

Sunday January 7, 2024

Lesson 6: The Wisdom and Worship of the Magi

Scripture: Proverbs 2:8-9, Matthew 2: 1-12

Context:

We continue our new winter curriculum, “God Abides,” focusing on how the Holy Spirit reminds us of God’s constant presence with humanity. The second unit is titled “Empowering Discernment” with lessons on how God orchestrates events from behind the scenes as the figures appeal to God for wisdom. Today’s purpose is to identify the marks of true wisdom in our discipleship.

There are two books we will explore today to see how the pursuit of wisdom is all throughout the Bible. The first comes from the Old Testament and is known as part of the Wisdom literature to characterize the focus of the kings in Israel, particularly King Solomon. As a monarchy allowed for a consolidation of resources, there became a space for the literary arts to flourish. One of the products of the time was the book of Proverbs, a book of maxims and pithy statements (called proverbs) about the nature of life. The proverbs fall into two general categories: those which express insights about the human experience and those which have a religious dimension.¹ The Lord gives divine instruction and encourage all to seek wisdom instead of folly.

The short words we have today from Proverbs speak to how the Lord is with those on the path to justice and those who show loyalty. As individuals seek the Lord with both justice and loyalty, they understand righteousness and integrity. The courses and paths for those individuals become straight over time.

This passage from the book of Proverbs is paired with a practical example from the New Testament with a passage from the gospel of Matthew. As today is the Sunday closest to the day of the Epiphany, we read of the mysterious Magi from the East who travel to see the newborn king. The gospel writer refers to the visitors as *magoi*.² The word has several meanings ranging from a magician to the Magians, a Persian priestly caste, possibly Zoroastrian.³ These individuals would have been intrigued in particular by the star, mysterious prophecies of old, and of new royalty in their midst.

The twist in the story is not the gifts they bring as gold, frankincense, or myrrh are befitting for a king. Their contribution in the story comes by their threatening of the world order as Herod is the first person they go to visit under the auspices of his support and acknowledgement of this new king. Herod though is moved by fear and wants information more than adoration or obeisance. Jesus will be a threat to his world. Here, this new king will not be

¹ Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 464.

² Hare, Douglas R.A. . “Matthew.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 13.

³ Ibid.

accepted by the nobility where he lives, but by Gentile strangers.⁴ Listening to their dreams after visiting the newborn king, the Magi return home by another way, refusing to participate by going back to Herod to tell him of the child's location. With their wisdom and discernment, the story continues as they will not be participants in Herod's desire to annihilate a threat to his rule.

Application

As this new section comes about, we find ourselves in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany is not as emphasized as much in the church as other seasons such as Advent or Lent. Yet it is still important as "Epiphany" means "a striking appearance or manifestation." When someone has an epiphany, they have an idea which connects several concepts, and the experience is akin to a lightbulb coming on in one's mind.

In the case of the Magi, they had an epiphany where they saw a new kind of king and they realized the importance of the Christ child. Yet they also realized something else: the current king in power was not the end all, be all. There was someone else to worship and adore. And when it came to how they would share the news, it would not come in telling the old king as there was something off. Instead, they would go another way and hold the experience as a sacred event.

The book of Proverbs reminds us of how our journeys are often about doing what is right and seeking justice, what is the best for all. At times, this means us discerning those who share these values and discerning who has chosen to reject concepts such as justice and integrity. Like the Magi, there is something to happen to those who stay loyal and faithful, trusting the Lord to illumine all things over time.

The same thing happens with discipleship in the local church. Discipleship involves us asking big questions and then also wrestling with how Jesus wants us to use the lessons we've learned and sharing with others. What I have found is whether it is reading the Bible, studying the text with others, teaching the Bible to a class of college freshmen, praying over a passage to preach in worship, or simply reading the Bible for devotion, discipleship invites us to ponder how God is speaking directly to us.

The challenge comes though when this conflicts with what we see others say or do with the text. It is easy to post a scripture passage to reflect what we think we believe or know. We can take scripture and craft a well-thought response to an argument. There are so many who believe the Bible is some kind of checklist for righteous living with the plan for Heaven all laid out.

Yet true discipleship invites a spirit of humility to see how the Bible never stops speaking, and God for sure does not stop speaking into our lives if we are willing to listen. This means we may not have all the answers. It might mean we get things wrong and must repent for how we've used scripture to hurt others. Or for how we have used scripture as an agenda to get something we want across. True discernment means getting at the core of what we seek and then being willing to admit we need God's Spirit to help us become clearer for direction on our journey.

In my own walk with Christ and understanding of discipleship, I have come back to the general rules John Wesley used to give his bands as a way for discernment to come on my journey. Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God. Those are the principles for how I understand God working in my life and they are to guide everything I do.

⁴ Ibid. 15.

It is so tempting for all of us to either worship the Herods of this world, or the Herod within our hearts. These Herods are all about power, control, and using a veneer of respectability to destroy or snub others. It is so tempting in this world to pursue the ways of Herod because it promises prestige, security, and control.

On the other end is to worship Jesus Christ, not just as the high King on a throne, in charge of the world. This Jesus is the tiny infant who is vulnerable to the world, needing his mother's embrace and crying when he cannot sleep. This Jesus is all about vulnerability, love, and affection. It's not watering Jesus down, but instead an asking of ourselves if the Christ child will be born in our heart. Will we learn how to be disciples who are vulnerable, loving, and seeking knowledge and growth?

What do you see as the marks of wisdom in a disciple? How does the pursuit of justice lead to a desire for integrity? How do you understand the gift of discernment? How could Wesley's three rules help you understand scripture and your own walk with Christ? Why do you think it's easier and more alluring for Christians to worship the Herods of the world?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009