

WISDOM ON THE WAY

Matthew 2:1-12

God still has a plan.

A sermon preached by
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With the New Year, there are always predictions being made about what the future will bring. You can find a plethora of prognostications about politics, sports, and psychic events. Lots of people want to give you their prophecies.

CNN did an article this week on some predictions that didn't quite work out. Back in 1964, over a half-century ago, the RAND Corporation, a government think tank, asked a group of prominent scientists to predict what the future would hold and when they expected developments to be available. Here are some of their predictions:

By 1980, they expected that robots would be in use as household servants and that we would have had a manned spaceship landing on Mars. By 1995, they expected human lifespan would have increased by 50 years and that we would be able to vote automatically. (One out of two on that one.) By the end of the 20th century, these scientists thought we would have a military force stationed on the moon, that information could be directly loaded into our brains, and that we would have two-way communication with extra-terrestrials.¹ Predictions, for the New Year or any other time, can be a tricky business.

One prediction I am comfortable in making is that in almost any United Methodist Church on the first Sunday of January, you're going to hear the story of the Wise Men. The first Sunday of January is usually the closest Sunday to the Day of Epiphany, January 6, which historically commemorates the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem. I can further predict that some people in the congregation are thinking, "Why are we still telling Christmas stories and singing Christmas carols? I thought that was over 2 weeks ago!"

We are so familiar with the Wise Men that we think we know the story backwards and forwards. The three kings are right there in our nativity scenes alongside the shepherds outside the stable, right? Only that's not how the story goes. We often mash the birth stories from Luke and Matthew into one story, and they are really quite different. Luke has the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the birth in the stable, the angel choir in the heavens, and the shepherds coming to see the Baby.

Matthew has no trip to Bethlehem, no stable, no shepherds. Apparently Bethlehem is where Joseph and Mary lived and had a house. After Jesus was born, it may have been up to two years before the Magi arrived, because when they stopped to inquire of Herod where the new king was, they told Herod when the star had appeared—the star which is not in Luke, either. When Herod found he had been tricked by the Wise Men, he acted on his paranoia and slaughtered all the boy babies in Bethlehem. He killed them all up to two years old, so that may have been the time the Magi said the star had appeared.

Fortunately, Joseph and Mary had been warned in a dream to leave Bethlehem, and they escaped to Egypt. In Luke, once Jesus is dedicated in the Temple at eight days old, we don't hear from him again until he is twelve years old. In Matthew, we get the story of how the Holy Family came to live in Nazareth. When King Herod died in 4 B.C., his kingdom was split up into three pieces. Joseph, in Egypt, heard from an angel that Herod was dead. But instead of going back to Bethlehem, he chose to go north to Nazareth, out of the way and under the radar of the rulers. So that's where Jesus grew up.

I think it's very interesting to see both stories of the birth of Jesus for what they are. Actually, the major points in both agree: (1) The birth of Jesus was accompanied by significant supernatural communication. Joseph and Mary both spoke to angels. (2) Mary was a virgin, not yet married to Joseph. (3) The birth of Jesus took place in Bethlehem. (4) Jesus grew up in Nazareth.

Most of all, both birth narratives agree on the identity of Jesus. He is the Son of God, the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. As the song says, he is "King and God and Sacrifice."²

What does this wonderful story of the visit of the Wise Men have to say to us today? How is this relevant to our lives?

First, the story tells us that the world is a dangerous place. It was then, and it is now. Joseph and Mary had no sooner had their Baby than they had to flee for their safety. They became refugees in a foreign land.

The UN reports that in 2018 there were 70.8 million refugees in the world—people who had been displaced by war or natural disaster or famine.

There are about 5.5 million refugees in Palestine, the homeland of Jesus, where some of us will be this week. Worldwide, 37,000 people *a day* have to uproot their lives and flee for safety.³

The fact that Joseph and Mary and Jesus endured a time of displacement should ignite a fire of compassion in our hearts for those who are displaced in the world today. It's dangerous out there.

The Holy Family was displaced because they faced the worst sort of violence. Herod sent his soldiers to kill all the boy babies in Bethlehem because he couldn't stand the thought of a rival king, even a baby one. Can you imagine the horror of that day? Matthew quotes a line from the prophet Jeremiah, who had seen the same sort of violence in his own day: "*A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.*"⁴

We know what it is like to live in a world of violence. Violence daily stalks our path. Wars abound. This week air strikes took out some of our enemies but ignited violent demonstrations and threats of retaliation. There were 434 mass shootings in our country in 2019, more than one a day, in which at least four people were shot in the same incident. Over 2,000 died. And of course, we know that even churches, synagogues, and mosques are not sanctuaries from violence.⁵

One thing we learn from the story of the Wise Men is that the world that Jesus came into, except for the technology, is not much different from the world we live in today. And just like the time when Jesus was born, God still has a plan. The world was dangerous when Jesus was born; it still is. But God sent Jesus into the world at a particular time and in a particular place because God had a plan. God had a plan for the life of Jesus—that he would be born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, that he would grow up and teach and love and heal and be rejected, that he would die and rise again from the dead, and through that sacrifice and resurrection, the world would know salvation. That was the plan.

By God's grace we are included in the plan. God created a way so that you and I can be a part of the story of salvation, that we can participate in God's grace, that we can know life in Jesus' name.

