

All is Calm: 4. Wisdom to Know the Difference

Matthew 2:1-3

December 22, 2019

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Two weeks ago we learned to pray, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,” and last week we prayed, “God, give me the courage to change the things I can.” If you have not heard those messages, I want to encourage you to go online and catch up. Those two prayers are good but stopping there can leave us with a problem because sometimes it’s hard to know what to do. Which one is it? Do I accept this situation in my life or... ask God for the courage to change my situation? My family struggled with these questions as my brother struggled with drug addiction for 16 years beginning at the age of 14. I saw my parents struggle to know how and when to help him, and when helping was actually enabling him, and when it was time for them to accept the situation as it was. For them, the next line of the Serenity Prayer was key, “and grant me the wisdom to know the difference.” What is this wisdom and how do we find it? This morning we are going to look for answers to that question in the story of the wise men.

So who were these wise men? Why are they called “wise”? Where did they come from and why is Matthew the only gospel writer to include this part of Jesus’ birth story? Most likely these men were from Persia, the area today known as Iran. They were interpreters of dreams. They studied magic, alchemy, astrology and religions of the world. They were wise, educated men. We sometimes call them kings (like in the Christmas carol, We Three Kings) but they were not kings. They were called magi and they were advisors to the kings. Being thoughtful observers of the stars and planets they noticed any strange events in the heavens and tried to interpret them.

Upon seeing this new, impressive, and unforgettable star that appeared in the eastern sky, believing that it was a sign that fulfilled Jewish scripture, they set out on a journey to worship this new king. They were driven by their desire to worship Jesus. They would travel for over six weeks and 900 miles and arrive in Jerusalem months after Jesus was born. Tradition says there were three magi but scripture never actually states how many there were. We say three probably because they brought 3 gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh but there could have been two or five or 12 or more. We can’t know for sure. But these were important people who would not have been traveling alone. They would have been accompanied by a large caravan of servants and guards. I’ve often wondered what would have happened if instead of Wise Men there had been Wise Women? I bet they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a hot dish, and brought practical gifts.

So this exotic, impressive caravan arrived in Jerusalem and went straight to the palace of King Herod (cause that’s where one would expect to find a king) and asked, “*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.*” This confused and disturbed King Herod. Herod was an insecure, paranoid, power-thirsty, tyrant who longed for control and power. During his 35 year reign, he had killed thousands of people, everyone and anyone who threatened

his power, including one of his wives and 3 of his sons. He would do whatever it took to remain on the throne.

Now in a panic, Herod assembled his religious leaders and asked them if they knew where the king of the Jews was to be born. This was one an easy question to answer because a few hundred years earlier, the prophet Micah had written, *“But you, Bethlehem... though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel.”*

Having his answer, he secretly gathered the Magi together, instructed them to go and search for the baby and then report back to him his exact whereabouts so that he could go and pay homage to the king. Knowing what we know about Herod, based on his track record, being a power-thirsty tyrant, do you think he had any intention of honoring this child? No way! He wanted to kill this baby so he could remain on the throne.

The Magi set out on the last few miles of their journey and, *“On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with....gifts.”* They bowed down and worshipped Jesus. They embodied a basic wisdom decision every human being is going to have to face once Jesus comes into the world. They were searching for a king to worship and they chose to Jesus as their king. They knew, if you want to be king and someone else comes along and claims to be the king, even a baby king, someone is going to have to go. There can only be one king. Then, having been warned in a dream, they did not return and report to Herod but went home a different way.

The magi are a picture of God’s heart for all people, especially those who don’t belong. Matthew was writing to first century Jewish Christians who would have expected the first people to come and pay homage to Jesus would have certainly been the Jews. (Remember, there were no Christians yet. Jesus had just been born.) But Matthew didn’t say a word about faithful Jews instead, he wrote about people from a foreign land and another religion. This was scandalous! Everybody knew that the Magi didn’t belong. They were outsiders! Matthew is saying Jesus came for everyone, even these magi who choose to worship Jesus. They are a picture of what God’s grace can do in our lives. Matthew is asking us to wrestle with the question: what king will you follow? Who sits on the throne of your life?

