



January 1, 2006

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Matthew 2:1-12

“No longer a secret”

Did you know that there really ARE twelve days of Christmas, like in the song? Christmas BEGINS on Dec. 25th. It continues through January 6th, Epiphany, when we celebrate the visit of the Wise Men to the child, Jesus. On this New Year’s Day our focus is on that Epiphany visit recorded in the Gospel of Matthew.

Notice that many popular images are not found in the Bible. First, there’s nothing to suggest that there were THREE wise men. We’re told simply that wise men came from the east, with no mention of how many there were. Second, they are nowhere described as “kings”. Most likely they were scholars, not rulers or monarchs. When they arrived in Bethlehem, they went “into the house”, where they saw the child with Mary, his mother. It’s likely they arrived in Bethlehem some time after Jesus’ birth, and the holy family was no longer stuck out in a stable. Jesus may have been quite a bit older than a newborn. These details aren’t provided for us, so our imaginations take over, and that’s all right. But as Christ-followers, we must consider what the story tells us about our own lives, and our own encounters with God’s Christ.

On Christmas we celebrate a holy night—a quiet night. We picture the young couple, Mary and Joseph, sheltered from the wind and night air in the stable. Baby Jesus is born, wrapped in cloth, and laid in soft straw in the manger. The dark night is outside, the warm glow is inside. No one fully knows the significance of this birth, not even Joseph and Mary. It is like a secret gift from God is being given, and the Holy Family alone is involved. We picture each of them sheltered, surrounded by angels, safe in the stable.

But the gospel story shows us that doesn’t last—if it ever was true in the first place. Angels make an announcement to shepherds--- the shepherds visit and tell everyone all about it—then, a star in the sky provides a message more amazing than any fireworks or sky-writing known to our age. The wise men read the sign, and baby Jesus is no longer a secret.

This story tells us that what God does in human lives is not just for one individual, or for a select group. When God comes, when God acts, it is not a secret, but for all humankind. God gave all of us a gift in Jesus Christ. God never intends us to clutch that gift to ourselves.

The Wise Men show us how to respond to God's public coming into human life. What did they do, in response to God's gift?

First, the Wise Men studied. They paid attention to what was around them. They read the signs of nature, and writings of learned people who came before them. This study led them to follow the star of God himself, born to live among us.

God is among us, as well. We are also called to STUDY. Listen to the murmurs of nature. Stop and smell the roses. There's a wonderful scene in an old movie, a comedy called "Short Time". In this film a 50 year old police officer one week from retirement is told by his doctor that he has a terminal illness. The story is a comedy of errors; he's not ill at all, but that's not important to my point. This man's life is transformed by his belief that he has a short time to live. In a scene I treasure, he sits in the squad car with his partner, holding a tulip. "Have you ever noticed how perfect a tulip is?" he asks, fingering the flower gently. "How the petals all fit together and open out so beautifully?" His partner is aghast. What is wrong with his friend? There HAS to be something DRASTICALLY wrong with him to act and talk like this.

What does this say about our ability to study the signs God places in our lives, even in nature? He intends for us to be stirred, moved, changed by what we see and experience. What about the study of God's Word found in the writings of Scripture, or in writings of religious thinkers and mystics, past and present? How much time or energy do we devote to studying, in order to be guided to God's presence in OUR world, in OUR time?

Does God want us to read, view or listen to the news regularly? What about being aware of other cultures, trying to learn more about human problems and how our actions or inaction affect them? The story of the Wise Men tells us that God's coming was not separate from world political situations. The Wise Men met with Herod the King. The secret was REALLY out then. Herod sent his armies to Bethlehem—not to worship God's special child, but to destroy him by systematically killing all boy babies under the age of 2 for miles around.

Like the Wise Men, we need to study this world, if we wish to find Christ. Like them, we also need to venture forth and SEEK Christ. Study will help us discern the signs that point the way—but we can never get there if we don't go looking. Seeking means asking questions. It means taking some chances of stirring up the wrong people, like Herod. It means committing time to the search. Seeking requires us to leave familiar territory.

When I think of seeking in today's terms, I think of things like joining a prayer group or a Bible study. I think of reaching out to people in need, volunteering to deliver meals on wheels, or to visit nursing homes. I think of going out of your way to speak to and welcome the family in the neighborhood from another race, ethnic group or culture.

Seeking also means committing some resources to the journey. If we never give any of our material goods away, I'm not sure we are seeking at all. (Repeat this sentence.) We know you can't take a trip for free. Every time we travel ANYWHERE, we're amazed at how much the trip ends up costing. Seeking means traveling which requires willingly committing resources to the journey.

The Wise Men call us to STUDY and SEEK. They also call us to WORSHIP. Without study, we can't discern the signs God places in our midst—bright starlike signs, but we can still miss them if we don't study. Without following the signs, seeking, searching diligently, committing resources, how can we find the Christ? But once we find Christ we shouldn't just STAND THERE. The Wise Men “fell down and worshipped him”. They were important men of their society, possessing both prestige and power. But they fell down and worshipped this little boy.

God expects us all to have that kind of humility. Christ taught this himself, saying “you want to know where I am in this world? Look at the poor, the sick, the prisoner, those suffering in your midst.” We're supposed to be humble servants of these folks. When we serve rather than scorn those who are homeless, struggling with addictions, stigmatized illnesses like AIDS or schizophrenia, we are “falling down and worshipping” Christ. Remember this when your life path connects you with those who are wounded and angry from abuse, poverty, illness or discrimination.

The Wise Men also gave tangible gifts of their own wealth and abundance to Christ. When we greet our brothers and sisters, who are scorned and hated by the world, with tangible gifts that show we respect and honor them, we are worshipping Christ. Proverbs tells us that a gift to the poor is an act of worship. The Wise Men call us to worship, not just with prayers and hymns and sermons, but with an attitude of humble service and gifts of respect, honor and material goods for those who need them.

Finally, the Wise Men teach us that we have to let God be our pilot. They had their trip home planned out. But God warned them in a dream to change their plans. So they took another way.

We REALLY want to be the captains of our souls. But the story of the Wise Men tells us this isn't the way God works. We need to be prepared and willing to turn aside from our own well-thought out plans and itineraries. The path we thought best might be all wrong for us. As Christ-followers we must always be open to “another way”.

Merry Christmas, friends, and enjoy all TWELVE days of Christmas. Celebrate the visit of the Wise Men to little Jesus. And go into this New Year with their example:

Study. Seek. Worship. Listen to your dreams and don't be afraid to follow another way. For God is with us. God has come in the flesh. Christ is born, and it's no longer a secret. So be it, forever and ever. Amen.