

THE MANGER: THE WISE MEN

Text: Matthew 2:1-11
LHUMC 12/29/13
Stations of the Birth #6

I. Introduction

A. Today we leave the gospel of Luke for the gospel of Matthew where we will be the next couple of weeks, in large part because Matthew places such an emphasis on the places and people that are important right after the birth of the baby.

B. And so today we leave the fields above the village of Bethlehem and head down to the manger.

1. Now as we arrive in this place, again try to imagine to yourself what it must have been like.

a) There is some disagreement among historians where that manger might have been.

b) Some say that the typical place in Bethlehem for a manger to be found would have been in one of the small caves that were carved into the rocky hillsides around the outskirts of the town. That that is where animals were typically kept.

c) Others say it would have been in some kind of small out-building that the birth would have taken place.

d) But whatever we envision as the actual place, what would have been the same regardless of the details would have been the animals that were there and all that goes with a place where you find animals—I picture hay bales, feed bags, mooing, and clucking and all of those sounds. Hopefully there weren't any pigs, because I know from experience that pigs make an incredible racket in an enclosed space. So the baby wouldn't have gotten much sleep if there were pigs there. And yes, the aromas that you find in those kind of places would have been present also.

II. So that is the place. But today we are actually coming at the manger from a different direction from where we were on Christmas Eve and with a different group of guys.

A. Not with the shepherds from the fields, but the wise men from the east. And this is a conscious decision on my part.

1. Mainly because of this theme that we are discovering on this journey that we have been on over the last few weeks. You might call what we've been on the "God Favors all People Tour" I kind

of like that—picture a T-shirt with that on the front and all the places we've been on the back.

- a) We heard those words first when the angel Gabriel said them to Mary when he announced to her that she was going to bear God's child.
- b) We saw it clearly on Christmas Eve when the angels appeared first to those lowly-and-I-do-mean-lowly shepherds in the fields outside Bethlehem.

2. So today we journey with the wise men to the manger for that reason. When you go with the wise men, you realize that the theme of "God favors all people" continues.

- a) Because we would kind of expect to find shepherds at the manger. They would fit right in with the animals and the smells and all the rest. This place wouldn't faze them a bit.
- b) On the other hand, picture for a minute what it would have been like here in this place for those wise men.
 - 1) My guess is that they had zero experience in a barn or a cave or wherever we are this morning.
 - 2) And even less experience than that with what you find in a place like that.
 - 3) I picture them holding their noses and lifting up their robes as they walked into this place.

B. So with that image in mind, do you see what is happening?

1. Basically, this "God favors all people" script is getting flipped over.

- a) Up to this point we've had God including all of these people in the story in ways that at first glance seem to be way above them.
 - 1) When a young teenage girl from an out-of-the-way little town is called to bear God's son, that would seem to be way above her.
 - 2) When a group of despised shepherds is told first of the birth of God's son, that would seem to be way above them.
- b) But when you get a group of highly educated, highly respected scholars showing up at a manger, that would seem to be way below them.
- c) So today we are apparently getting the message that God favors all people from the opposite direction.
 - 1) God doesn't just call those with the least to play a part in the story, but those with the most as well.

- 2) And don't forget, these wise men also weren't Jewish, they were also outsiders in the story in a religious sense as well, as those who studied the stars for meaning in their lives rather than praying to God.

III. So what I'm realizing in all of this is that these wise men, by showing up here in the manger, may have more to teach us than anyone else we've met so far on our "God Favors All People" Tour. Because if we examine our own lives, I would say that most of us have more in common with them than we do with Mary or Joseph or the shepherds. For if you compare our own lot in life with most of the world—we are far more privileged than most, educationally, materially, etc. etc. And with our stature and what we have available to us, we are probably more tempted than Mary would have been, for example, to turn to other sources of meaning in our lives than God. We may not be star worshippers in a literal sense, but there are lots of "stars" out there that probably get too much of our attention sometimes. So what do we learn from the wise men if in many ways they are us?

A. First, that so many times, in order to carry out God's plan, they remind us that you have to be willing to lower yourself.

