

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

So, what kind of world is Jesus born into? What kinds of people is he likely to meet there? Luke tells us about the coarse, smelly shepherds whom the angel urges to come to his birthplace, and now Matthew tells us that strangers from the East, from Persia, have followed a star to find that same place. They are foreigners. They are apparently not Jewish. They might have been Zoroastrians, the precursors to Islam, who often traveled these eastern routes in caravans. There were probably women as well as men. We are not told how many, either, though the tradition of three apparently arose from the three different gifts they brought. But Matthew does tell us that they were “wise” ones. In addition to ignorant but faithful shepherds, Jesus the child will find wise ones in the world into which he has been born.

He will also find tyrants, like King Herod. Now, Matthew calls Herod a king, and Herod called himself that, too. But he was a puppet official, really, under Roman rule, having certain discretionary authority as long as it didn't interfere with the Italian occupation. It does tell us something, BTW, about the different audiences for which the two different Christmas stories were meant. Luke begins his narrative, as I'm sure you remember, by writing “In those days a decree went out from Roman Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” Matthew begins his narrative with “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea...” Luke seems to be writing to readers who are accustomed to thinking of the world in Roman terms, while Matthew's audience, perhaps more specifically Jewish or Judean, is more concerned with local politics. Jesus will find both the imperial and the provincial in his world, and the misuse of power from both.

Thinking that Herod would be just as delighted as they, the wise ones go first to Jerusalem and inquire of him just where this new royal child might be, that they could go and bow before him. But Herod hasn't seen the star. Herod is surprised all right. The thought that a rival king, one whose birth has been foretold in scripture, has been born right under his nose, is both surprising and frightening. In fact, Matthew tells us that all of Jerusalem is terrified by the amazing news. The leadership of that capital city is as comfortable as possible with the way things are; they have no great longing for change. They don't need their apple-cart upset, thank you very much! The announcement made by wisdom, by the wise ones, is not only unwelcome, but worrisome. Yet the scribes, when asked, determine that the Messiah, the rival to the Judean power-structure, is to be born just a few miles away, in the suburb of Bethlehem.

Turns out that Herod, for all his power, is not wise, only clever. Wisdom would recommend that he, too, should embrace the faithful future, like the wise men and women from the East. If he were indeed wise, and worthy to administer justice and authority in Jerusalem, God's historical promise of a messiah, a savior, would be a joy to him. If he were to just listen to the wisdom of the scriptures, to the true prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, he would know that the news was good. Instead, he devises a plan to corrupt the promise of the new birth, and tries to enlist the wise ones themselves as unwitting co-conspirators. He sends them on to Bethlehem, that their discovery might give him access to Jesus. Access that would cleverly permit him to destroy his rival, God-given or not! Herod is fearful. He is jealous. He is obsessed. He is clever. But he is not wise.

Being wise is an underlying message of this gospel lesson, and as this new calendar year begins, being wise is a good place to start, a good New Year's resolution, I think. Being wise doesn't explicitly mean that one has attained wisdom, by the way. Wisdom is not a thing to be earned, or achieved, or possessed. Wisdom, being wise, is, I think, is more of an attitude, a way of life, a perspective on the world around us and within us. While it would be nice to think of wisdom as a commodity, it is too elusive for that, too much of a process, really. Better to hope that we are acting and thinking wisely than to expect

that there is some line we can cross which will identify us as having wisdom, or not. The Gentiles from the East, these ones in the narrative who are called wise, may have had some inspiration that they should follow this star they've seen, but they had no particular, specific knowledge of what they might find. They didn't have that kind of wisdom, yet they are called "wise". Reading between the lines of this familiar story, we can find a richness of symbolism from which we can discern what a wise life is actually like.

And there, between the lines, we can see that, for these foreigners who are looking for the new king, being wise is a response, a response to life's mysteries. The star is mysterious and compelling, and it seems to be calling them to new discovery. It is a captivating sign, an inscrutable promise, and they wisely make a decision to follow wherever it leads. Being wise is a response. A response, though, unlike Herod's. Herod is being clever, but not wise. He may have even tricked himself into thinking that he is the hero of this story rather than the villain, but his response is cruel, not wise. As you know the story, his intent is to murder the potential rival to the throne he thinks he owns. The three kings, however, come not to injure but to take in the awe, to find the answer to a mystery, to welcome and revere the fulfillment of some promise with which they were not entirely familiar. Their wise journey is not an expedition to defeat or impair, but to honor and applaud. And as they are packing for their inspired adventure, the wise ones include their gifts, not yet knowing how they might be used. Precious gifts, gifts they personally have at their disposal, something of themselves which they are willing and anxious to share. Notice that when they encounter Herod, they offer him none of their personal gifts. Despite his persuasive ruse, they are not impressed; they wisely discern his villainy and save their gifts, their contributions, for the real hero, the one they hope to find, a king disguised as a mere child.

In the New Testament, Paul is also known for his remarkable journeys. Rather than being led by a star in the heavens, Paul testifies that he was guided by God's Holy Spirit. Like the wise ones from Matthew's birth narrative, he travels to parts unknown and unfamiliar, bringing gift which were precious to him, the preaching, the baptisms, and the faith he felt compelled to share. When we hear of his adventures, and read the letters he wrote, we ought to be inspired by how wisely he went about his vocation. He was called by the Spirit, and wisely followed God's dream. He wisely discerned his mission. He wisely took his gifts along, to the diverse peoples from various cultures and political jurisdictions. He shared God's word of grace with all manner of people. He found heroes in the most unlikely places, and honored and applauded them. Like the wise ones, he himself was wise enough to discern which guide to follow, with whom to share his gifts, and in the presence of whom to kneel. He was wise enough to discern the way and the truth and the life he ought to lead. Reading between the lines of our own lives, I hope these lessons from the Biblical treasure can inspire us as we embark on this New Year's journey. Granted, being as confined as we are by this viral menace, we aren't likely to take any physical expeditions across the landscape, but as we pursue the new journeys of our hearts and minds this year, may we wisely discern what dreams to follow, what miracles to embrace, and which of our personal gifts to share. May we also be known as 'wise ones'.

Gale read this to us today from Paul's letter to the Ephesians: *"I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of **wisdom** and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe."* If we can just see with the eyes of our hearts, and hear with the ears of our hearts, and touch with the fingertips of our hearts, we will be setting-off on this wise journey. We will be truly accessing God's words in prophecy. We will be bowing down reverently to new birth. We will be offering our gifts of worship, with thanksgiving. We will be discerning the faithful path. We will be choosing love over cleverness. And, God willing, we will wisely be doing it together. May God bless us all with new life this Christmas and always. Amen.