

“So, What Made Those Wise Guys So Smart?”

by Pastor Steve Ramer

January 11, 2015

Second Sunday of Epiphany

Scriptures:

Matthew 2:1-12

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in Judea, when Herod was King. Astrologers from the East showed up in Jerusalem just then. “Tell us,” they said, “where the newborn king of the Judeans is? We have observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.”

When this news reached King Herod, he was visibly shaken, and all of Jerusalem along with him. He called together all the ranking priests and local experts, and pressed for information: “Where is the Anointed supposed to be born?”

They replied, “At Bethlehem in Judea.” This is how it is put by the prophet: And you, Bethlehem, in the province of Judah, you are by no means least among the rulers of Judah. Out of you will come a leader who will shepherd my people, Israel.

Then Herod called the astrologers together secretly and learned from them the exact time when the star had become visible. Then he sent them to Bethlehem with these instructions: “Go and make a careful search for the child. When you find out where he is, report back to me so that I can also go and pay him homage.”

They listened to what the King had to say and they continued on their way.

And there, ahead of them was the star that they had observed in the East: it lead them forward until it came to a standstill above where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were beside themselves with joy. And they arrived at the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. They fell down and paid him homage. Then they opened their treasure chests and then presented him with gifts - gold and incense and myrrh. And because they had been alerted in a dream not to return to Herod, they journeyed back to their own country by a different route.

Sermon

Societies of the ancient world were clearly stratified.

Everyone had a place and thus their subsequent role and value

depended upon what rung they occupied on that social ladder.

Health, wealth and the very survival of any nation or Empire

depended upon everyone knowing and then keeping their place.

Just like Yertle the Turtle, those sitting at the top

relied on those on the bottom to keep quiet and stay in their place.

If one person stepped out of line then the whole kit

and caboodle could come tumbling down.

This was certainly the way things were

and worked in Palestine at the time Jesus was born.

At the top of his world there was Caesar
 who ruled over the immense and mighty Roman Empire.
And like all King's in the ancient world,
 regardless of whether they came to power through inheritance
 or military coup, they were considered Divine,
 chosen by and placed in their roles by the Gods.
But if you read a little history about any Empire,
 whether it be Roman or early British,
 you'll also notice that God had a habit of constantly
changing his mind since many of those Divinely ordained rulers
 came and went, often in rapid succession.
Brothers, fathers, mothers, sons, uncles, cousins and generals
 were always deposing, exiling and killing one another
 as each one claimed their own particular Divine Right to rule.
And of course the warrior class needed to be given a higher status
 than most, in order to ensure this Divine selection.

Now Herod was given the title of "King"
 but his power was given to him by the Roman Empire.
He served at the pleasure of Cesar and he had basically two jobs.
 First keep things quiet in Judea so that the Roman army
 could spend its time and energy conquering other nations.
And secondly to make sure taxes were collected and sent to Rome.
 The fact that Herod was Jewish just goes to show that Empires
 need local collaborators to help pacify the local populace.
Rome had little concern for how he got things done.
 So if Herod wanted to collect additional taxes to enrich himself
 or to spend on lavish building projects,
 Rome was content to let him take his cut.

And though Herod was certainly not on the top
 he certainly had a lot to lose if and when
 God decided it was time for a change in the ruling order,
or if anyone on a lower rung than he
 began questioning the social status quo.
For Herod the status quo was clear,
 there was room for only one King of the Jews in Judea.
And the game of thrones, for him, was quite real
 requiring a quick and ruthless response to any perceived threat.

I find the words Matthew chooses to describe Herod's reaction

to this royal search party quite interesting.
King Herod, Matthew says, was “visibly shaken”
when he heard those astrologers request for help.
Something obvious gave away the fact
that he was not happy with what they were saying.
Was it a furrowed brow, profuse sweating,
or was his body literally shaking in his royal slippers?
What ever it was, it caused him,
and all of those around him in his royal court to be alarmed!
Remember, Herod, and those around him,
who benefited from the status quo did have a lot to lose.

And what about these fellas that Christian tradition calls, “Wise Men?”
Who were they? And what exactly was their role?
Now for Empires to work a vast bureaucracy of clerks, accountants,
artists, scientists, lawyers and religious clergy were necessary.
All of those folks would have been on the government payroll.
They would have formed sort of an upper well educated class of folks
who used their minds more than their backs to make a living.
Matthew calls them astrologers, or quasi-scientists
who studied the stars and read books about stars.
They observed and took notes of what was happening
in the celestial realm and then proved reliable phenomena.
But they also were interpreters of these cosmic events,
probing for deeper and other worldly meanings.
These latter efforts we might deem as religious
and so they might have been priests as well
and thus servants of both God and science.

