

Christianity and World Religions: The Wise Men

Today is the first in a series of 6 sermons about Christianity and World Religions based on Adam Hamilton's book of the same name. You are welcome to read along in the book for an even deeper experience. It is going to be a fantastic time of learning and growth for us.

Now, the story that you just heard describes one of the most holy moments in the history of the Christian faith. God has taken on flesh and blood and moved right into our neighborhood. The light of the world stepped down from heaven into the darkness of the world. This story is about the birth of Jesus. And it is the story of the magi who traveled over a thousand miles to kneel down and worship Christ the newborn king. And although if you've been in Hobby Lobby lately you might think it is Christmas time, your calendar and the weather channel will tell you that we are nowhere near the time that we typically read this story. However, the journey of the wise men gives us a profound lesson to kick off this sermon series. The lesson is all about **how God** revealed himself and **to whom** God revealed himself. And so I invite you today to ponder what this story of the wise men tells us about God's character.

You see the word *magi* is the root word for magic or magician. But the magi weren't magicians the way we think of that word, they were probably part of the priestly class of the religion called Zoroastrianism. They were respected advisors, scholars, and sages – they were devout believers in one god like the Jewish people, but their god was called Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord) and their faith was quite different from the Jewish faith. They were scientists of a sort – they studied stars to find signs of God's plan for the world. They were probably educated, and based on the gifts that they brought the Christ child, they must have been wealthy. The Magi probably lived in Persia – in modern-day Iran which was a 1200-mile journey. It would have been a long and difficult journey to come half-way across the known world from the foreign land of Persia to Bethlehem.

If you think about it, it is really an odd happening. Why do you think God would invite these foreigners who were followers of another god to the most holy moment in history -- the very moment that God chose to reveal himself in a way that we humans could understand? Wouldn't it be more logical that God would invite his own people living nearby to honor his Son? Adam Hamilton wrote that "surely there were **Jews** with gold, frankincense, and myrrh in nearby Jerusalem that God might have invited...[surely there were Jews] who would have come to see the Christ child. Is it possible that this story is meant to tell us about God's mercy and love for people of other faiths?" PerhapsGod chose these Persian priests for a very particular reason. And maybe.....that reason is to demonstrate that God is a God of amazing love and grace, and that this love and grace was meant for all people, not just the Jewish people. Maybe Jesus came to share the love of God with foreigners and even people who believed in other gods. If you think about it, this story is a shocking example of the way that Jesus came as a light for the world – for all of the world. For each and every one!

Over the next six weeks, we will be learning about other faiths and about our own faith, too. We will learn about the major world religions: Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and Christianity. We are going to think about our theology of religion. In other words we are going to think about how we view our faith alongside other faiths and how we think God sees people who don't profess their faith in Jesus Christ as their salvation.

A couple of summers ago I took a world religions class in seminary. And I really wondered why in the world I would be studying these other religions in a Christian seminary. It

didn't make a lot of sense to me. And honestly, if it hadn't been a required course I probably wouldn't have taken it. But it turned out to be a really powerful class for me. Because after studying all kinds of other religions. I began to have a more inclusive view of people of other faiths. Although my faith in the saving power of Jesus Christ was just as strong as ever, I began to see God as a big God, a mysterious God and a God who could work to bring people of other religions to salvation in ways I certainly could never understand. And my understanding and appreciation of my neighbor sky-rocketed after taking the class--both for my neighbors living in my own town and state, and for my neighbors around the world.

Today we are part of a global society - we live among people of different cultures and ethnicities and also people of different religions. Not only that, but our technology is so sophisticated that our definition of our neighbor has greatly expanded. Our neighborhood is really a global one. We can see news and information about people across the globe right on our phones -- and our exposure to people of other faiths is constant. And it's not difficult to hear stories of terrorism and violence related to differing religious beliefs. Some of our exposure to news about other faiths has negative consequences--because we oftentimes hear things without having background information to inform our thinking. We have to be informed to recognize mis-information when we hear it. And would you agree that sometimes when we don't have information about our neighbor of another faith, and when we don't personally know our neighbor of another faith, when we don't take time to know our neighbor, we come to fear our neighbor of another faith. And fear can spur hatred. And as followers of Jesus -- we are called to love as Christ loves us -- with this love that is big enough to include people who are different than us.

I believe our God-given purpose on this earth is to love God and to love people. In Matthew 22:37 Jesus gives us the great commandment:

"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.40 All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands. (Matthew 22:37-40.)

So we begin this sermon series with a reminder of the goal of learning to love God and to love our neighbor.

So let's begin. First, I want you to know exactly who your neighbors are. Check out these charts and graphs showing the percentage of the world's population and the numbers of people who believe in different religions.

