

Worship: The Wise Men Show Us How

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

January 6, 2018
Faith Community

One of the enduring images of Christmas has to be the Wise Men. So popular are they that a number of misconceptions have come up over the years, and in the process we've lost track of things they can teach us. Let me give you a few examples.

First of all, we've got our timing a bit off. The Wise Men really don't belong in our manger scenes since they didn't arrive until later. Some think it was a few months down the road, while others suspect that Jesus may have been as old as two by the time they showed up.

Another misconception has to do with their identity. Sometimes they're called kings, as in the carol we'll sing later on, but they probably were not. More than likely they were astrologers who specialized in interpreting dreams and signs in the sky to predict the future, and in that way may have even been early astronomers.

Thirdly is the number. We don't really know how many of them were on the scene. Matthew doesn't name them or number them, but since they brought three gifts, the thought of three Wise Men fit nicely.

So, conversely, what can we learn from the Wise Men?

The Old Testament is filled with promises of the coming Messiah, and the New Testament confirms them. Especially in the book of Matthew we see how many of them were fulfilled. That's why Matthew is the first book of the New Testament, by the way. It's not the first Gospel to be written, but it *is* the most Jewish, and so it's a bridge between the Old and New Testaments.

Their arrival on the scene was a big deal, a very big deal. Remember this is in Matthew's gospel, and Matthew was especially interested in Jesus' Jewish roots, demonstrating that he was indeed the long awaited Messiah. He also points out that Jesus' birth in Bethlehem was itself a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Thirdly, their visit points out the worldwide impact of this infant. His birth would have international significance. Something very special was going on here.

There are other things that can speak to us today on a more personal level. Look at what happened, and see how you might apply them in your own life. They can even be sustaining for you.

First of all, the Wise Men searched. They took the initiative. Whatever else we can learn here, this is something we should not miss.

Look at how the story begins. They come to King Herod and say,

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. (Mt. 2:2)

They may have come from Babylon, Persia, or the Arabian Desert, but wherever it was, it took a big effort to get to Jerusalem. There was personal risk involved, as well as expense, but they did it.

Friends, watch this closely. The Wise Men searched. How are you doing that?

- What are you reading?
- What do you do with the questions of your life?
- How do you handle the doubts?
- What do you do with the stirrings inside you?

Do not leave your life as a Christ follower to chance. You will not grow that way. Neither will you be equipped for the challenges of life.

The Wise Men saw the star and responded. What might it be for you? Maybe it's some kind of coincidence that when you look closely really isn't. It could be a broken heart. It could be a victory of some kind. Whatever it is, see God's hand in it. Let it drive you to God.

The next thing they did was to stay the course. As the story continues, we see someone else searching. It's Herod. The king, himself. He hears the Wise Men tell him what they're up to and decides to get involved. He too wants to know where this newborn king is. He gets a rough idea of the location and then calls them back together and tries to partner with them in their search. He tells them that when they get the specific location nailed down to come back and let him know. This is where the train could go right off the rails.

The Wise Men were searching. Herod was searching. Their motives couldn't have been more different.

The Wise Men wanted to worship:
Herod wanted to destroy.
The Wise Men saw the promise of hope:
Herod saw a threat to his power.
The Wise Men found joy:
Herod found fear.

Friends, watch this closely. There will always be temptations,

- to settle for less than God's best in your life,
- to live a life of good intentions,
- to confuse religious routine with life changing Christianity.

God spoke to the Wise Men, first through a star and then in something as common as a dream that helped them avoid disaster. Had they gone back to Herod, the baby Jesus would've been in great danger. Instead, they paid attention. They stayed the course. You need to do the same. Sometimes this can be so subtle. Don't let the work of God in you be compromised or even destroyed.

Here's something else the Wise Men teach us. Give God your best. The gifts they brought were treasures. Someone had to bankroll the trip, and someone had to shell out for the goodies. I need to come back to this story regularly. I'm constantly tempted to give God the leftovers of my life. When I do, my witness suffers and I myself miss God's best for me.

Friends, give God your best. Right off the top.

The time of day when you're most alert and effective. That's when you pray. That's when you read. That's when you discern God's leading.

The first cut of your paycheck or other source of income, not after expenses have been taken care of.

Be at the top of your game whether at school, work, home or wherever precisely because you're a Christ follower.

The apostle Paul put it best:

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col. 3:17)

When you live like this, you'll be amazed at what happens. Look at the Wise Men. There were messages in the very gifts they brought, the gold, the incense, and the myrrh.

Gold signified royalty. This wasn't an ordinary kid here; this was someone special; this was a newborn king. So the Wise Men brought gold.

The incense pointed out that this was someone more than human. It's no coincidence it's used as an expression of worship in some traditions since when it's burned, its scent and smoke speak to people of God. This gift symbolized that here was God in the flesh. The Wise Men brought incense.

Finally there was myrrh. It too was costly and was used to make perfume. But it was also ground into powder and served as a primitive form of embalming. Myrrh would be sprinkled between strips of cloth as they were wrapped around the body of a dead person, as would happen with Jesus. The Wise Men brought myrrh.

A king. God in the flesh. Born to die. When you give God your best, whatever that may be, God will work wonders with it. God will work wonders with you. After all, he gave us his best. He gave us Jesus.

So friends, like the Wise Men:

Search.

Stay the course.

Give God your best.