So when we are in trouble, when we are displaced, when we are victims of the violent ways of the world, when we are afflicted in any way, we have hope. Our hope is not in politics or technology or even human progress. Our hope is in God, who is still God and who still has a plan. We are part of God's plan. Good News? You bet!

Our proper response to the God who sent Jesus and who still has a plan is the response of the Magi. What did these Wise Men do when they saw the sign that God was up to something? First they came. They made the effort. They showed up. They were willing to displace their own lives to participate in something bigger and greater and more meaningful than what they had going on.

Then they worshipped. Matthew says, "*When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.*"⁶ When we understand what God has done—what God has done *for us*—the only wise response is to worship.

Christian Wiman is a renowned poet and teacher at Yale Divinity School. In 2005, on his 39th birthday, he got the news that he had a rare, mysterious form of cancer in his blood. Trying to make sense of his life, even in his illness, *especially* in his illness, he was driven to worship. He wrote,

One morning we found ourselves going to church. *Found ourselves.* That's exactly what it felt like, in both senses of the phrase, as if some impulse in each of us had finally been catalyzed into action, so that we were casting aside the Sunday paper and moving toward the door with barely a word between us; and as if, once inside the church, we were discovering exactly where and who we were meant to be. That first service was excruciating, in that it seemed to tear all wounds wide open, and it was profoundly comforting, in that it seemed to offer the only possible balm. ...So now I bow my head and try to pray in the mornings, ...because to once feel the presence of God is to feel his absence all the more acutely. ...I go to church on Sundays ...because faith is not a state of mind but an action in the world, a movement toward the world. How charged this one hour of the week is for me, and how I cherish it..."⁷

Wise people worship, and wise people give. The Magi did not come to Bethlehem empty-handed. As they worshipped, “*opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*”⁸ The gifts, of course, are symbolic of the identity of the Baby. Gold is a symbol of royalty, frankincense of divinity, and myrrh of sacrifice. The gifts they gave helped them recognize their relationship to this newborn Messiah.

The gifts we give help us recognize who Jesus is in our lives. True worship leads to giving, and our giving demonstrates in a concrete practical way who it is that we truly worship.

A few years ago in *The Upper Room*, Patricia Summey, a schoolteacher in Texas, wrote about a canned-food drive they did in her inner-city school. Just before Thanksgiving, they began to collect food for the needy. Each class had a decorated box, and the kids would bring their cans to add to the growing number.

The last day of the drive, Patricia saw one of her first graders smiling broadly as he proudly brought a big can to place in the box. She noticed the can had a white label, so she secretly looked to see what the black letters said: “Commodity Boned Chicken.” The kid had brought food from a government food program. Patricia knew that the child’s family was one of the families chosen to receive some of the food collected. But here he was, bringing an offering from his family’s meager pantry. He wanted to share in the act of giving to someone in need. It was like an act of worship.⁹

If we are wise people, our response to the good news of Bethlehem is to worship so we can give and to give so we can worship.

As we come to the Lord’s Table in this New Year, we might be ready for an act of rededication. It’s a time for new starts. Those of you who were in church last week experienced John Wesley’s Covenant Renewal service, which is a great way to start off the New Year. If you didn’t, or even if you did, the Lord’s Supper is also a great way to reset your spiritual focus for 2020.

Dr. William Barclay was one of the foremost Bible scholars of the 20th century, a Scotsman and a devoted follower of Christ. After he died at the age of 85, his family found something very curious in his personal papers. There was one piece of paper, yellowed with age, that William Barclay had

evidently kept since his teenage years. The title was “An Act of Commitment,” and it was a written pledge to God that Barclay had made on his 16th birthday, when he was a student at Glasgow University. Apparently, he had continued to add his signature every year on his birthday to renew his commitment. The yellowed, dog-eared piece of paper showed that he had signed it every year from age sixteen to eighty-five.

The commitment was basically a surrender of Barclay’s life to God. Everything he had he offered to God to be used for God’s glory—his mind, his body, his possessions, his vocation, his time, his relationships. He ended the statement of commitment with these words: “To Thee, O Lord, I leave the management of all events and say without reserve, ...not my will but Thine be done.”

Are you ready and willing to make a new start in this New Year? Then let that prayer be on your lips as you come to the Table today: “not my will but yours.”

Here is my prediction for 2020. It is going to be a year of great challenges—politically, spiritually, denominationally, nationally, and locally. There are going to be some big hills to climb. But I also believe 2020 is going to be a year of great opportunity. God still has a plan, and we are part of it. I am convinced that we will not reach the potential of our opportunity unless we approach God like the Wise Men came to Bethlehem—humbly, in an attitude of worship, giving our best. With God’s help, I believe this can be the best year ever.

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/01/tech/2020-predictions-we-got-wrong-scli-intl/index.html>.

² “We Three Kings,” *United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 254.

³ <https://www.unhcr.org/ph/figures-at-a-glance>.

⁴ Matthew 2:18.

⁵ <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/texas-church-shooting-hanukkah-stabbing-spur-calls-increased-security-places-n1108676>, https://www.al.com/living/2017/11/post_346.html.

⁶ Matthew 2:10-11.

⁷ Christian Wiman, "Gazing into the Abyss," *The American Scholar* (Summer 2007), *PreachingToday.com*.

⁸ Matthew 2:12.

⁹ Patricia K. Summey, “Sacrificial Giving,” *The Upper Room*, January 2, 2008.