

Outsiders Becoming Insiders

COMMUNION

January 6, 2019

Matthew 2: 1-12

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Play video: "Sick" (1:41)



He walks by sick person after sick person. He looks at his phone, at a chart. At the end, he finally sees a patient, and she looks perfectly healthy. How often do Christians walk past people in need of help – simply

because they have an “appointment” at a certain time? How often do we walk past folks in need?

The wise men set out to follow the star. They journeyed far, in a way like the doctor, focused in on their goal. Once they felt they were close, they stopped and sought help. With King Herod’s help, they gather up all the religious folks and ask what some more of the prophecies say about the Messiah. Lo and behold, these prophecies say that the Messiah will be born in tiny Bethlehem. As his plan begins to come together, Herod finds out from the wise men when the star appeared and asks them to return to Jerusalem to let him know where the Messiah is so that he too can go and “worship” the newborn king as well. As we will soon learn, that is not really Herod’s intent.

Today is Epiphany – the day we celebrate the wise men’s visit to the Christ child. Epiphany means “manifestation” and there is a revealing of something that has been hidden implicit in the meaning. Through the star, God makes divine glory known to all the world in Jesus. The world finally gets to find out what God is like. The star represents light. For the people walking in darkness, they have seen a great light. The wise men see the great light and they follow the star to the place where the Christ child is. They are outsiders who become insiders,

welcomed by God's extravagant hospitality and welcome. They become insiders when they meet Jesus. This is our theme for this morning. Let us pray...

Today's passage is one that I referred to last week when I shared how the long years of silence in Jesus' life was just God experiencing what it was like to be an ordinary human being. In Matthew's gospel, the gospel writer begins with the genealogy of Jesus, then the baby is born, the star appears, and the wise men come. The wise men themselves are a bit of a mystery. We do not actually know how many there were – we assume three because there are three gifts named. We do not know where the "east" really is – they could have journeyed hundreds of miles or even thousands. We do know that the wise men were both astrologers and religious men. We do know that they were important men – the gifts indicate people of status and wealth. We do know that they would have traveled with a fairly large caravan of people.

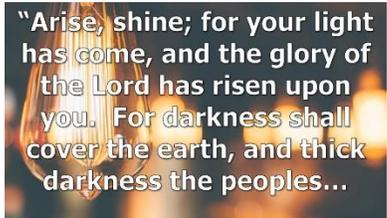


The wise men's journey is similar to the journeys that we have all been on. The wise men traveled through dry, desert places to get to Jerusalem. We know of dry places and of dry seasons as well – of times when our spirit and soul feel dry, when we sense that we are searching for something. Like the wise men looking to the stars, we too can look around to try and find purpose and meaning in our lives. The wise men were from a foreign land, so they would have spoken a different language; they would have clearly been outsiders when they arrived in

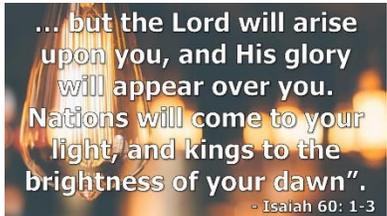
Jerusalem. We too have felt like outsiders before – we can all remember times when we were on the outside looking in, times when we were not like everybody else, times when we felt as if we were speaking a different language, times when we were not included.

The wise men were Arab Gentiles. In the closed religion and culture of Jerusalem, they would have been an odd sight. We believe that they had studied the ancient Jewish texts and came to believe that what they had read in Isaiah 60 was being fulfilled. It was the star that announced to them that something significant was happening began their journey to worship this king. That the star was announcing the birth to the world beyond the Jews would have been hard for the Jews to even fathom. After all, they were the chosen people. Yet, into the Jews midst come riding these wise men and their whole entourage, outsiders seeking some insider help and knowledge to complete their mission. The wise men were on a mission. They did not let the insider-outsider stuff get in the way. They were on a mission to find and worship this newborn king. These outsiders even acted like they belonged, so in a sense they shattered the stereotypes that the Jews held about God and God's relationship with people outside of the Jewish nation. Jesus would grow up and do much the same thing – shattering the religious expectations about what the Messiah would be like – coming as a humble servant, not as a powerful king.

Perhaps we wonder why the wise men did not just go directly to Bethlehem or to Nazareth. Again, scholars believe that Isaiah 60 was the text that they used to connect the new star to a special birth. The first few verses from Isaiah 60 read, *"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn"*. The passage is a bit vague. The wise men would have come to Israel because of the star and the ancient Hebrew text. But to find the exact location is a very small nation would have been difficult, so they seek help.



"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples..."



... but the Lord will arise upon you, and His glory will appear over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn".
- Isaiah 60: 1-3



Jerusalem would have been the natural stopping place – of course the new king would be born in the capital city. But once the wise men arrive, no one seems to know anything about such a birth. They start asking around, *"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews"*? Outsiders come seeking something that the Jews have been dreaming about and longing for years – the Messiah. We read that their question strikes fear into all of Jerusalem, especially into Herod. We learn later in Matthew 2 that after the wise men *"depart by another road"*, Herod becomes enraged and orders the murder of all the boys under two in the area and surrounding Bethlehem. During this time Mary, Joseph, and Jesus have fled to Egypt, remaining safe from Herod's crazed killing spree.

The wise men find out that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Armed with this knowledge, they depart Jerusalem and begin again to follow the star. Verse 9 tells us, *"there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was"*. When they arrive, the wise men kneel and worship Jesus, *"opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh"*. The gifts have meaning. The gold represents Jesus' royalty. The frankincense represents His deity. This spice was used in worship and with offerings throughout the Old Testament writings. The myrrh represents Jesus' humanity. As a young child Jesus is given myrrh. After the cross, myrrh will be one of the spices used to prepare His body for burial. This signifies that Jesus came to die for our sins on the cross, saving His people from their sins. Jesus, this newborn king that the wise men journeyed far to worship, would reveal God's glory throughout His life.

