

January 3, 2021

*“Three Sermons In One”*

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 2:1-5, 7-12

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Well, this certainly is a busy Sunday. It's Epiphany Sunday, the first Sunday of the New Year, and Communion Sunday. So today I'm going to give you three sermons in one! First about the wise men coming in a spirit of awe wanting to worship our great God. Second, about us as confident disciples of Jesus Christ welcoming in a new year trusting in his promises for our lives. And finally about us as humble servants asking for forgiveness of our sins and transgressions, as we come to the table.

So let's begin with those wise men. Theologian Harry Poe states, “If the universe was not created by God, and if God was not involved in the universe, then the universe tells us nothing about God. If, on the other hand, God did create the universe and continues to be involved with it, then it (is) a source of information about God.” Now I like that statement because I feel that most of us realize that there is indeed a presence behind all the mystery and power in the universe... and we must be alert to that spiritual order. As the psalmist says, “When I look, Oh God, at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars you have established... I think, what are human beings that you are mindful of us, mortals that you care for us.” I'm convinced that's what those wise men must have thought two thousand years ago. The universe was giving them information... about God. We heard them say in today's Scripture, “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising.” You see, they realized there is a power and a mystery in the Cosmos telling us God does indeed exist, and, what's more, he is among us. It was their epiphany.

Now I'm sure many people who saw the star shining in the dark that night dismissed it simply as a freak occurrence of nature, and were unmoved by what they were witnessing. King Herod in Jerusalem obviously was one of them. And he was only a mere six miles away from where the Christ child was in Bethlehem. But that's exactly how many people caught up only in themselves and in the world usually think. They think they're the center of the universe. They reject the mystery and awe of creation, the nature of divinity, and instead are convinced of their own knowledge and answers and explanations. But, for others, more wise about the relationship between God and man, a light in the darkness is no ordinary occurrence. A wise person knows that the greatness of God can never be fully understood or comprehended. A wise person knows that there are truths that the mind can grasp, but there are others, before which man can only bow down. And that's exactly what those wise men came to do. You see, they made a long journey – twelve hundred miles in fact, following that light, so that they could worship

and bow down to the Christ child, the Creator of all that we see and cannot see, all that we understand and that which we don't understand. And they were overwhelmed with joy!

Now, sermon number two. Let me say it again – Happy New Year... even though the virus is like a dark cloud hanging over our heads. Because I'm thinking many of us are feeling that we're starting the New Year exactly like we left off. With lock downs, worries of getting sick, not able to visit friends and family, not able to worship like we want to, as well as all the associated anxiety that it causes us. And the question many of you are really thinking – “Is the world any different today than it was last Thursday, December 31st?” Well, my answer is yes. Why? Because every day we persevere we move one day closer to the end of all this. And every day we put our hope and trust in our God, is one day more where we don't let fear rule our lives. And every day we come to God seeking his will in our lives is one day more for God to use us to make a difference, despite the troubles and difficulties we're going through. For imagine if those wise men stayed home because of the difficulty of the journey. Imagine if the shepherds didn't leave their flocks. Imagine if Mary said “No.” But they didn't! You see, every new year, every new day in fact, presents a new opportunity for us. And that should be our epiphany this year. That each day God gifts us with renewed hope, with second chances, with a God-given purpose to our lives. You see, the coming of Jesus Christ has hallowed all that we are and every place that we are, and through his grace, we can live our lives to the fullest and not be afraid. Yes, Christ is the “light that shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.” So with joy in our hearts, let us give thanks for the gift of another new year of life and the opportunity serve God and one another.

And finally, today we come to the table to celebrate Holy Communion. Obviously, communion is that sacrament of the church that assures us that our sins are forgiven and we are made clean. Christ's body and blood is the food that feeds our souls as we hunger and thirst for righteousness in our lives. But Holy Communion is also God's fundamental message of love for his children, you and me. How so? Well, we come to the table as sinners, broken and in need. Yet we are not judged, but accepted, leaving the table made new, made whole, by his unconditional and sacrificial love. A love that not only calls us to the table, but also calls us to leave the table and go show that same kind of love to others. And sometimes I'm not sure we really understand the magnitude of that love. But I want to share a wonderful little story about Jesus and his earthly father Joseph working in the Nazareth carpentry shop that I think will help us better understand. You know, the Bible tells us little about Jesus growing up, but it does say that he grew in wisdom and in favor with God and man. Now how might this have

happened? Well, I'm sure Joseph taught Jesus the secrets of the hammer, the plane, and the saw. But he also probably taught him many of his "life's learnings." Remember, the Bible tells us that Joseph was a righteous man. So let's listen in on the conversation.

"Be obedient to love, Jesus. Be obedient to love. Whatever you're doing, whatever you're making, along with it always make a home for the Spirit. I like to think of a spacious home with a very big window for sunlight and a wide door. Now the best way to keep your home inviting for the Spirit is to stop the mind from judging. Whenever things seem overly simple and obvious, go slow. There is always more than you think, only it hasn't appeared yet. Judging stops the real truth from appearing. It cuts down people and situations to the little bit we think we know. It closes possibilities.

Now the law is our measure. It is a tool of judgment. Do not use it like a hammer to hit or as a saw to cut. Our tools are used to fashion a table or chair, to make something beautiful and useable, not to brutalize the wood. In the same way, the law should be a tool to help fashion people. But it can break people and lose its sense of purpose if not done right. The law alone wants to make examples of people who break it. It feeds and grows strong on transgression. So find a way to honor the law and honor the person who, in our limited understanding, has broken it. This is not easy. It requires making the law work with love. Love is like the sun. Law its furthest and weakest ray. If you hold onto love, you will see how the law can reflect it. If you lose love, law will not substitute for it. It will only become something with which you will punish others. When you love the person through the law, you shape the law. This gives life a chance to breath and people a chance to change. And the deepest change will be in yourself. Love takes the beam out of your own eye. It does not focus on the splinters in the eyes of others.

Once something happened to me and I was tempted to judge and punish. But I held back, waited and a door opened. That's the wide door I mentioned. I was led into a spacious room filled with sun, the home of the Spirit. Your mother and you were there, and a presence of light spoke to my fear. I sensed it was a dream, but it was not sleep. The dream awakened me and it took the beam out of my eye.

So look at everything twice, Jesus. See it once with the physical eye, and see it again with the eye of the heart. At first glance you might see an uneven and unusable piece of wood. You may be about to throw it away. But do not be fooled by appearances. Look deeper. On second glance you may use it and see a lovely arm of a chair hidden in its shape. So above all, be obedient to love, Jesus. Be obedient to love.”\*

And so, as we go into this new year 2021, let us love and worship our great God like the wise men. Let us love the life God has given us and live it faithfully and purposefully all through the New Year. And let us be obedient to love others as he has loved us, as we come to the table. Amen

\*Story comes from "*The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers*" by John Shea