

# ***“Wise Men Not So Wise”***

**Matthew 2**

**Sermon Preached by Pastor Rob Fulton**

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**First United Presbyterian Church  
Bellefontaine, Ohio**

Now, I don't know how YOU see it, but as far as I'm concerned, I think a pretty good case could be made for the fact that the “Wise Men” were anything BUT wise! I mean, think about it! How else do you explain the colossal stupidity of their little visit to King Herod?

The opening verses of Matthew's second chapter tell the tale – how one day these astrologers from the East show up at the king's palace asking “*Where IS he who has been born king of the Jews?*” I mean, HELLO! Don't they realize, being in King Herod's capital city of Jerusalem, that Israel already HAS a king who isn't going to take too kindly to the news that a NEW king has been born...ESPECIALLY one that Herod knows nothing about? Can't you just imagine the goofy smiles on their faces when they say, “*Well, hello there, your majesty, and congratulations! We've brought some baby gifts for the new king of the Jews! Please take us to the royal nursery so we can see the little tyke!*”

Wouldn't you have thought that the LEAST they could have done was to ask someone...ANYONE...in Jerusalem if a blessed event had taken place in the palace? It's simply called “doing your homework.” But NO! These “Wise Men” go barging in all atwitter in the hope of seeing the “newborn king,” never even stopping to think what the old buzzard Herod might do if, in fact, there IS no bouncing baby bundle of joy in the royal nursery.

Imagine their embarrassment when Herod says to them, “*Baby!? WHAT baby?*” It's no WONDER the scriptures tell us Herod was alarmed and upset, and all of Jerusalem with him, at what the Wise Men said.

“*OOPS!*” the Wise Men think to themselves, their sheepish grins beginning to fade from their faces. But they were so NOT wise that they STILL didn't get what the sly old Herod is up to when he calls in the Bible professors from the Jerusalem Institute of Prophetic Studies and asked them where the prophets had predicted the Messiah was to be born. They say, “*Bethlehem, of course!*” and Herod replies, “*Uh...thanks guys! You...uhh...you can go back to your scrolls or prayers or whatever it is you do with you time! I'll take care of things from here on out!*” And then turning to the so-called Wise Men, he continues.

“*Okay, gentlemen, here's the deal! You go and FIND this baby and then come back and tell me where he is so that I...umm...so that I...can...umm...so that I can go...and umm...umm...so that I can go and worship him too! Yea, yea! That's right! I want to come and worship him too!*”

Yea RIGHT, Herod! You sly old fox you! You don't fool us for one little minute! But these “Wise” Men actually fall for it. They actually BUY Herod's story. So off they go, tickled pink they are still hot on the baby's trail. And eventually, they find the baby, in a house with Mary, his mother, and bowing down before him, they offer him their gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Now my hunch is, being the “UN-Wise Wise Men” that they were, they were all set to actually go back and TELL the king where they had found the child...Herod's REPLACEMENT, no less. “*And oh Herod, he's SO cute! We know you'll just love him to death!*”

And they'd have done it too, the bumlbers...TOLD Herod exactly where to find him...except that, as the Bible puts it, God had other things in mind...such that “*having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they returned home by another way.*” And that, to be honest about it, is the LAST we ever hear from these characters...EXCEPT, of course, for all the legends and tales that have grown up around the “Wise Men” tradition.

Well, good riddance, **I** say. Who knows what kind of mess they would have made if they had stayed around much longer. The mess they'd **ALREADY** made was bad enough.

Of course now, we usually **OVERLOOK** the fact that the "Wise" Men's blunders enabled Herod to carry out some pretty bloody business. We don't even like to **READ** that part of the story. But because of their "tip off," Herod puts out a contract on the life of all the baby boys two years old and younger in Bethlehem...all in an attempt to eradicate the **ONE** baby boy the Wise Men had called "the King of the Jews." And wholesale slaughter occurred. Murder and mayhem took place.

So what do you think? Am I campaigning for the elimination of the Wise Men from the Christmas story? Well **NO!** Of course not! The Wise Men have become as much a part of our tradition as the shepherds on the hillsides and the babe in a manger. What I **AM** campaigning for, however, is a little **HONESTY** in telling their story.

You see, my hunch is that we shrink from such honesty because we don't much **LIKE** what follows. In the midst of all the purity and innocence of the Christmas story, we don't like to think about the **HORROR**...the absolute **TERROR**...of little babies being slaughtered by Herod's Gestapo Storm Troopers. We don't like to actually **ADMIT** that such things even **HAPPEN** in the world...much less that they happen because of the sweet little baby Jesus in the manger in Bethlehem. So we end up painting the Wise Men as these heroes who come riding in from parts unknown to pay homage at the foot of the Christ child and **FORGET** about telling how their bumbling questions to King Herod cause the unmitigated slaughter of countless numbers of innocent baby boys in Bethlehem.

And yet, the Bible doesn't **DWELL** on that horror, does it? Unlike many of our modern-day stories, Matthew's Gospel simply doesn't contain a bunch of gratuitous descriptions of blood and guts violence here. Instead, it simply invites us to imagine the absolute **TERROR** that seized the mothers and fathers of Bethlehem when the news of Herod's bloody intentions began to spread. And if we are brave enough to listen, perhaps we can even **HEAR** the helpless cries of infants being torn from their mother's arms and **SEE** the impotent rage of father's watching their sons being slaughtered before their very eyes.

