

Wise Men Still Come to Bethlehem!

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "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." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Technically speaking, Christmas is a Jewish holiday. No, you will not find it in a Jewish calendar for they are still looking for the Messiah, but everything about Christmas is Jewish by nature. The parents of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, were Israelites. The Shepherds, the first to hear, were not Romans or Greeks but Jewish. Even the angel's message was geared to an Old Testament, Jewish audience. The angel said the Savior was born in the "**City of David.**" He could have just said "Bethlehem," but by calling it the City of David, he was reminding the shepherds of God's Old Testament promise to the Jews. He used terms only Jewish believers could understand, terms like Messiah, Lord and Savior.

But Christmas is not just a Jewish Holiday. Nor is it really a Christian holiday. It is not a holiday at all. It is a promise. The promise of a Savior is a promise for the world and not just one part of it. The visit of the wise men in our text is often referred to as "The Gentile Christmas." They were from the East; this we know. They probably had little if any Jewish blood in them. Yet, Jesus was their Savior just as much as he was the Jewish shepherd's Savior as evidenced. Friends, wise men from all over the world still come to Bethlehem. Today we see some obstacles they must face, but we also rejoice that wise men still come to Bethlehem.

I. The obstacles the wise men face.

There were many obstacles that could have prevented these wise men from worshiping Jesus as their Savior.

The first obstacle was distance. The Bible gives us precious little information on the wise men. They are called "magi." Magi studied the stars and the sky. We are told they came from the east, that's it, probably Babylon or Persia or beyond. The best estimates are they traveled about 500- 1500 miles round trip. No big deal today. You can cover the same distance in one to three days by car. But they had no cars; they traveled by foot and it took anywhere from two to six months round trip. Sure, they could have shipped their gifts to Jesus. But that wasn't enough. They wanted to see him and worship him and distance did not get in the way.

Can you afford to take off two to six months from work for church? I wish I videotaped Charlotte Stradtman coming to church. Charlotte lived only across the street in some apartments from my former church. Charlotte was up there in in years and she relied on her walker and she moved slowly. One day I timed her coming to church. By the time she left the apartments and crossed the street and sat in the pew, it was 23 minutes! 23 minutes to go 40 yards to church in her walker. But she did it and she did it every Sunday. I wished I taped it so I could go to some homes, show them the whole 23 minutes and then ask, "So, what's your excuse?" Distance and a walker didn't keep Charlotte from church. Distance did not keep the wise men from coming to Jerusalem.

Another obstacle facing the magi was the reaction they met in Jerusalem. The star God sent disappeared for a short while, so they went to Jerusalem to ask directions, something men don't like to do. They asked King Herod where the King of the Jews had been born. And after a little searching in the Bible, the scholars did find the location, in Bethlehem. Herod pretended to be interested and asked the magi to come back and tell him exactly where the child was. But why didn't he go with them? Why didn't the Bible scholars ask to join them the last five miles of their journey? The wise men were excited Jesus was born, so excited they traveled hundreds of miles to see him. It must have been disappointing that those who lived closer didn't care to join them.

Herod and all Jerusalem were actually disturbed that Jesus was born. Herod could care less about a Savior, but it was afraid of any threat to his power. And Jerusalem who witnessed Herod murder his wife and many others to keep his throne were scared. Can you imagine the disappointment a wife feels when she tells her husband she is pregnant and he doesn't crack a smile or say anything, but went back to watching TV? Talk about sucking the air out of the room. The wise men could have concluded that Jesus maybe isn't that much of a big deal and when home. But that didn't stop the wise men from going on to Bethlehem.

There was a third obstacle, the lowliness of this Savior. When they got there, they came to a house that was extremely modest reflecting the lower class of Mary and Joseph. His parents were uneducated, unsophisticated commoners and this child had no robes, servants or throne. These wise men were rich. They are use to being in the throne room with the king and all of his nobles dressed in the finest clothes. Surely the Son of God and the King of the Universe, you would expect, would be dressed up as royalty. But that was not what they found. Yet, this did not bother them. They bowed down and worshipped him.

Friends, what obstacles face you? When I was growing up, if someone stood up and stood between you and the television, we would say, "Even though you are a pane [like a window pane], you make a better door than a window." I ask you, and myself, what doors or obstacles keep us from going to see Jesus? Is it a mind preoccupied by a zillion other things? Is it worry? Is it fear or arrogance? Are you too busy? Then the question is, "Busy with what?" Of course there is always something we can do instead of going to church or spending time in our Bibles. But then we don't go to Bethlehem. We don't see Jesus or hear how we are saved. When you come to church, do you notice the empty pews? I can't remember which one, but I saw one of the college bowl games. The stands were two thirds empty. Boring. An insignificant bowl game. Why waste the time? Does the disinterest in Christ affect you to feel the same way? What other obstacles do you have? What if a parent gets in the way, or a child? What if the child refuses to spend more time with you because you keep bringing up church? Will you stop talking about it?

II. The Joys we find.

The wise men refused to let obstacles prevent them from going to Bethlehem. Once God told them with the star that the Savior has been born, everything else in their lives, and I mean everything else, didn't matter. They traveled hundreds or thousands of miles to see him. It didn't matter if others didn't care. It didn't matter if Jesus looked so young, so plain, so ordinary. The star and God don't lie. This simple child is God and their Savior so they fell to the ground before him.

But why were they so excited? It is because they came to bring a sacrifice for Jesus but it wasn't the gold, frankincense or the myrrh. They were living the words found in Psalm 51, "***You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.***" If those wise men came boasting of who they were, God would have despised them for there is no one who is righteous. If they offered gifts as sacrifices to bribe God, he would have despised them. The gifts the magi brought, the gift anyone brings, doesn't come close to equaling all the Lord deserves. No, they went as broken and contrite sinners. Before they laid down gold, frankincense and myrrh, they offered God their broken hearts which he filled with joy and comfort that their sins are forgiven in that Christ. The only sacrifice that matters is the sacrifice Jesus will offer God, himself on the cross, to pay for the sins of the world.

When you come to God, come as these wise men. Offer God a heart that is broken by its sin and is contrite, humble, sorrowful. And then look at your Savior. See his forgiveness and sacrifice. Be filled with "Christ-Esteem," not self esteem. Then don't be surprised if you bow before him and offer him gifts.

And watch how wise men still come to Bethlehem. Despite all the obstacles, believers still bow down to the Lord every Sunday even in countries where Christianity is illegal. Every day Baptism washes away the sins of another sinner. Every day funerals celebrate another saint gone to heaven.

It is interesting, the wise men didn't find Jesus. God found them. He sent the star to tell them the Savior was born and to lead them to Christ. The star the Lord uses today is simpler, words in the Bible and the Sacraments he gave the church. They lead us to Bethlehem and our Savior. They lead us to faith in him. They guide us through this world to our home in heaven. These Scriptures make us wise, not in worldly things, but wise for salvation. So, don't let obstacles get in your way. Rejoice how wise men still come to Bethlehem including you and me. Amen.