1. I give the wise men tremendous credit for being here at the manger.
2. Whereas showing up at the manger wouldn't have bothered the shepherds at all, it would have been a tremendously humbling experience for the wise men.
3. They would have had to not only check their egos at the door, but also check whatever understanding they would have previously had about what kind of king this child really was and where he might be found.
4. They remind us that sometimes our own journey of discipleship, our own journey to find Jesus, can take us to places that we wouldn't have imagined going—places that we would have considered to be far beneath us.
5. The question for us becomes whether or not we are willing to check whatever we need to check at the door to the manger (whether it be preconceptions, prejudices, pride, etc.)
6. Or maybe the question is even simpler—to what depths are we willing to go to follow the star?

B. Second, they teach us something about the need for us as Christians to take a stand sometimes against the powers-that-be.

1. We must never forget that a big part of the wise men's story is that it is an act of rebellion.
 2. Herod sends them off in search of the king for his own political reasons, (really as his undercover agents), and they completely defy him. First by worshipping this newborn king.
 3. And then if we'd have had one more Sunday, we could have had one more station of the birth—that station being that “other road” by which they left this place.
 4. They don't go back to tell Herod about who this king is and how to find him—instead they take another road home. A critical place on the overall journey of Christmas.
 5. That road becomes the reminder that sometimes we too have to go by another road, to make decisions and choices that are based on our devotion to this heavenly king rather than to our earthly kings.
- C. And then finally, they and this place teach us something about worship. Because that is what they do—when they enter the stable or the cave or wherever it was, they do so in the spirit of worship.
1. And so the question they raise is “where is it possible for worship to happen?”
 2. Is worship something that just happens here?
 3. Or can it happen in a stable, or wherever that stable is for us?
 4. One year at another church we were a part of—in a kind of suburban setting, it was decided to do a different kind of Christmas Eve service.
 - a) Instead of at church, we made it into a road trip out to a farm outside town.
 - b) Lots of churches do live nativity scenes, where you truck in the animals to the church. When you bring the manger to the people, so to speak.
 - c) It is less common to bring the people to the manger.
 - d) And so we had the service there, in the barn, with the animals, and the hay, and yes, the smells too.
 - e) And the result of that is we all learned something about worship—that going out to worship at the manger is not only possible, but meaningful as well.
 - f) That you don't have to be here to worship God—that God can be met in worship in places we might have considered to be beneath us and Him.
 5. The wise men also teach us about the practice of worship.

- a) That it begins with the bringing of our gifts to God, and that doesn't have to be gold, frankincense, or myrrh.
- b) Maybe the greatest gift they brought was their willingness to bow before the child in praise and adoration.
- c) Can you picture the wise men in all of their finery kneeling on the floor of the stable? I also know from experience that once you've been on the floor of a stable, the stains and the smells don't wash out, if you know what I mean!
- d) At a number of levels, that was the ultimate act of humility.
- e) And maybe that's the ultimate gift that we too are to bring in worship, whether it's here or anywhere else—the gift of humility.
- f) For when we come to Christ in worship, in the end, that's the gift that unites us—this humbling knowledge that all we have, all we know, all we are, comes from him.
- g) When you come to worship bearing that gift, then worship itself becomes a gift back to us, empowering us to go home by another road if that's what we need to do.

IV. Conclusion

- A. One commentator says that with today's story we realize that “God reaches beyond shepherds at the bottom of the barrel to the Wise Men at the top.” (Craig Satterlee, *www.workingpreacher.com*, 1/6/2013)
- B. Kind of a neat way of saying that “God favors all people”.
- C. Which brings me to the other image that I can't get out of my mind—which is that as we gather here at the manger, the whole cast of characters is here—Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and the wise men, for the one and only time, all together.
- D. And so it is here at the manger that we get the whole barrel.
- E. It is here that we find all of these people, all of whom we can relate to depending on what is going on in our lives and where we are in our journey with God.
- F. It is here where we finally understand that God really does favor all people, and that God could care less where we are in the barrel.
- G. That God not only favors all people, but God uses all people as a part of His plan for the salvation of the world .
- H. So today we remember that the door to where the manger is found, the door to this place, is open to all.