

G3 sermon for 12/18/16

They Didn't See Christmas Coming:

The Wise Men

Good morning. My name is Bob Richardson, and I am the assistant pastor here at G3. I'm delighted to be worshipping with you today, and thanks for affording me that grand blessing.

FIRST SLIDE- This is a beautiful picture of one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. This is Devil's Tower, an almost 900 foot tall rock in the middle of nowhere in northeastern Wyoming. It first came to prominence in 1906 when President Teddy Roosevelt established it as the first national monument in American history. It came to much more widespread notoriety in 1977 in the Steven Spielberg movie *Close Encounters of The Third Kind*, because it served as the location where extraterrestrials came to say hello. I saw the movie upon its release way back when, and upon leaving the theatre I looked skyward and made a vow that one day I was going to see Devil's Tower for myself.

It would take me 34 years to make true on the vow. When Susan and I moved out to Portland, Oregon in 2011 we, along with our daughter Lulu, took a ten day road trip across America. On day seven of the trip we made our way from South Dakota into Wyoming. As an aside, I drove all 3000 miles on that trip. It was kind of a guy thing for me; I wanted to be able to say that I had driven the whole way from North Carolina to Oregon. But I must admit that on the day we were driving to Devil's Tower I thought, "I'm going to ask Susan to drive", because I wanted no distractions when approaching this site that I had waited 34 years to see. Nevertheless, we packed up the Santa Fe that morning and I hopped in the driver's seat. I was going to drive, but I also silently promised myself that I was going to keep an even keener eye on the Wyoming landscape as we got close to the tower.

A road sign told us that we were 12 miles away. I'm trying to pay attention to both the road and the horizon. My heart is pounding, my pulse is racing, and my mind is swirling with the realization that, after all those years, it is now just a matter of moments. I remember looking right, left, right again, back to the left again. I then heard Susan say three words I don't think I'll ever forget: "There it is." Quietly, yet assuredly. "There it is." I looked in the direction in which she looked and sure enough, there it was. About 500 yards up the road I pulled over, and this is the view I was afforded. **SECOND SLIDE**

There was very little about Devil's Tower I did not know. I knew its height, its circumference, the Native American folklore of its creation, the science of its origin. I'd seen every video on YouTube. I knew the roads leading up to it, the farms they passed. I knew just about everything about Devil's Tower. Ironically though, despite the fact that I knew all there was to know about it, I still, in so many ways, did not see it coming. Not just because Susan saw it first, but because pictures and study could not possibly capture its splendor, its beauty, its majesty. I didn't see that coming.

We continue today in our Advent sermon series about the Christmas they did not see coming. We've talked about the prophets Isaiah and Micah, King Herod, and last week Ron spoke of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This morning I'd like to discuss the wise men, the group cited for the purposes of our discussion in the Gospel of Matthew's second chapter, verses 1-12. I invite you to turn in your Bibles, to your smart devices, or read along with me on the screen. Hear these words:

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem,² saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose^[b] and have come to worship him.”³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him;⁴ and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

⁶ ““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.””

⁷ Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared.⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.”⁹ After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was.¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.¹¹ And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.¹² And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

By way of background, whereas the Gospel of Luke was written for Gentiles, as we learned from Pastor Ron last week, the Gospel of Matthew was written with a Jewish audience in mind, and its intent is to identify Jesus as the Son of God, as the promised Messiah of the world. With that in mind, Matthew sets out to chronicle events in Jesus’ life, beginning with His birth in Bethlehem, the reason for this season that we call Christmas. But ultimately remember that this book is focused on calling Jesus what he is: Savior.

But to return to the wise men, we are first told that they come from the east. They could have hailed from Babylon, or modern day Iraq. This means that they would have traveled 800 to 900 miles to see the Christ child. Now, wise men were an amalgam of roles: they were priests, alchemists, magicians, but mostly they were astrologers. They would have learned from the Old Testament of a star that would forecast the coming of the Messiah. They would have learned this from the Book of Numbers, in a prophetic word spoken by the psychic Balaam, they would have also learned it from the prophet Daniel.

I don’t want to get bogged down in background, though it is terrifically important. Suffice it to say that as a vocation the wise men looked to the stars to get the lay of the land, and the stars told them that a new king was coming. And so they began their trek to Bethlehem.

There are a couple of other matters about the wise men that I’d like to touch upon before returning to the verse from Matthew’s gospel. One, it is legend that there were three. We three kings of orient are notwithstanding, it’s entirely possible that there were as few as two and as

many as a hundred in their party. Two is possible because Matthew refers to them in the plural form of magi. Legend has them numbered as three because of the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh brought to the baby. But it is also entirely possible that however many wise men there were, they also came with their entourage, and so their number could have multiplied to a hundred as I said. That creates a humorous image then doesn't it? Imagine you're the mother of a two year old, remembering that by Matthew's account of the visit actually took place two years after the birth of Jesus, if you take into account Herod's tirade and the allusion to a house, and not a manger. Anyway, you're in the midst of the terrible twos, and suddenly a hundred people show up to say hey. And out of this hundred folks you get three gifts. I mean, they're nice gifts, but only three?