Perhaps both curiosity and religious zeal had compelled them
to embark on that journey of following yonder star?
Which, brings me to what I think is the point of the story.
That learned folk, with soft hands,
that had never labored a day in their lives
and who spent their days indoors studying books
and their nights out studying the stars,
would have so willingly and enthusiastically embarked
on such a journey that was likely filled with danger and uncertainty.
And all it took, was one particularly unusual star shining in the distance.
A sign, beckoning them to follow and promising them
the hope of a new birth- the possibility of a new beginning.

Matthew indicates that this light went ahead of them,
 leading them like a huge cosmic flashlight.
 Which leads me to surmise then, that they traveled at night.
Now there were many legitimate things to fear traveling in the dark
 and plenty of good reasons to avoid it.
But traveling at night was also a smart thing to do
 since crossing the desert at the height of summer heat
 could have made daytime travel a deadly adventure.
And traveling at night would also allow those ancient caravans
 to use the night sky to navigate by.
For you see, deserts, like oceans, can also be devoid of land marks,
 so like mariners, desert caravans also looked
 to the heavenly constellations for both guidance as well as hope.
And I think you all know why?
 Because the night sky is true, the constellations do not change.
We know that the stars are the ones that remain fixed
 and that it is us who are moving.

And we also know that there is randomness as well in the heavens.
 Stars do “fall” from the sky and cosmic collisions
 do alter the course of planets.
But it is crucial to take note that those ancient astrologers
 did take dramatic action in response to that strange
 and unusual appearance in the night sky.
As deeply religious folk it was also crucial for us
 that they saw this as some sort of Divine intervention
 an intervention that just might shake everything up.

Now it was also common in the ancient world for the birth
 of a ruler to coincide with some sort of cosmically stellar event.
It certainly gave, “cred” to anyone claiming to be a God- king.
 So for these astrologers to sit up and take notice
 and interpret this event in this way was not a surprise.
But I cannot stress enough the risks that they undertook
 on this journey of discovery, a dangerous journey
 that lacked any clarity regarding destination or distance.
If they were coming from a rival kingdom
 they certainly risked capture, torture and death.
It would not have been unusual for a caravan
 to perish in those unforgiving deserts.

And what if the journey took them all the way
to the very end of the earth, uncharted territory,
where unknown dangers were certainly waiting.

But in spite of all those dangers and uncertainties
they remained resolute to follow that holy light.
Those intrepid seekers did not allow either the fear of the unknown,
nor the comfort of their certainties to hold them back.
They did have knowledge of those things they knew to be certain
but they also knew what they did not know.
They carried the belief that they had more to learn
and they were convinced that the experience of the journey
was necessary to more fully understand that which is true.
Sometimes the wisest thing is to know that our knowledge is limited.
We then can take that first step realizing that the great unknown,
just might be revealed slowly, step by small and struggling step,
as we keep on moving towards it, and as we simultaneously leave
our certainties and misconceptions
and outdated coping strategies behind.

I also have to wonder at times, if those three weren't a little bit surprised
by what they found waiting for them in that little town of Bethlehem?
They certainly were not greeted by a royal reception when they arrived.
They certainly could have been a bit confused or even disappointed
"We came all that way for this..?!"
But Matthew says that they were, "besides themselves with joy!"
A curious choice of words don't you think?
And what does that mean exactly?
I interpret it as a very physically engaged reaction.
Maybe those starry eyed geeks were literally jumping for joy!
A physically obvious reaction,
similar to Herod's physically compulsive reaction,
but one that was pure joy rather than fear.

No doubt those smarty pants nerds
probably thought they knew what they were looking for,
a King who would end up being like most other rulers.
Fortunately, however, they were, in the end,
also smart enough to adjust their expectations
so as to more fully comprehend what God really had in store.
For what God had waiting for them

was someone who could radically change lives.
They quickly realized that they could no longer go back
by the same path that had brought them to this new revelation.
That journey was over, but just as suddenly a new one had begun.
God has come, intervened in the world, in their own times,
and God has also entered into each one of their lives.
Nothing can, nor should be, ever the same.

And though their first step may not have been a smart move.
These wise ones can no longer blindly obey those
claiming a divine anointing to supreme rule.
They have seen the light! They have found
and must now follow a new King, one who's rule
will be the opposite of those who seek to build Empires.
Their services can no longer be given to those
who seek to perpetuate oppression and death.
A new path has been illuminated for them to follow
and it is a way of light and not darkness, it is a path of truth
and not lies, it is a journey of life and not of death.

And so it makes me wonder as well,
did they leave again in the dark?
Only this time using it as a cover so as to not be seen
as they snuck out of King Herod's little pond?
Leaving secretly this time, but carrying with them
a scandalous and dangerous wisdom,
a certainty that God's desire for all of creation
will not be accomplished by the might, domination and violence
of armies, kingdoms or nations,
but by those who seek and who also follow with their very lives,
even when its dark outside, that way which is illuminated by a child.
A child of hope, born to us on a dark and cold night in Palestine so long ago.
A child who also can and must continue to be reborn in us
each and every moment of our lives both day and night.