat, and sand storms don't make for a good time.

Do you think the wise men ever wondered if they made the right choice? Can't you just hear one of the wise men saying, “It seemed like a good idea at the time.” If they never had second thoughts, they weren't human. However, second thoughts are just temptations from the devil and our sinful nature. The important thing is that the wise men didn't let the distractions of the journey override the importance of the journey.

We also have distractions. Satan is always doing his best to bury the King of Christmas under the hustle and bustle of Christmas. Here is a list of some of Satan's best distractions. Some of them you will easily recognize. Some might give you something to think about:

- § Focusing on the temporal rather than the spiritual.
- § Celebrating the celebration rather than the Savior.
- § Focusing on the physical gifts rather than the gift of God that changes hearts and lives.
- § Being more concerned about the costs and obligations than you are concerned for the people around you and showing them God's love.
- § Being so angry about the commercialization of Christmas that you lose sight of Christmas or just withdraw from Christmas.
- § Getting so involved “doing” Christmas that you miss Christmas.

The wise men found the true King of Christmas because they were paying attention, they actively sought the King, and they refused to allow distractions knock them off course. You can do these same things. If you do, this Christmas you will have the same reward those wise men received – a personal encounter with the King of Christmas.