Richard Sterns had a tough childhood. You may be familiar with his story from his book, *A Hole in Our Gospel*. He came from a broken home with an abusive, alcoholic father and a mother who could do nothing more than fend for herself. He remembers lying in bed one night, listening to his parents arguing yet again, and realizing that they were never going to be able to help him. So that night, at the age of 10, he decided to take control of his life. When all the other little boys were dreaming of becoming baseball players and fire fighters, somehow, Richard knew education would be his way out. At the age of 13, he got out his Royal typewriter and composed letters all the Ivy League Schools requesting their catalogs and he began making his plan to take control of his life.

Sure enough, he received a scholarship to Cornell and then went on to earn an MBA from the Wharton School of Business and immediately began climbing the corporate ladder of success. At the age of 24, he went to work for Parker Brothers Games and was promoted to CEO at the age of 33. Then in his mid-forties, he was hired by Lenox to be their CEO. You know Lenox, America's finest tableware company? Richard had all the money, fame, prestige, a house in the country and fanciest of cars that one could ever hope for. He was living the American dream when God began to work on his heart. Richard was being heavily recruited by World Vision, a global Christian humanitarian organization that partners with children, families, and their communities to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. World Vision wanted him to be their CEO.

Richard resisted and resisted and resisted the recruiter's attempts until the recruiter asked him, "Richard, are you willing to follow God's will for your life?" As he wrestled with that question, he recalls courageously crawling under the covers of his bed one afternoon, and struggling to hand over the control of his life to God. He knew working for World Vision would mean that he had to give up his high salary and all the perks and prestige that came with it. Most people who climb into their throne seat want to stay there but Richard made another decision that day. He said "yes" to God and "yes" to World Vision. He served as their CEO from 1999-2018. He was much poorer, had a much smaller office, no fancy car and a greatly reduced lifestyle. But when asked if it was worth it, he said that since realizing God was not calling him to sell fine china to the wealthy but to care for the poorest of the poor, his life has been incredibly blessed. "When you put God on the throne of your life, you are in the zone with God." Wisdom forces us to come to grips with, "Am I going to try to be the master of my universe or am I going to say, "God, help me. I want you to come and take charge of my life."?

When the magi saw Jesus, they rejoiced, they bowed down and worshiped him because they had discovered that there was a God and he was not out there with a star someplace; he was personal and had he revealed himself to them. He was right there in front of them, face to face. And God still sends that star out to bring people to Jesus. God wants to reveal himself personally and intimately to you, to me, and to all of humanity. It happens anytime your life gets interrupted by an event that sends you on a quest where you begin to search for serenity or courage... for renewed health, peace of mind, control of your anger, for financial peace, a new job, a new relationship, or freedom from addiction.

We all have a story. Every one of us. The Bible says:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray. Isaiah 53:6

There is nobody righteous; no, not one. Romans 3:10

All have sinned and fallen short." Romans 3:23

We're all the same. That's why we're here. Here's my point point: Jesus, who was born in a manger to communicate God's humble love, died on a cross to communicate God's forgiving grace. Nobody comes to God as master of the universe. When I humble

myself, I get real with God about my need, and then I get off of my throne and on my knees and say, "God, help me. I'm not going to try to rule my life anymore. I'm not going to be in charge anymore. I want Jesus to come and take the throne."

God entered the world as a baby so that we would make room – and finally let God take the throne and, like those magi, come face to face with a God who cares. And that's when we discover WISDOM.

Let's pray: God, we pray for your wisdom to trust in your love and grace, knowing that nothing depends on us being right or in control of our lives. You are our king and we want to follow you and worship you, just like the magi. Help us to be the people you want us to be and share the light of Jesus with the world. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 22, 2019

Weekly Prayer: Gracious and loving God, thank you for providing an example of humility by sending Jesus to be born in a manger and to show us the greatness of your love. Help us to be humble this week and allow you to be Lord in our lives. Please accept our heart and our worship as our offering to you this Christmas. Amen.

Monday, December 23

Scripture: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God in the beginning. Everything came into being through the Word, and without the Word nothing came into being. What came into being through the Word was life, and the life was the light for all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light. A man named John was sent from God. He came as a witness to testify concerning the light, so that through him everyone would believe in the light. He himself wasn't the light, but his mission was to testify concerning the light. The true light that shines on all people was coming into the world. The light was in the world, and the world came into being through the light, but the world didn't recognize the light. The light came to his own people, and his own people didn't welcome him. But those who did welcome him, those who believed in his name, he authorized to become God's children, born not from blood nor from human desire or passion, but born from God. The Word became flesh and made his home among us. We have seen his glory, glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Observation: Opening with "In the beginning," John deliberately echoed the first words of Genesis. The life and light images also echoed those "beginning" stories. Coming to earth, Jesus the creator was creating anew. John also said that the Jesus he had seen, heard, and known was the light who broke into the world's darkness. As darkness couldn't put out light, so Jesus could deliver us from the darkness we find within ourselves. (We act out this text's meaning at each Christmas Eve service. We offer services on Christmas Eve at 4:00, 7:00, and 9:00.)