But all the Bible says is this:

*"Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:*

*'A voice was heard in Ramah,  
the sound of bitter weeping.  
Rachel is crying for her children;  
for they are no more.'*"

What a world of sorrow and loss is contained in that phrase:

*Rachel weeping for her children.  
for they are no more.*

Because although it doesn't dwell on the horror of what happened in Bethlehem after the Wise Men left, neither does the Bible avert our gaze from the human fear and suffering.

How **TERRIFIED** Mary and Joseph must have been for their little son! And how **FEARFUL** they must have been for their own safety as well. Warned in a dream to flee, they do so at once...departing Bethlehem under the cover of darkness in order to escape Herod's murderous plans.

Can you even **BEGIN** to imagine what it is like to have to pick up in the middle of the night and flee your home...leaving everything behind... running for your life...and your baby's life...setting out for a place where you know no one and no one knows you...where the language is strange...the customs unknown...where you have suddenly become a refugee? Can you **IMAGINE** such a situation in your own life?

Well no, in all honesty, I **CAN'T** imagine it! I haven't ever experienced the fear of having to suddenly leave everything behind and flee my home in the middle of the night. Nor have I ever known the terror of having my children ripped from my arms and brutally slaughtered before my very eyes. Nor, do I imagine, have you. But that is **NOT** to say that you and I have not known fear and terror of our own kind that can sometimes be **EQUALLY** as devastating and demoralizing in our lives.

--The fear of losing something that is **SO IMPORTANT** and so very **PRECIOUS** to us – our homes...our marriage...our family...our dreams...

--The terror of losing our job...our income...our sense of security and "rightness" about the world.

--The fear of facing some terrible disease or diagnosis from the doctors and knowing...knowing that we've got to face that fear head on and "live with it" for whatever days we've got to live.

--The terror...the absolute TERROR...of having someone who is near and dear to us...whom we love with all our heart...ripped from our lives and from our very arms by sickness, disease, accident, death...ripped from our lives and from our hearts by misunderstanding...estrangement...separation...divorce

No, I DON'T know the fear and terror of having to flee my home in the middle of the night...or having my children murdered before me. But don't tell me I don't know fear. Don't tell me I haven't faced terror. I HAVE. And YOU have too. We ALL know how close we sometimes come to the darkness that can so easily encompass and overwhelm our lives.

So answer me this, I beg you! Where is the GOSPEL in this "Wise Men" story and the havoc they wrought by their careless questions in Jerusalem? And where's the GOOD NEWS that's to be heard as Rachel weeps for her children? And what are we to make of it all for our OWN lives...TODAY...when we are forced to confront the fears and terrors we CONTINUE to face each and every day.

The Good News comes, of course, from the same unlikely answer as it came to those who found themselves walking in darkness two millennium ago. The Gospel comes in the form of the child who was forced to flee Bethlehem in order to escape a slaughter that was meant for him. That child, of course, was the Christ Child...the babe of Bethlehem's manger...who did not REMAIN a child but instead grew up to become a GREAT LIGHT for all those who walk in darkness...a BRIGHT AND SHINING LIGHT for those who dwell in a land of deep darkness. (Isaiah 9:2) He grew up to become the light of the world that no amount of darkness can overcome. (John 1:5) He grew up to bring comfort and strength...and most of all HOPE...to those who ARE fearful and whose lives are filled with terror of whatever kind. (Luke 4:18-19) He came to let us know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that no matter WHAT fears or terrors we are facing, we are never EVER alone...for he is EMMANUEL – God WITH us, ALWAYS! (Matthew 1:23) And because of him the Apostle Paul could confidently proclaim...and we can know that

nothing ...ABSOLUTELY NOTHING in all of creation will EVER be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus, our Lord! (Romans 8:38-39)

So let's be honest about it. Maybe the Wise Men WERE bumbling idiots when it came to making their inquiries about "*him who was born King of the Jews*" arousing Herod and all of Jerusalem with him. But let's also give credit where credit is due! They were wise enough that when they DID "*see his star in the East*" they came and WORSHIPED him. They were wise enough NOT to ignore what God was trying to say to them. They were wise enough NOT to look the other way, conveniently not seeing stars...not hearing angel voices. They were wise enough not to try and EXCUSE themselves by busily tending to the affairs of their kingdoms. Wisely enough, they saw his star in the east and came to worship him!

Good friends and beloved of the Lord, may WE TOO be wise this Epiphany Sunday. For surely there are times in our lives when we are NOT so wise. And surely there are ALSO times when by our bumbling actions...unintentional though they may be...we too may cause fear and terror in the lives of others. And there will surely be times when WE OURSELVES will fall victim to the fears and terrors of life that can sometimes...OFTENTIMES...come our way.

But in the midst of it all, let us also be WISE...wise enough to continue seeking the light of him who is the very LIGHT OF LIFE...in whom is found not only light, but LIFE...life...and a perfect love which casts out ALL fear --the love of him who is nothing less than EMMANUEL...God with us...ALWAYS!

May it be so THIS day and ALWAYS...to the glory of Him who IS the light and life of us all! Amen...and AMEN!

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