Christians 32%
Muslims 24%
Unaffiliated 16%
Hindus 15.1%
Buddhists 6.9%
Folk religions 5.7%
Other .8%
Jews .2%

There are

Christians -2.3billion

Muslims 1.8 b
Unaffiliated 1.2 b
Hindus 1.1b
Buddhists .5b
Folk religions .4b
Other .1b
Jews .01b (10 million)

So while Christianity remains the largest single faith, there are over 6 billion of our neighbors who aren't Christians. I would argue we ought to know about our neighbor's faith, we ought to respect our neighbors, and we ought to come to personally know our neighbors in order to love our neighbor.

The one thing that I know when I consider my theology of religions - the way that religions fit together in God's overarching plan for the world, God's grace remains. God loves without limits. God calls people we would never expect to draw near to Christ, and in the story of the Magi we see that they responded -- they came to worship, they traveled 1200 miles to honor and adore the Christ child -- they came to bring their finest gifts for the newborn King.

I want to tell you a real life story that many of you know better than me. It's about a couple of young men who made a big mistake. They let misunderstanding and hatred against their neighbor and a night of drinking get the best of them right here in Fort Smith back in 2016. They drove to a local mosque -- the place of worship for Muslims. They spray painted a swastika in black on the building on 28th street. They painted the message "Go Home" on the wooden front door. On the garage they painted: "We Don't Want You Here U.S.A." And on one of the front windows, among profanities about Islam and Allah, they painted the phrase "Deus Vult," which is Latin for "It is God's will" -- a medieval rallying cry for the Crusades - a horrific chapter in the history of religion where Muslims and Christians slaughtered each other for the cause of their faith.

You may have seen the vandalism in person when it happened. If you lived here in 2016, or even if you didn't, you probably heard the story. The New York Times picked the story up and journalist Sabrina Tavernise wrote an extended article in August of 2017, and I really want you to read it this week. In fact, that is part of your challenge this week. You can google it -- it is called Two Americans - it's in the 8/26/17 New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/26/us/fort-smith-arkansas-mosque-vandalism-and-forgiveness.html>

Ms. Tavernise writes about the victims in the story, and she writes about one of the men who was arrested for this crime. You see a security camera at the mosque had caught it all. And two men were arrested. But then the leaders of the mosque reported that something wonderful happened afterward. The article says:

The mosque's phone started ringing, and didn't stop. Churches called. A synagogue called. Buddhists called. So did residents who had seen the news or simply driven by. One man called, crying. His daughter had seen the graffiti on her way to work and told him about it. He said the vandals could not have been Christians. No true Christian would have done it.

[Strangers stopped to help remove the graffiti.] Over the next week, the mosque was snowed under with cards and letters. Some people brought flowers. Most of the letters were from Fort Smith and the surrounding towns, but some were from as far as Reston, Va.

And as one of the men arrested sat in the Sebastian County jail, he had an awakening and he was truly remorseful for what happened. And the journalist wrote that he “felt a powerful urge to set things right.” He decided to write a letter to the people at the mosque. The letter said this:

“Dear Masjid Al Salam Mosque, I know you guys probably don’t want to hear from me at all but I really want to get this to y’all. I’m so sorry about having a hand in vandalising your mosque. It was wrong and y’all did not deserve to have that done to you. I hurt y’all and I am haunted by it. And even after all this you still forgave me. You are much better people than I.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to me, and that is honestly really scary. But I just wouldn’t want to keep going on without trying to make amends. I wish I could undo the pain I helped to cause. I used to walk by your mosque a lot and ask myself why I would do that. I don’t even hate Muslims. Or anyone for that matter.

“All in all,” he concluded, “I just want to say I’m sorry.”

When the leaders of the mosque read the letter they said they really didn’t expect to hear from the vandals. The reporter wrote that the “sermon they had just heard had reminded them of their duty as Muslims to forgive. It didn’t take them long to do it, and the leader said. “If one of my kids did something stupid like that I would want them to be forgiven,”

The victims spoke with the prosecutor’s office and decided they did not want to press charges and strongly opposed a felony charge for the young man. “We did not want this to destroy his life,” the leader said.

This real life story that played out right here in our neighborhood is a shocking example of how misunderstanding, fear, and hatred can get out of hand. It is also an amazing example of reconciliation -- of showing God’s mercy, love, forgiveness, and grace to people of other faiths. It is a huge lesson in loving our neighbor.

So who are our neighbors? Our neighbors are people like the Persian Zoroastrians known to us as the wisemen, and the Muslims in our community, and the Jewish folks; the Buddhists and Hindus. Our neighbors are even people who would paint swastikas on the side of a mosque. No where in scripture does Jesus call us to judge our neighbor. But over and over and over Jesus calls us to love our neighbor. God’s love and grace and mercy are wide enough and broad enough to include us all. Thanks be to God! So, let us go from here to love the Lord our God with all that we are. Let us go from here to love our neighbor as ourselves. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.