

Matthew 2:1-12

It's an old story, but I like it. Two men sitting together on an airplane began to get acquainted. One man was an astronomer, the other a theologian. After awhile each began to share his understanding of the other's discipline. The astronomer said, "I believe all religion can be summed up in the phrase 'Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep.' " The theologian, miffed at this simplistic understanding of his discipline, said, "And all astronomy can be summed up with the phrase 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.' "

The gap between religion and science, or faith and knowledge, has been enormous and unfortunate. It began in earnest in the 16th century when Copernicus discovered the earth was not the center of the universe. It wasn't even the center of our solar system as the church, but not the Bible, had taught. Due to centuries of miscommunication, many scholars of both disciplines have misunderstood each other.

The problem is not just ignorance; it's arrogance. Each side has claimed it has the whole truth. Science has contended religion can't be true because it doesn't fit into scientific categories. Religion has argued much of science can't be true because what it says can't be found in the Bible. That's pure arrogance, bad science and bad religion. Anyone who believes they know everything about anything, has a lot to learn. The truth is, science and religion are two different approaches to the same reality which is big enough for both of them.

But I'm happy to say in recent years humility has come to both sides and conversation has begun among some. The best of religion has come to see that science has not rid the world of God, but traces God's footprints in creation. The best of science has come to understand the facts of the universe support the Bible, especially since the dawn of quantum physics. People of both disciplines are beginning to believe the world and the people in it were made for a purpose, God's purpose. So, the best part is: WISE PEOPLE ARE ON THEIR JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM.

I saw it that way after reflecting on our scripture for today from Matthew. In the Christian calendar the season of Epiphany begins January 6 with the celebration of the journey of the Magi, or Wise Men, to Bethlehem to find and worship the Christ child. Epiphany means "to reveal, to make known or manifest." It ends with the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday. In the season of epiphany we focus on God becoming known to people in new ways.

This scripture is very familiar and is often part of the Christmas readings. However, the Wise Men did not actually find Jesus until much later. He could have been up to two years old. The important thing is, they kept seeking until they found Him. This story speaks to us about how we also may seek the Christ. So, today I want to address contemporary wise persons.

FIRST, let's look at how the Magi's knowledge of both religion and science led these ancient wise men.

The Magi were often holy men and advisors to kings. They were skilled in philosophy and the natural sciences. The sophisticated science of those days was astrology. In that year Saturn and Jupiter came together. Seeing this great light,

these wise men believed it meant a mighty ruler would die and another would be born to take his place. That conjunction took place in the constellation called Pisces which meant the shift of power would occur in the land of the Jews. That's why they came to Herod saying, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews?"

It's important to note the Magi didn't abandon their way of understanding the world to get to Jesus. They came the way they were accustomed to journeying, through their intellect and reason.

It's not important that their science was different from today's science. Matthew is careful to say the Magi were from the east, that is, from Persia, which was the center of the highest and most respected learning in the world of that day.

The Magi's journey took them first to Herod to ask for help. Yes, WISE men will stop and ask directions! But they weren't dummies! Herod directed them to Bethlehem and pretended interest in worshipping the new king, too. They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and they were wise enough to know this was of God. They soon understood the world's future wasn't being determined in Herod's palace, but was determined in a Bethlehem stable before they arrived.

Their first act of worship was to bow down before the Christ Child, to humble themselves, in spite of their knowledge and power. They acknowledged Christ's authority over them. Then they offered gifts of their culture that were steeped in religious symbolism.

Gold foretold He was to be the true King of the universe.

Frankincense, or incense, predicted He was to be the perfect High Priest, the bridge between God and all humankind.

Myrrh, which is used for embalming, foreshadowed His death, but through it He would become the Savior of all people.

So, Matthew's point is not astrology led the Magi to Christ, but wise persons following the best they knew, found Christ and were led to wonder and to worship.

SECOND, we need to understand that just as religion and science converged for the Wise Men following the best they knew 2000 years ago, so it can be for us today. God leads wise people to Bethlehem just as surely as God leads magi and shepherds—the revered and the humble.

That means we don't have to check our brains when we come through the front door of the church. If we like to examine ideas closely with intellectual integrity, we don't have to conclude there is no room for us at Bethlehem. A Christian needs to be both religiously philosophical and scientifically practical to find the best AND to survive in this world.

