

“Do You Stop and Ask for Directions?”

Matthew 2:1-12

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Can you believe it? Surely they were not properly schooled in the rules of travel. I'm certain if they were making that trip today, they would not make the same mistake. What travel blunder was that?

On their way to see baby Jesus, the Wise Men stopped and asked for directions. Just to show you how futile this was, the person they asked had no idea where they should go and had to consult his advisors. You can imagine how much time that took.

I am convinced this is why men quit asking for directions. For those of you who are married to a man that never stops on a trip when he is lost, blame it on the Wise Men.

Who were these Wise Men that needed a GPS navigation system? They were men from the East, perhaps Persia or the Orient, that were considered holy and wise. They were teachers and served as consultants to kings. They were astronomers, mystics and scientists skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science.

Matthew includes them in the birth narratives and makes them a significant part of the Christmas story. Why? I suspect there were several reasons.

Even though Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience, it appears he wanted to reveal the inclusive nature of the gospel. The Wise Men were gentiles, yet they went searching for baby Jesus. Evidently they were familiar with the promise of a king to be born to the Jews, though they did not have all the details related to the birth of the Messiah. Was this Matthew's way of introducing the idea that Jesus' ministry was not limited to Jews, but was designed to meet the needs of all people? I think so. Why else would the Messiah first become manifest to the gentiles?

Maybe Matthew included the Wise Men as a way of telling his readers that faith is a journey that will require great effort to cultivate and develop. It will not take shape or become authentic until, as Tom Ehrlich writes, “we are ready to leave the certainties and comforts of home to discover God.” This will demand, by the way, perseverance, courage and a holy curiosity.

Some speculate that Matthew was sending a strong message to his readers that every generation faces the struggle between good and evil. Unfortunately, deception and the abuse of power exhibited by Herod are never in short supply.

Perhaps Matthew used the story of the Wise Men to introduce the idea that Jesus was the new Moses. He, too, would be a bold deliverer and great teacher. You certainly cannot overlook the similarities between their lives, including the fact that both were endangered as infants and had to depend upon others to protect them or they would have been slaughtered because of a ruler's jealous rage.

I think that Matthew had another message in mind and it is the one I want to examine and develop more fully this morning. **I believe Matthew was writing to encourage his readers, including us, to discover where God is at work in the world and join Him.**

Why would we want to do this? Why did the Wise Men? They were on a lifelong search for truth, wisdom and understanding. They wanted to go beyond the surface and explore the depths of the universe to discover more about God and His involvement in this world. So strong was this yearning that they made great sacrifices in search of the new things God was doing in the world. What good role models they are for all of us. I hope we will follow their lead.

To do so, we need to ask where God is at work in this world. What is He doing? **He is wherever people are in despair giving them hope and helping them change.** This is God's passion and all scripture bears witness to it, including our Old Testament reading for the day.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the people, but the Lord rises upon you and His glory appears over you” Isaiah 60:1-2.

This passage was written as the Jews were returning to the Promise Land from years in exile. Their cities and farms were in rubble. The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed. Many family members had perished. They were overwhelmed and despondent, reeling in despair. No doubt they felt like giving up and quitting. What did they need more than anything else? They needed hope and encouragement to rebuild their cities and lives. According to Isaiah, God was at work planting hope in the heart of each weary pilgrim.

Jesus was, too, and made this clear the first time he spoke in his hometown synagogue after his baptism. “The Spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened upon him and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” Luke 4:18-21.

Where is God at work in the world and what is He doing? Listen to the prophets and examine the life of Jesus. You cannot miss it. **He is wherever there is despair offering encouragement and hope and we need to join Him.**

“We are called to be persons who embody hope for one another. We have to be each other’s partners in hope,” writes theologian Paul Waddell. “We must make hope visible.”

I like that phrase, “partners in hope.” Matthew and Isaiah were partners. The Wise Men were, too. Are you?

Who do you know that needs encouragement and hope? Is it you? Was 2007 a difficult year for you? Are you reeling from mistakes you or others made? Did you encounter some insurmountable challenges and problems? Did your world crumble around you and you are not sure you have what it takes to pick up the pieces and rebuild your life? Is Isaiah’s message for you today?

Do you have a family member, a neighbor or friend that is struggling? What could you do to make hope visible to them?

Can you hear the cries of those that are suffering because of natural disasters, war, oppression, disease and poverty? What could you do to be their partner in hope? I hope you will do it, not only because of the difference you will make in their lives, but the difference it will make in yours. You will find God there, and you will forever be changed by that divine encounter.