

Sermon for Sunday, December 13, 1981, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"ROADS THAT LEAD TO BETHLEHEM"
"The Road the Wise Men Took"
St. Matthew 2:1-12

Text: When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was." St. Matthew 2:9

Our Scripture for this morning tells us that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great. It is fairly well established that Herod died in 4 B.C. That means that Jesus was probably born in either 5 or 4 B.C. When he was born, the Bible says the wise men came saying they had seen his star in the East. I wish we had time this morning to talk about that star. There is a great deal of speculation about what the star was. Was it a comet? Was it a conjunction of two planets? Was it a supernatural appearance of something new that lasted only during this period? Was it something given to the wise men that only they saw it? Perhaps next year at Christmas we will have an opportunity to talk about the star of Bethlehem.

But the point I want to make this morning is this: The so-called wise men were really astrologers. They were men who studied the stars. And something had appeared in the skies that was significant to them--so much so that they set off on a journey to find out about it. You see, people had been studying the stars for centuries before Christ. They could predict eclipses as well as conjunctions of planets and stars. However, somewhere around 5 B.C. something so unusual, something so special, occurred that the astrologers set out to find out what had happened. Incidentally, you might be interested to know that according to ancient Chinese astronomical records, a nova occurred and could have been seen in the night skies over Jerusalem for about 70 days in March and April of 5 B.C. Now, a nova could not have been predicted. A nova is a star that suddenly has a tremendous increase in brilliance due to an explosion and subsequent expanding gases. Astronomers don't know why this happens, except that they agree it is the most spectacular astronomical occurrence we can see from earth. In any event, the Chinese records indicate such a spectacular event in March and April of 5 B.C. If that was the phenomenon the ancient astrologers saw, they could not have predicted it nor explained it.

So, the first thing we can say about the wise men is that they were astrologers who saw something that made them travel to a foreign country to see for themselves. There are several other things we can say about these travelers. For one thing, they came from the East. We don't know if they were Medes or Persians, but such astrologers were fairly common to the Mediterranean world. Actually, they were more a profession than they were representatives of a particular culture. You might be interested to know that two such persons are mentioned in the New Testament (Act 8:9-24) and Acts 13:6-11) and in both cases, they are mentioned in a bad way.

However, not all astrologers were bad. They were in fact the early men of science. Philo and Cicero speak favorably of them and commend them for research into nature. This means they had a sound reputation for character and learning.

Another thing we know about them is that they were not Jewish. They had no knowledge of Jewish scripture or tradition and when they got to Jerusalem, they had to inquire about the king who had been born. In summary we can say about them that they came from the East, they were not Jewish, they were astrologers, they had followed some astrological phenomenon and they were looking for a king.

However, on the other side, there are some things that we don't know. First, we do not know how many they were. The Bible doesn't say. A tradition developed that there were three, but we don't know that. It may have developed because there were three gifts. Second, very probably they were not royalty. There is absolutely no biblical evidence that they were kings. Probably this tradition developed from Isaiah 60, the first three verses, where we read, "Arise, shine; for you light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you....and nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (See also Psalms 68:29 and 72:10).

But in addition to the facts we know about them and the things we don't know about them, there are several observations we can make about their character. First, they looked for truth and meaning. They were looking for reality in their world. Do you remember what Jeremiah writes? In 29:13, 14 we read, "You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord.." I think these men were seeking for truth and God revealed truth to them. Even though the means through which they sought truth was inadequate, because they sought God with their hearts, he used their astrology to reveal truth to them.

Second, when evidence came to them of something unusual, they acted on it. That is, when something out of the ordinary occurred, even though they did not fully understand it, they acted on what they did know. Would you have taken off after some strange phenomenon had you been in their place? Would you have acted on such inadequate evidence? I have a friend who is a doctor. Once he had a patient who was radically healed from terminal cancer. Yet, my friend has not responded to this sign from God. How about you? Have you known persons or had friends who came into a new and dynamic relationship to Jesus so that their lives were changed? Has that mattered to you? Have you responded to that for your own life? Isn't it true that most of us wrote off such friends by saying, "Well, he (or she) got religion, but I don't need that."

