

WGUMC Dec 29, 2013 "The Visitation" Matthew 2:1-12

You know the joke. Why do we know that the magi from the east were men? Because if they'd been women, they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, brought some practical gifts and...there would be peace on earth. At least that's what it says on the t-shirt that my mom gave me for Christmas one year.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that the magi were likely men, they can still teach us something about seeking Jesus. They can even give us some practical pointers about making house or stable calls, but we'll get to that in a minute.

First, let's talk about the text. Matthew and Luke are the only gospels to mention the birth of Jesus, but the two stories differ in many respects. In Luke, we have the familiar census by Caesar Augustus, the journey to Bethlehem, no room at the inn, the angels and shepherds and manger. In Matthew, we have

none of these things, but we do have some wandering astrologers or magi. (By the way, they weren't kings. We don't know that there were three of them. And we don't know any of their names. That all comes from later tradition.)

Certainly Luke's birth story is the better known and the more beloved one, but Matthew's version has a message we don't want to miss. Matthew is arguably the most Jewish of all the Gospels. The whole first chapter of the book is a long genealogy that emphasizes Jesus' Jewish heritage by tracing it all the way back to Abraham. So it's remarkable that in Matthew the first people to acknowledge the birth of the Messiah are not the Jews who are looking for him. The very first to proclaim the Messiah's birth are the magi from the east. And they are outsiders, foreigners, and almost assuredly idolaters.

Luke's story that we read on Christmas Eve is about Jesus coming as the Messiah to save Israel. But Matthew opens up

the story of salvation to the whole world. The magi tell us that the person and promise of Jesus are not confined to his own ethnic group. Instead, we learn that those who are outsiders to the Law, foreigners to the faith, in other words folks like us, don't have to be Jewish in order to seek him and find him.

So, right at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, the Messiah steps across the boundaries of race, religion, ethnicity, and tradition and becomes the Light to all nations and the Hope of all the world. This message about the Messiah is much more important than the magi themselves. So after delivering it, they disappear from our story. After they find the child and worship him, their job is finished. They are warned in a dream not to return to Herod and so leave for their own country by another road.

Now I wonder what would be different if we didn't have this story about the visit of the magi. What if the magi had simply noted the star, guessed that it was a sign that a new

king had been born somewhere, and then decided to stay home and wait to see what happened? They could have believed in this new king from a distance, but then they would never have met him and come to think of it, maybe we wouldn't have, either.

You know it's very possible to believe in a Savior from a distance and never make the time or take the risk to meet him close in. We could all have an intellectual idea of God rather than an intimate, spiritual, heart connection to the One who is our light and hope.

As we are heading into a new year, let's not stay home. Let's be like the magi on a mission. Let's go and search diligently for the child until we find him. But let's not go alone. In too many aspects of our lives, we are expected to go-it-alone, figure it out by ourselves, muddle through it on our own. But the magi didn't travel solo, and I don't recommend that we do. If we're going to cross any deserts in the coming year,

spiritual or otherwise, it's best to have some travelling companions. For one thing, we are much more likely to find Jesus that way. Jesus himself tells his disciples [in Matthew 18:20], "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." So, if we want to find Jesus, we'd better find some spiritual friends and pay them a visit.

The magi went visiting and found Jesus. We can, too. In my experience, there is no easier way to encounter Christ than to visit some of our special friends. Where two or three are gathered together in his name, there we will find him.

That promise is so real for us that visitation has long been an important ministry in the Methodist Church. John Wesley established the office of Visitor when he was organizing his Methodists. Each grouping, each class meeting, had at least one official Visitor of the Sick. But the job of the Visitors was not just to go visiting so that they could find Jesus. They went visiting to bring Jesus and, in a way, be Jesus for someone else.

And that is what we are going to do today. By the grace of God, we will be Jesus for some of our special friends who can't regularly gather together so as to meet him. But before I send you off, here are a few practical pointers we can learn from the magi.

First, we need to be clear on the purpose. The magi set off expecting to see the Messiah. When we visit, we must go with the expectation that in our meeting, we are going to encounter God. Every person has the potential to be Christ for us, if we but open our eyes and ears to him. Likewise, we have the same potential to be Christ for them. By the grace of God and not by our own goodness, we can be the star that will shine the light and love of Christ into their lives.

Secondly, we need to make some preparations. Before we arrive, we need to inquire about the person we are visiting. The magi went to Herod and Herod asked his chief priests and scribes and they searched the Scriptures and offered some

vital information about where the Messiah was to be born.

When we go visiting, we need information, too, not only about where someone lives, but how they live, so that we can be more helpful to them. What is their situation, what are their needs, what are their limitations. Are they grieving a loved one or feeling alone? Are they hard to talk to or just hard of hearing? Do they want companionship and maybe communion?

Thirdly, we can have a purpose and make preparations, but we still need passion. The magi were overwhelmed with joy when they finally arrived at their destination. I tell you that nothing gives me more joy on a regular basis than visiting members of the church and being a reminder to them that God loves them. One good visit can turn around a very bad day.

And finally, we should always bring gifts. The magi brought some strange presents. They were fit for a king, but pretty impractical for a newborn. When we visit, we can bring any little thing: a card or a cookie to say that we care, a

worship bulletin or a copy of the sermon to help them maintain their church connection. But the most important present we can bring them is simply our presence. In the hospital, I sometimes find folks asleep and I don't wake them. So, I simply sit by their bedside and pray for them and leave a note. That way, they'll know I've been with them. Or I may visit someone who can't communicate very well, sometimes not at all, and I'll bring a Bible and read to them or a hymnal and sing to them. You know, for someone who has lost most of their memory, the hymns still mean something. Music can still communicate Jesus for them.

Just being with folk can remind them that God is there for them. And what better way for us to find Jesus than to find ourselves being Jesus for another person. You know, I'm glad the magi didn't stay home, and I hope you won't either. That's because Christmas isn't over, my friends. The work of



Christmas has just begun. So by the grace of God let's take the time to bring Christ to a special someone. Amen.