

EPIPHANY SUNDAY

JANUARY 6, 2013

UNLIKELY CANDIDATES

Pastor Jim Dunn

(With some help from a sermon idea from Jeffrey Gibbs in *Concordia Journal*, October 1997, pp. 365-366)

Matthew 2:1-12

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 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 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.

Children who saw the recently released movie, *Lincoln*, may have been amazed. In 1865, the fastest way that the War Department in Washington D.C. could communicate with General Grant was by way of telegraph. At that time communication depended on telegraph lines that were easily destroyed. Telegraph communication depended on operators who knew Morse code and runners who would carry the latest news from the telegraph office to the public.

The type of communication used by James Bond wouldn't faze children. In the newest Bond film, *Skyfall*, 007 communicates with M and his other superiors in London by way of an earpiece. He's in Istanbul, Turkey, nearly 2000 miles away. He communicates without wires, without Morse code, without operators to relay his messages and without even having to hold anything in his hand. He speaks directly to M and she to him – in real time and through an earpiece. But this really cool spy technology is merely Bluetooth, a technology even our children have access to.

Because of our rapid communications technology, we live in a time of unparalleled access to information. If you want to know more about Morse code, go on the Internet. If you want to know *exactly* how many miles there are between London and Istanbul, or between Babylon and Jerusalem the route of the Wise Men, then go on the Internet. If you want to know M's real name, there's probably someone on the Internet who can give even that information to you.

Yet, with such access to so much information, are we any wiser? We have so much information it makes our heads spin. With all of this information, which information is really important? Who's telling the truth? Who is really in power? What's really going on? With all of our information, are we really all that wise?

Are we any wiser than the Wise Men, whose example we follow this morning in coming here to worship Jesus?

They have been called Wise Men. The Bible translation we used this morning uses the term "Wise Men." But were they actually wise?

They went to Jerusalem to ask about a newborn king of the Jews. In a place where the current king, Herod, had executed or murdered numerous rivals for the throne, including six people in his own family. But even after they worshiped Jesus, these Wise Men remained so naïve about Herod they needed to be warned by an angel in a dream not to go back to that madman with the information he sought. So, how wise could they have been?

In fact, if we peel away all of the legends about them, what information do we actually have about these Wise Men? Matthew writing in Greek, says these men were *magoi* from the East. *Magoi* is the word translated here as Wise Men. But in the Book of Daniel, the same word is translated as magician. And the magicians appear in the same list as enchanters and sorcerers. In the Book of Acts, in chapter eight *magoi* is translated as sorcery in connection with Simon the Sorcerer, and in chapter thirteen *magoi* is translated as sorcerer in connection with a man named Elymas, who was also called a false prophet.

So, if we and the translators will stop where the Bible stops and not try to read back into it those stories people have made up to fill in the gaps in our information, then these men were not wise. They were sorcerers, enchanters, and masters of the dark arts. They practiced witchcraft.

They were the people you'd least expect to seek to worship the Messiah. They were the most unlikely candidates for an adult confirmation class. Proving again that the truth is revealed to babes and fools. "For God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise." (1 Corinthians 1:27) God turns human wisdom on its ear by revealing the truth to the most unlikely candidates. God reveals the truth of Jesus Christ even to people who are not German Lutheran!

These Magi were from the East: Iran, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia. So, they were people of color, not German. They were not a family but a group of professionals. They couldn't have been "German Lutheran", because they certainly knew nothing about putting on a baby shower. They brought no casserole. They brought no Jell-O salad. And there was not one practical gift between them. But the truth was revealed to these most unlikely of candidates, and they came and worshiped Jesus.

Are we any wiser than these former sorcerers? Are we wiser than them when we think we know who is likely to come and worship with us and who is not? Don't these Magi confront us when we think that certain people are less likely to worship with us than others? Among those I have thought won't come are those who have dabbled in witchcraft. How wise does that make me? Those who were supposed to be wise, who knew their Scriptures well enough to be able to quote Micah 5:2 that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, did not seek to worship the newborn Messiah King. But to these men who had practiced witchcraft the Lord revealed the truth and they did worship Jesus. This confronts our foolish thinking.

When these Magi worshiped Jesus, did they chant the service from page 15 of the old red hymnal? I think not. That doesn't mean that we can't. But don't these Magi, and all Middle Eastern worshipers who have their own style of music, confront our foolish thinking that one particular style of music is the only kind we can use for our worship of the King?

Thankfully, the Lord chooses the foolish things of the world. God chooses fools to do His work. He brought the message of the birth of the Messiah to King Herod and his handpicked backsliding Bible scholars through the most unlikely missionaries since Jonah. God used those who had once been masters of the dark arts. Will He not use fools like you and me?

For, God comes into unlikely human hearts and lives like ours, enabling a change of heart, enabling repentance, enabling love for and worship of Jesus, and thus a love for people, all people, enabling us to be His missionaries even to the most unlikely candidates.

Though He comes into our lives in the most unlikely ways. A star! What an unlikely communication tool! What an unlikely way for God to communicate with the Magi and lead them to the truth! And a king! Yes, a true king who received truly kingly gifts and who will on the Last Day fully reveal His kingship but who nevertheless comes to us now in the most unlikely way, obscurely, unexpected, hidden, and weak.

Jesus is so weak He needed Joseph's protection to take Him to Egypt to escape cruel King Herod. He's so weak He needed God to protect Him but instead was nailed to a cross to take away our sins.

Bread and wine and the preaching of the Word! What unlikely ways God chooses to come into our hearts and lives! How unexpected are God's ways among people! He comes to such unlikely candidates as the Magi and you and me! And enables us to be His means for communicating His message to those other unlikely candidates who will yet stand beside us to worship the Messiah King.

AMEN