

## *Christmaswise*

Stephen Van Kuiken  
Community Congregational U.C.C.  
Pullman, WA  
December 27, 2020

Ancient Witness: Matthew 2: 1-12

The Advent and Christmas seasons are filled with a series of surprise visits upon the main characters in the drama: the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, the innkeeper, and the Magi. And by looking at this “coming” of the Incarnate One, we can gain some valuable insight into the true nature of the divine-human encounter.

What are the signs of a genuine visit from the messengers of God? What should we look for? How should we prepare for a personal presence of the Holy? Hearing the Christmas narrative, I believe, can help us to verify and anticipate the authentic experience of God from the common, human experience of our own lives. For these startling experiences of God’s glory break into our world in ways which go beyond our wildest dreams.

Today, I am going to talk about wisdom that comes with this experience. In Proverbs, wisdom (“Sophia” in the Greek), is a woman. “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,” she says (8:22). She was there when God made the heavens, the sea, the earth. The wisdom of God—holy wisdom—is more feminine than masculine. It has more to do with imagination and dreams, than with cold, hard facts. In fact, as with the Magi, holy wisdom often come to us in our dreams. One of the unexpected encounters in God’s arrival is from this divine feminine Wisdom.

Wisdom is a matter not only of the mind, but of the intuition and the heart. “Her ways are ways of pleasantness,” says Solomon, “and all her paths are peace.” (3:17)

And coming to a certain awareness, being made “Christmaswise,” is a mark of a genuine God experience.

True understanding and wisdom is more a matter of the heart than anything else. “You can’t think straight with a heart full of fear,” said William Sloane Coffin, “for fear seeks safety, not truth. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind.”

So let’s take a look at this segment of the Christmas story. It was during the Roman Empire, which in many ways was a continuation of Hellenization (Greek culture). One could characterize it as a time of great intellectual openness. It was a time when ideas flowed freely across the Roman roads the empire. No particular school of thought or religion held prominence; it was kind of a patchwork of ideas and belief.

It was a time of great searching and of human effort to make a difference and to assert itself. One of the ways that people tried to influence destiny was through magic.

Often, each individual decided which deities to call upon. And they often strung together these mysterious magical phrases of unpronounceable verbal monstrosities. And they would adapt and mingle many different traditions together. Even the God of the Hebrews was mentioned in the incantations. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was invoked along with all the others in a kind of “more is better mentality.

Why am I going into all this? Well, this is essentially what Magi were. They were magicians, sorcerers and enchanters. They were into everything: philosophy, astrology, every science of the day. They were a priestly caste, similar to the medicine man and the shaman. And Magi were not necessarily kings, but they were often employed by kings to serve on their courts as advisors or chiefs of staff.

So in the Bible, Magi were not well spoken of. In fact, Jews were forbidden to have contact with them. “He who learns from a magus (wise man) is worthy of death,” was the Hebrew teaching. Elsewhere, God promises to defeat the Magi or “wise men” in Babylon’s court. Through the prophet, Isaiah, we hear,

I am the Lord, who made all things,  
...who frustrates the omens of liars,  
and makes fools of diviners;  
who turns wise men back,  
and makes their knowledge foolish. (44:24-25)

This makes it even more amazing that it was the unwelcome Magi who sought out and saved Jesus. But these three “wise men” sought to be enlightened. It was not by just their own ability that they were able to seek the Incarnate One. They had a star, just a vague notion of which direction—stopping to ask directions, ironically, from none other than Herod. “Hey Herod, which way to the Truth?” And it took a dream to make the Magi truly Christmaswise.

There is much to admire about these three. They are patient—it took them a very long time. They were willing to expend great effort to find God, even though it was like feeling their way in the dark. The teller of this story uses their gifts to foreshadow their encounter with Christ: gold, a typical tribute for a king, incense, that which is burned and offered up to God, and myrrh, which is used to anoint the dead. So they were looking for the divine in the direction of the Crucified One.

True wisdom always goes beyond human effort. The wise men need to be taught that wisdom knows the limits of human knowledge. And instead of trying to manipulate and control the destiny of the cosmos, it is humble in the face of mystery.

And while Wisdom is humble in the face of mystery, in the tradition of the prophets, it also allows for stunning and audacious clarity, enabling people to speak with incredible certainty and conviction, putting their lives at stake.

Jesus, himself, talked about this wisdom when he said, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.” (Mt. 10:16) And that is what the true encounter with the divine does—causes us to become both wise and innocent.

We become aware that there are wolves and that innocent ones about to be destroyed. To be Christmaswise is to see through all the nostalgia, lights and glitter, to see the real and unmistakable evil in the world. Evil, which does violence to the Child.

There is another story in the Bible about the birth of Moses, which also called forth the slaughter of innocent children. And this is also another time when we come across this holy wisdom, which is to be alert and aware of violence.

In that earlier story, Moses is also saved by foreign outsiders, the Egyptian midwives, Shiprah and Pinah, who disobeyed the state. They lied and said that the Hebrew women gave birth to their children so quickly, they always go there too late. Divine wisdom blessed them with courage!

John Calvin called this deception of the midwives technically as sin, but one which avoided a much greater evil.

And in the second story, Jesus was saved but the unlikely foreign Magi, who disobeyed Herod, showing great courage and conviction, by leaving a different way and not telling him the location of the baby.

Being Christmaswise is to know that the Good News has enemies. It is to become aware of the hostility to the One who gave himself, loving the poor and neglected, that there are those institutions and persons who have other plans for them. Becoming truly wise is, like the Magi, moving from mere curiosity and inquiry to courage and action.

They found themselves enlightened, they found themselves taking a stand, a stand for life over death. And this is what the divine encounter should do. It is to hear the whisper: “Tell the wise men to be quiet about the child!”

Through the generations one can trace many stories of those who became Christmaswise—who became aware of the pain and destruction of the innocents:

- Harriette Tubman and the underground railroad
- The new underground railroad from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, escaping violence in their homeland
- In the present day, the enslavement of over a million Uyghur people in China, forced into labor
- The men, women and children of Yemen, caught in the deadly crossfire of war, resulting in mass starvation and disease
- The awareness and becoming wise to hunger and homelessness, mostly women and children, in every city in this nation.

So with the divine-human encounter comes wisdom. And the wise gain a broader perspective and an ability to connect the dots. The wise are able to see the Big Picture of the sisterhood and brotherhood of all, the solidarity with all humanity. And this wisdom brings an awareness of: the enemies of compassion and justice, the heartless forces driven by greed and acquisition, and the institutional violence inflicted upon the weak and powerless.

In the starry light of God we come to a new understanding. Evil become an unavoidable reality. And we find that we are involved up to our neck. And we hear the whisper, “Don’t tell the pharaoh. Don’t cooperate with Herod. Keep quiet about the child. Resist!”