

January 3rd, 2010

Houghton Lake United Methodist Church

Three Men and a Baby

Matthew 2:1-12

Pastor Tom Anderson

I want to think with you this morning about three men and a baby, and I do not mean Tom Selleck, Ted Danson, and Steve Guttenberg who starred in the 1987 comedy directed by Spock, er, I mean Leonard Nimoy. I refer to the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem. Who were these people, and what does this story mean for us?

The wise men were a class of people who dabbled in astrology, magic, dream interpretation and all kinds of religious books. Daniel mentions encountering them during his time in the court of the king of Babylon. (Daniel 2:2 and 24) We know that there were at this time vibrant Jewish communities as far east as Bagdad, Tehran and perhaps even India. Under the influence of these Jewish communities, the wise men became enamored with the idea of the Jewish messiah and correlated it with the star they observed.

Were there just three wise men? We do not know; this number is a legend based on the fact that there were three gifts. And what about the Christmas star? What is to account for it? We do not really know, but perhaps the best explanation was given around 1640 by the great renaissance astronomer Johannes Kepler, who proved that in the year Jesus was born, the planet Saturn converged with Jupiter twice; once in May and then again in October and November. This seems to fit the double appearance in Matthew's account very well.

What is startling is that Matthew is the most Jewish of the four gospels. Astrology and magic were pagan practices ridiculed and strictly forbidden in the Old Testament. Jeremiah 10:2 puts it strongly, "This is what the LORD says: 'Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the sky, though the nations are terrified by them.'" It is not a little surprising to have pagans appear as the very first people to worship Jesus as the king of the all the earth in a very Jewish gospel! This is sort of like having a group of tourists from Alabama come up to northern Michigan to teach us how to ice fish. One wonders, how on earth did these guys wind up at Bethlehem? How did these aliens wind up in the middle of the Gospel story?

The Bible is very clear that there is no place, time or culture on earth where God has not left himself a witness.

The Bible says in Romans 1:20, "...since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." That is the existence of the one God, all powerful and wise is universally available to all reasonable people. But there is more: God's moral law is written on every heart. The Bible says in Romans 2:14-15, "...when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves...since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness..." Finally, the apostle Paul points to an awareness of the unknown God. He said to the men of Athens in Acts 17:23, "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you." You see, before any missionary announces the Christian message in some foreign environment, the God of Jesus Christ has already been there and has already been preparing hearts to receive the Savior. We are not told exactly how the wise men came to know about Jesus Christ, but we can judge by the results that God did indeed provide them with a witness even in a distant land with a strange tongue. Whenever we go out to do something for Jesus, we can be assured that he has already gone before us to prepare the way.

Matthew has told this story to emphasize one of the great principles of Christian mission: God wants everyone to come to faith in Jesus Christ. Many people waste a lot of God's time by wondering what happens to people who die without hearing the gospel. My advice to you is to surrender that question into the hands of God. The real question we ought to ask is this: what is my role to play as a part of God's mission to bring all people to faith in Christ?

The Bible says God is prepared to overlook ignorance. Acts 17:30 says, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent." God insists on our mission to bring people to repentance of sins and faith in Christ. Romans 1:5 says, "Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from

faith.” Finally, there are Jesus’ unforgettable words at the end of the gospel in Matthew 28:19, “Go and make disciples of all nations...” God’s church is not big enough until everyone in the community has a seat in it. God’s mission is not finished until the gospel has been presented to every last soul on earth. Inviting people to Christ is a matter of eternal significance. It is a matter of life or death, light or darkness. As Peter put it so pointedly in Acts 4:12, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.” To be a Christian is to be compelled by this mission: Jesus must be for everyone, or he is for no one. Jesus is of first importance, or he is of no importance. The entire Gospel mission begins with this one point of moral clarity so poignantly demonstrated in the visit of the wise men.

If God wants all people to know his salvation in Jesus Christ, then why do so many refuse it? The scripture gives us two main reasons. The first is evidenced in King Herod. Herod’s main interest in life was power and wealth. This is a man who had his mind set on his own sinful desires. The Bible says in Romans 8:5, “Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.” Herod had his first wife killed as well as two of his own sons in order to consolidate his political power. His drive for the things of this world was ruthless and cruel. Even today people set their minds on money, sex and power and for this they refuse the good news of Jesus Christ.

A second reason is evidenced in the religious leaders of Jerusalem. It is apathy. They knew the right answers from scripture but did nothing about it. They showed no interest in actually going to worship the Messiah. The Bible says in Proverbs 26, “The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who answer discreetly. / Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” (verses 16 and 12) Herod’s interest was malevolent, but at least he had an interest in Jesus. These religious professionals were worthless and worse than fools. I would rather hang around people who hate Jesus than people who yawn at him. C.S. Lewis observed that the Devil’s task is not to get people to do evil but to get them to do nothing. To be apathetic is to be wholly given over to the power of evil; that is why sloth is one of the traditional seven deadly sins.

The visit of the wise men shows us the heart of our Father. He wants all people to know salvation in Christ. The end of the gospel is a summons for us to take our place in God's mission to save the world: Go and make disciples of all nations. The obstacles we face are hearts full of apathy and minds set on sinful desires. Our efforts would be doomed if it were not for the fact that Jesus himself has already gone on ahead of us to prepare the way.