The third thing, they came to Bethlehem and bowed before the wisdom of God. Do you remember how Paul talked about wisdom in the first chapter of I Corinthians? He said, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" And then he adds, "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men.." I'm sure the Magi didn't fully understand what everything meant, but they bowed before the wisdom of God.

There are some other things about the visit of the wise men that we sometimes either forget or don't know. First, they didn't get there on Christmas Eve. By the time the Magi got there, some time had already passed. We know this for two reasons. First, in Matthew the Scripture says, "and going into the house..." Mary and Joseph and the baby were no longer in a stable. By now they were in a home. Second, the Bible calls Jesus a child. Now, in the Greek, a small infant--a new baby--is called a brephos. But when the person is a little older, he is called a paidos which means a young child. So when

the wise men arrive, Jesus is not called a baby, but a paidos, meaning a young child. Perhaps that will help us understand why Herod ordered all children up to two years of age to be killed.

Let me ask you this question: why were the magi of the East even brought by God to Bethlehem? Why would these men from alien cultures be brought into the picture at all? Well, the Bible really doesn't tell us and as a matter of fact, they pass quickly out of the scene and we never hear of them again. But as we think about it, two possibilities come to mind. First, I think God wanted to demonstrate in the beginning that Jesus is not only the Jewish Savior, but he is the universal Savior, the Savior of all men. Wasn't that what the angel said? He said, "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people..." So I think it was appropriate for people other than Jews to come to worship Jesus.

But second, the Jewish leaders themselves did not come to Bethlehem while these strange aliens did. And I think God wanted to demonstrate that those of his own people who rejected Jesus would be replaced by those from afar. Do you remember how Jesus put it? On two different occasions he told how men would come from the East and the West and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob but those people of Israel who rejected Jesus would be cast out. (Luke 13:27ff and Matthew 8:11, 12)

But it isn't enough simply to have some information about the birth of Jesus. Are there any important lessons we can learn? Let me suggest several. First, the wise men obeyed what truth they did know. Too many today don't want to worship Jesus or become Christians because they have a lot of questions. Well, the fact is, we will never know all of the answers to all of our questions. There are simply so many things we don't have the answers to. When I was a student in seminary, one of my professors used to say to us, "Boys, when you get in the pulpit, preach what you believe and not your doubts." Well, that was good advice. God calls us to act on what we do know. God calls us to respond to what we can believe. Isn't that what Jesus said? He said if we had faith no larger than a mustard seed we could move mountains. And do you remember the story of the little boy who was ill and his father said to Jesus, "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." He responded with what he did know and could believe.

Yes, God calls us to respond to what truth we do know. The second thing we can learn is to give God our best. That's what the wise men did. They brought gold, frankincense and myrrh. It was their finest, the very best they had, and they brought it and laid it at the feet of Jesus. Are we giving God the first fruits of our time and energies? What gift do you bring to Bethlehem to lay at the feet of Jesus? Is it your very best?

The third thing we can learn from the wise men is this: obey the leading of God's Spirit in your life. Why did they come to Bethlehem in the first place? I'm sure it was the tugging of God's Spirit. And why did they take the long way home, going by another route? Because they felt the leading of God's Spirit. You know, I am convinced that God speaks to all of us. I'm sure there is not a person here this morning but that there are times in your life, probably every day, when God's Spirit addresses your heart and speaks to you and tugs at you. Are you sensitive to that leading? Are you listening to God? Because the wise men did, they were privileged to kneel at the feet of Jesus.

Some day the Savior will come again. The Bible says when he does, he will gather all those who have believed in him. I suspect those who will be gathered will be those who have responded to what truth they do know, who have given God their best, and who have been obedient to the leading of God's Spirit. Like the wise men, in the end, they will be the ones who will kneel at Jesus' feet.