Application: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness doesn't extinguish the light" (verse 5). Have there been times when it felt to you as though darkness was trying to put out God's light in your life? What spiritual practices keep the windows of your soul open, so that God's light can keep shining in and through you?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were (and are) light in my darkness. Continue to change me from the inside out to be a beacon reflecting your light to those around me. Amen.

Tuesday, December 24

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Observation: Christmas is one key story about God's Great Reversal. Caesar Augustus, a human who thought he was a god, issued a decree that forced Mary and Joseph to make a hard trip with Mary nine months pregnant. Jesus, the true God become human, spent his first night on earth in a humble animal shelter in Bethlehem. On Christmas Eve, we reflect on the birth of the child who showed us God's kind of power—the power of selfless love.

Application: A contemporary Christmas song has Joseph say, "Why me? I'm just a simple man of trade ... Why here, inside this stable filled with hay? Why her? She's just an ordinary girl ... This is such a strange way to save the world." If you were God, would you trust the Messiah to a family as poor and "ordinary" as Mary and Joseph formed? What role is Jesus playing in your Christmas celebration this year?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you were born in a stable, and laid in a feeding trough. Be born in my messy, yearning heart this Christmas Eve, Lord, and dwell in me forever. Amen.

Wednesday, December 25

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

Observation: We're used to seeing dignified, noble shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. Yet when Jesus was born, most people looked down on shepherds. Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn't carefully observe all the

rituals that the priests believed it took to be holy. But God loved them, and made these shepherds the first to hear the “wonderful joyous news for all people.”

Application: In verses 9-10, the shepherds were terrified, and the angel told them, “Don’t be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you.” Have you ever felt fear when you faced something unexpected or unexplainable? In what parts of your life do you need to hear anew the wonderful, joyous news of Jesus, and to say YES to whatever God has placed before you by taking courage (“Don’t be afraid”)?

Prayer: Lord, by my world’s standards, it was odd that you’d declare the good news first to shepherds. But you chose well—the shepherds listened and worshipped. This Christmas day I join the shepherds in worshipping you. Amen.

Thursday, December 26

Scripture: John 9:1-17

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man who was blind from birth. Jesus’ disciples asked, “Rabbi, who sinned so that he was born blind, this man or his parents?” Jesus answered, “Neither he nor his parents. This happened so that God’s mighty works might be displayed in him. While it’s daytime, we must do the works of him who sent me. Night is coming when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” After he said this, he spit on the ground, made mud with the saliva, and smeared the mud on the man’s eyes. Jesus said to him, “Go, wash in the pool of Siloam” (this word means *sent*). So the man went away and washed. When he returned, he could see.

The man’s neighbors and those who used to see him when he was a beggar said, “Isn’t this the man who used to sit and beg?” Some said, “It is,” and others said, “No, it’s someone who looks like him.” But the man said, “Yes, it’s me!” So they asked him, “How are you now able to see?” He answered, “The man they call Jesus made mud, smeared it on my eyes, and said, ‘Go to the pool of Siloam and wash.’ So I went and washed, and then I could see.” They asked, “Where is this man?” He replied, “I don’t know.” Then they led the man who had been born blind to the Pharisees. Now Jesus made the mud and smeared it on the man’s eyes on a Sabbath day. So Pharisees also asked him how he was able to see. The man told them, “He put mud on my eyes, I washed, and now I see.” Some Pharisees said, “This man isn’t from God, because he breaks the Sabbath law.” Others said, “How can a sinner do miraculous signs like these?” So they were divided. Some of the Pharisees questioned the man who had been born blind again: “What do you have to say about him, since he healed your eyes?” He replied, “He’s a prophet.”

Observation: When John wrote that “the life [i.e. Jesus] was the light for all people” (John 1:4), he followed Jesus’ lead. Jesus said in the Temple that he was the light of the world (John 8:12), and repeated the claim in verse 5 of today’s reading. His healing of this blind man was like a life-changing, acted out parable. Jesus’ light gave the beggar back both his physical and spiritual sight.