G.K. Chesterton and several other literary figures were asked one evening what book they would prefer to have with them if stranded on a desert isle. One writer said without hesitation: *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Another said, "I'd choose the *Bible*." Turning to Chesterton they asked, "How about you?" He replied, "I would choose *Thomas's Guide to Practical Ship Building*."

The church should not be a place where people talk as if 2000 years of intellectual and scientific discoveries haven't taken place. They are not a threat to belief in God. They are authentic means of finding and glorifying God. The church is to be a living, breathing, dynamic power shaping a better world.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit God is guiding and directing those who follow Him today in building a better world where advanced learning and technology are used to eradicate disease and end hunger, where reason is used to bring fullness of life. We who are Christians are stewards of creation.

THIRD, the decisions that determine our quality of life require more than just knowledge; they need wisdom. However, some are wise, most are “otherwise.” In a biting comment, one philosopher said of another that he was “the greatest of thinkers and the most petty of men.” We all know lots of people with high IQ's or have great skill in accessing all the knowledge of the internet, but still are foolish in their choices and words. We all know people who never finished the 8th grade but are very smart in their choices and decisions.

What is wisdom?

I believe it's knowledge, that is knowing the facts, what we learn from books, combined with insight, that is seeing beyond the immediate, looking deeply into the issue, some call it “reading between the lines,”

using discernment, that is being able to separate the good from the bad, the wheat from the chaff,

and Godly perspective, that is putting our choices or decisions into the bigger context of God's word through prayer, Bible study and Christian fellowship.

We go to school for knowledge, but the Bible says in Proverbs (4:7), “Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.”

How do we acquire wisdom? In James (1:5) we read, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” In fact, the Bible, and the book of Proverbs in particular, is a veritable textbook of wisdom for the believer concerning just about any field of learning you can think of: finances, work, marriage, child rearing, and more. That's why we say “God's Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.” It gives us good direction for a good life.

Most of us have knowledge about Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection to assure the forgiveness of our sins and allow fellowship with God. We know the terms “Lord” and “Savior.” But, does what we know make a difference in how we live? We can feign belief, like Herod, or do nothing with that knowledge like the scribes and Pharisees, or—we can be like the Wise Men and put that knowledge into action with wisdom. We can combine our understanding of both the world and God's grace in handling everyday questions and challenges. Like this man:

Once there was a sheep-raising farmer. Next to him there was another farmer who was raising wheat, children, and large dogs. The dogs were scaring the sheep. The sheep farmer didn't know what to do. The facts were he could shoot the dogs or poison them, be nasty to his neighbor, or even take him to court.

He prayed about it and got an idea. As soon as some new lambs were born he gave each of his neighbor's children a lamb as a pet. The children were thrilled, but their father could no longer allow his dogs to run rampant. He restrained them for the sake of the pet lambs. The two farmers became friends. That's knowledge plus wisdom.

In truth, God can impart wisdom through His Word, through other books and other people, sometimes through just a thoughtful phrase to ponder if our minds and hearts are open to hear and learn, like these:

- Wisdom is knowing when to speak your mind and when to mind your speech.
- We make our choices and then our choices make us.
- Worrying doesn't take away tomorrow's troubles, it takes away today's peace.
- Prayer is not a "spare wheel" you pull out when in trouble, but a "steering wheel" for each day and situation.
- It's good to be a Christian and know it; it's better to be a Christian and show it.

I'm sure you know many more. The bottom line is this: if we want more out of life, we have to learn to put more of God into it. Jesus came to show us the God of love, grace and wisdom. If we seek to have Jesus in our lives; we will find Him. And the more we learn of the world and of Him, the more we will want to honor or worship Him. That's exactly what happened with the Magi. That's what happens whenever wise persons of any age finally find Him. Grace transforms the way we see the world and the way we live our lives.

As we continue our journey in our own way with the best we know and are, we can be assured God accepts us in spite of our doubts and questions, in spite of our knowledge or lack of it, in spite of our piety or sinfulness.

No, we're not the center of the universe, but we are at the center of God's heart. It's the wisdom of the ages, what the stars told the Magi long, long ago, still speaks to us today:

"God loves you, pass it on."