

Sermon: "Three Stories of Wise Men"

I. The Birth of Jesus was not celebrated by early Christians until 200 years after Jesus was born. It was not his birth or divinity that was at the heart of early worship. It was the death and resurrection of Jesus that drew people to Jesus who became followers.

A. Even the story of the three wise men contained a foreshadowing of Jesus' death as one of the kings gifts is myrrh....an oil that was used for preparation of a body before being placed in a tomb. Myrrh was brought by the women to the tomb who were going to anoint Jesus body.

II. If there are very few details in the Bible about Jesus' infancy or childhood, why was this story of the journey of the magi kept in holy scriptures? The answer to this question lies, not in how the story happened, but what it meant to these early Christians trying to grasp the power of Easter?

III. The story was form them, and is for us, a warning that we ought not respond to the coming of Jesus into our lives like King Herod did.

A. Herod hears about the birth of a child according to prophecy and immediately entertains troubling thoughts. He entertains a false explanation to the news that a child has been born who is "King" of the Jews.

B. Herod turns inward and his imagination begins to stir up anxieties and fears and his anger....

C. Then he begins to plot....to find ways to alleviate his fears, to calm his anxieties about what this might mean for his future. And he hatches this idea about finding where the child is so that he might kill him....and get rid of what he thought was a threat to his own throne. We have this story passed on down to us over the generations in order to remind us what sin really is....so that if we recognize it, we can defeat it.

IV. Sin is described by Augustine and Luther as an Inward Curve. Turning away from God and away from others and turning inward to primarily be concerned about ourselves.

A. In our personal lives, turning inward happens when a thought pops up, often unbidden, in our minds and we begin to chew on it....generating fear and then anger...just like Herod.

B. Going to bed at night....things quiet down....mind begins to work in the silence....into the silence pops a thought....maybe it is an unreturned phone call, a disappointment of some kind from a spouse or a friend, a worrying physical symptom....anything will do....unchallenged our mind turns inward and our imagination goes wild....resentments grow, fears multiply, anger burns...you begin to have imaginary conversations....etc. The product of loving yourself first...turning away from God and others...beginning with a false explanation of the thought.

C. Experiment with silence....become a distant observer of your mind....wait and see, out of the silence, what thought first pops up, unbidden. Imagine it is as if you were sitting in your kitchen watching a hole in the wall that a mouse has been coming out of. Wait to see what it does.

V. Why are the three kings called wise?

A. Because their story is in sharp contrast to Herod's. As if the story teller is saying to us...look....which of these two characters should you be like?

B. The wise men are outward turning. They respond to the news of the child's birth by looking for outward guidance.....they follow, not their own imaginations, but the direction given from a star...a star that produced not fear and anxiety, but a star that caused them happiness...they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. They had been given an accurate picture of what was happening. They did not brood, their minds did not turn envious of another king, they did not stay in their own little kingdom but went outward to follow this new guidance...and set out on a journey of worship. This led them to give away their treasures and their hearts and their worship.....unlike Herod who could only turn inward and hope to greedily keep what was not really his anyway.

C. This is a story that was kept by the early Christians to be warned about the dangers of turning inward upon themselves, and the call to always be looking outward for what is real, true, and life giving.

D. This story is at the heart of the Christian season of Epiphany, a season that reminds us that the child was born for all of humanity, not for some select inside group of believers. It was a story for the deserving and the undeserving, a story of hope for all people.

VI. Some years ago I found a retelling of this Epiphany story that had been printed in the editorial column of a newspaper. Let me tell this creative story that was inspired by the Three Wise Men from the East.

A. These men too found their joy by turning outward, escaping from the confines of their aging, believing in the need to live for others, and keeping God, not their own troubles, in the center of their lives.

VII. This weekend our nation observes the birth and the story about another man who refused the temptations to anxiety, fear, resentment and anger and followed a star.

A. We honor the life of another wise man who could have stayed safe within his own private life, but instead chose to take the risk of reaching outward following the star of freedom, the star of equality, the star of tolerance and the dream of interracial sister and brotherhood.

B. Like the wise men who sought the birth of truth, of divine love in the announcement of a child's birth, and did not trust the word of the kingly power of their day but listened to the word of God in a dream, so this man we honor on the third monday of the first month of the year, also had a dream and a vision that showed him the way.

C. Martin Luther King, Jr. Baptist Pastor and national leader refused to wallow in events of racial hurt and injustice, who "endured harassment, threats and beatings and even bombings" and followed a star....that led him to see a world whose people and nations had triumphed over poverty, racism, war, and violence. He gave up his life serving others. And motivated all of us to live a life of altruism and giving, instead of the darkness of destructive selfishness.

Amen.