Application: At what age or stage of life did Christ’s light first shine into your life? Jesus’ disciples reflected a view common in their day (and still today): that God caused everything, even bad things. Jesus taught us to see God differently, as the source of healing and hope even in the face of illness or tragedy. What does it mean to you to trust that God is on your side, not working against you, in a volatile, often frightening world?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, when something bad happens, I'm tempted to ask, "Why is God doing this to me?" Help me remember what you told your disciples, and to trust your healing light and love even when I'm hurting. Amen.

Friday, December 27

Scripture: John 9:18-41

The Jewish leaders didn't believe the man had been blind and received his sight until they called for his parents. The Jewish leaders asked them, "Is this your son? Are you saying he was born blind? How can he now see?" His parents answered, "We know he is our son. We know he was born blind. But we don't know how he now sees, and we don't know who healed his eyes. Ask him. He's old enough to speak for himself." His parents said this because they feared the Jewish authorities. This is because the Jewish authorities had already decided that whoever confessed Jesus to be the Christ would be expelled from the synagogue. That's why his parents said, "He's old enough. Ask him." Therefore, they called a second time for the man who had been born blind and said to him, "Give glory to God. We know this man is a sinner." The man answered, "I don't know whether he's a sinner. Here's what I do know: I was blind and now I see." They questioned him: "What did he do to you? How did he heal your eyes?" He replied, "I already told you, and you didn't listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?" They insulted him: "You are his disciple, but we are Moses' disciples. We know that God spoke to Moses, but we don't know where this man is from." The man answered, "This is incredible! You don't know where he is from, yet he healed my eyes! We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. God listens to anyone who is devout and does God's will. No one has ever heard of a healing of the eyes of someone born blind. If this man wasn't from God, he couldn't do this." They responded, "You were born completely in sin! How is it that you dare to teach us?" Then they expelled him.

Jesus heard they had expelled the man born blind. Finding him, Jesus said, "Do you believe in the Human One?" He answered, "Who is he, sir? I want to believe in him." Jesus said, "You have seen him. In fact, he is the one speaking with you." The man said, "Lord. I believe." And he worshipped Jesus.

Jesus said, "I have come into the world to exercise judgment so that those who don't see can see and those who see will become blind." Some Pharisees who were with him heard what he said and asked, "Surely we aren't blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you wouldn't have any sin, but now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

Observation: In his prologue, John said we must choose to see the light Jesus brought (John 1:10-11). John graphically portrayed the terrible results of spiritual blindness. The blind man's talk with the Pharisees would be comical if it weren't so tragic. Rather than admit anything good about Jesus, the religious leaders grasped at straws to deny the plain fact that a man born blind could now see! In his beautiful confession of faith in verse 25, the man showed that he could "see" more clearly than the religious leaders.

Application: In verse 25, you may recognize the words John Newton used when he wrote "Amazing Grace" centuries later. Newton used the words to confess his sorrow at having once sailed a slave ship that carried holds jammed with captive Africans across the ocean to a life of slavery. In what parts of your spiritual life is this your testimony? What do you now see to which you were once blind? How will you apply what you have "seen" about Jesus to living your life in 2020?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, please continue your "eye surgery" in my life, clearing my vision and moving my heart to follow you more completely. Amen.

Saturday, December 28

Scripture: Matthew 2:3-8

When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. They said, "In Bethlehem of Judah, for this is what the prophet wrote: *You, Bethlehem, land of Judah, by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah, because from you will come one who governs, who will shepherd my people Israel.*" Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search carefully for the child. When you've found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him."

Observation: Notice that Matthew never says there were "three" magi. (That tradition began 600 years later). In fact, it may have been quite a large entourage to cause a stir in Jerusalem, a crossroads city that was used to foreign visitors. Herod, who often used violence to defend his hold on the throne, hid his real plans under veneer of courtesy and religiosity.

Application: There's a tragic inversion in this story. The "teachers of the law," who could rattle off Micah's prophecy about Bethlehem, seemed uninterested in whether it was coming true. Herod cared only out of political paranoia. Only the guests from far away truly sought the new king. How can your worship and Bible study give you a holy curiosity like the magi had, rather than the settled, routine assumptions of the scribes? What would it mean for Jesus to sit on the throne of your life? How might that give you the wisdom that is so critical to know what to accept and what to change?

Prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. I give my life to you again today. Amen.