Secondly, history tells us that these wise men were followers of the religion called "Zoroastrianism", a series of beliefs that are among the oldest in human time. It's entirely possible that the wise men were of another religious persuasion too, but I've just been having a really good time saying anything with Zoro in it. Seriously though, what is important to note is that these wise men were not Jews. Put another way, they were not believers. They knew Judaism on an intellectual level, but not on a level of devotion and allegiance. That's important to hold onto as Matthew's gospel is considered thematically. Put another way, they knew what to expect by the years of study in which they had engaged, but this birth of a King, this Immanuel, this God with us, well, they never saw that coming.

In the time I have left I'd like to return to the passage itself from Matthew. To review, the wise men show up to see the newborn King, for a star in the sky has alerted them to his arrival. They've traveled about six weeks or 800 miles to Bethlehem as a result of their knowledge of scriptural prophecy of anyone from Balaam to Micah to Daniel. They encounter Herod, Bethlehem's king, who tries to trip them up into divulging just where Jesus is to be found. They don't take the bait. Most importantly, they manage to get where they're going, and when they do, their response is to worship a king they do not claim as their own.

There's a lot going on here by way of application to our own days, and I'd like to touch upon a few of them. Before I do that though, one more side trip to the star that is mentioned. In preparation for today I talked with two friends who are astronomers, and they offered some theories as to just what the object in the sky might have been. They told me it could have been a supernova exploding, which would have lit up the entire horizon. It could have been a comet, but the dating on that explanation may not play out. It could have been a particular alignment of stars and planets like Venus or Jupiter. More fascinating to me is what they both concluded: the star of Bethlehem just might not be able to be explained by science. It was a temporary and supernatural light. It was the first Christmas miracle.

To return to application though, let me repeat what I said about the religion of the wise men. They were not Jews. They were not what we might call believers, and certainly not Christians. But they were among the first to worship Christ. They could not have seen that coming, but that was the posture they assumed. This speaks volumes to me. While I steadfastly hold to what Christ says in John 14:6, that no one comes to the Father but through him, my Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc, brothers and sisters are just that: my brothers and sisters.

I have a friend who is an atheist. His mother is very sick, and is at Hospice. My friend has been told that her time is very short, that the end is near. As he has traversed all of this he has shared with me and others on Facebook some precious and wrenching, dare I say, epiphanies, some having a poignant and profound, dare I say, theology behind them. And yet he does not believe. Now, I believe that he is making choices in his life that have eternal ramifications, for that is what my theology tells me. But that does not mean that he has much to teach me about life, and mine is the loss if I don't pay that recognition the highest regard. There's no room for us vs. them, especially at Christmas. Rodney King had it right: can't we all get along.

The wise men offered the child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These were more than simple presents. The wise men had studied prophecy about the coming king, and in the gifts they brought they established a prophecy of their own. Gold was a gift traditionally offered to a king. The wise men were declaring Jesus a king. Frankincense was an incense used by priests at times of prayer. The wise men were declaring Jesus as our high priest. Myrrh was used as a perfume in the embalming of bodies. The inclusion of this gift can be seen as prophetic of the death of the king. The wise men, in the presentation of these three gifts, declared Jesus as prophet, priest, and king. Talk about the gift that will keep on giving. The wise men could not have seen that coming.

I ran the Boston Marathon in 1980. Did it on a dare, was not really a runner, but just accepted the challenge of my friends, trained, and ran and finished it. It's a nice claim to fame to say that I lost a road race to Bill Rodgers. At mile 24 of the 26 mile race I ran by Boston College. It was the top of Heartbreak Hill, the view of the finish was in sight, I was close to actually making it. But I was spent. I'd lost 14 pounds in four hours, my knees were toast, I was done. At just that moment I saw a woman with a tray of orange slices, and sided over to her to see if I might have some. She said of course and handed me one. To this day, almost forty years later, that orange slice is still the sweetest, finest thing I have ever tasted. It became more than just a gift of citrus, but a life-long lesson in the power of simplicity and the might of meeting a need. Talk about the gift that has kept on giving. Don't underestimate the power and might of the gift that you bring. What may seem simple to you may be life changing for the person to whom you give a gift.

Finally, afraid of Herod's wrath the wise men, in leaving Bethlehem and the baby, "departed to their own country by another way". There's more going on there than just Google Map. There's more there than just an itinerary. The wise men are going another way because they have encountered the newborn king. They could not have seen that coming. Nothing less is true for us today. Encountering Christ does not mean that our lives are made easier, that we won't encounter the wrath of an earthly and tyrannical king. But it does mean that we are transformed, that history is changed, that the face of the earth is renewed.

As a former addict and alcoholic I have one particular strategy I employ in counseling those trying to recover. I assure them that, though they may use again, that nice little high, that swell little buzz they enjoyed is forever gone. You won't get high again. It's that simple. Maybe, I like to say, it's time to go another way. I'm human. I have sinned and will sin again. But I am forgiven now, for I have worshipped the newborn king. I'm going another way.

Ultimately though, it comes back to what we've been discussing the last couple of weeks. I want to approach Christmas with the wonder of one whose only sure response is to worship in wonder and awe at this history changing reality that I did not see coming. And I want to share that wonder and awe with all I meet, for then I will have not only fulfilled Christ's ultimate mandate, I will have given a gift *they* could not see coming, and they will now the glory of the newborn king. What about you? What are you going to do about it?

Let us pray.