Again, from Isaiah 60, we read, *"Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you"*. We too are reminded that Jesus came for just



such a purpose – to be the light, to reveal God's glory. This is what drew the wise men. The light and glory continue to draw people to Jesus.

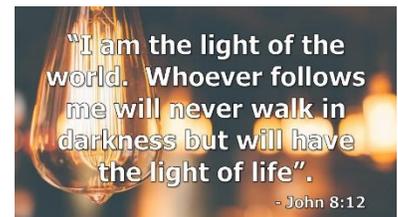


Christ's birth reveals God's glory in at least three ways. First, faith is about belonging and inclusion. All people are equal in the light and love of Christ. Christ and His glory are made known whenever followers of Christ recognize prejudice or sexism or any other "ism" and address the situation, bringing justice and belonging and hospitality to the situation. We are most often called to do this

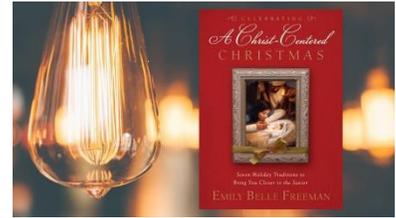
for those on the margins and those who are outsiders. We are not to be like the doctor in our opening video – walking past the sick in order to keep our agenda or appointment.

Second, the message of faith is one of equitability, mutuality, unconditional love and light. In the world, power and dominance rule. Like we see with Herod, we see many today who crave power and control and will stop at nothing to secure and insure their places of authority. The light of Christ shines into the darkness. It casts a light upon the evil that drives such people, exposing it for what it is. Jesus enters the world offering unconditional love and equality for all people, exposing the evil that separates and divides.

Third, the light is born from a life that continues to shine. The light is born not of a star, but from a life. The life was lived out in first-century Palestine, but its light still warns us and warms us in our day. The life was buried just outside of Jerusalem, but its resurrected light still shines today. As Jesus said in John 8:12, *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life"*. We have the light of life.



This morning I close with an excerpt from Sharon Jaynes' book, "Celebrating a Christ-centered Christmas". Hear the light of Christ being shared.



An African boy listened carefully as his teacher explained why Christians give presents to each other on Christmas day. "The gift is an expression of our joy over the birth of Jesus and our friendship for each other," she said.

When Christmas day came, the boy brought the teacher a seashell of lustrous beauty. "Where did you ever find such a beautiful shell?" the teacher asked. The youth told her that there was only one spot where such extraordinary shells could be found. When he named the place, a certain bay several miles away, the teacher was left speechless.

"Why ... why, it's gorgeous ... wonderful, but you shouldn't have gone all that way to get the gift for me."

His eyes brightening, the boy answered, "Long walk part of gift." God came from heaven to a manger, from a manger to a cross, from a cross to the grave and from a grave back to heaven.

And we ask, "Why all this trouble, God?" And God would say to us, "Long walk part of gift."



We all have received the gift of the light and love of Christ. Yes, Jesus went on a long walk to be our light and love, our hope and salvation. God reached out to those outsiders, to those wise men from afar, helping the Jews, the insiders, to begin to see the light. Each of us knows someone who needs to walk in the light. Do not be like the doctor – head buried in your phone, rushing off the next important thing, missing the person that God has put in your path, in your life. The lost, the broken, the sick, the hurting - they are outsiders who need to become insiders. Like the wise men, like the little African boy in the closing illustration, how focused are you on following the light? How far are you willing to walk this week to let them know the joy of Christ that you know? However far, may God bless your journey this week. Amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve

- 1) What desert or dry place are you experiencing right now? How can your faith bring hope and love into that place?
- 2) Jesus Christ shatters the lines of race, gender, and class. Pray for Jesus to shatter any barriers or walls that you have in your heart.
- 3) Who do you know that are outside, like the Magi? In serving them, how can you help to bring them “inside”?

The Way Forward – A Journey for the United Methodist Church

Last Sunday I gave the background history for the “Way Forward” that I have been praying for each Sunday in worship and each morning as I go on my prayer walk around Winner. In general, the Way Forward involves our Book of Discipline’s wording, guidelines, and understanding of the topic of homosexuality. Last Sunday I shared on the “One Church Plan” – the plan recommended by the majority of the Council of Bishops. Today, I will briefly unpack another plan. Next Sunday I will unpack the third major plan plus some other things that will come to the floor in February. Then, on Saturday, January 19th, we will have a “Town Hall Meeting” to further unpack and discuss these plans, the potential impacts upon the global church and upon our church here in Winner, and to try and answer some questions. Again, at this meeting Beata Ferris, one of our two Dakotas Conference representatives to the Special General Conference will be present to help guide our time together.

Plan Two – The Connectional Conference

The plan that I will briefly present today is the most complex of the plans. This plan would take years to implement because it involves a major restructuring of the United Methodist Church. Today, in the United States for example, the United Methodist Church is organized into five jurisdictions. This map shows how the 54 annual conferences in the United States



are organized into these five jurisdictions. Keep that picture in mind as I briefly explain the Connectional Conference plan.

A Way Forward

CONVERSATIONS
ABOUT A WAY
FORWARD FOR THE
UNITED METHODIST
CHURCH



The matters of human sexuality and unity are the presenting issues for a deeper conversation – one that brings our regional and cultural differences to the surface and which highlights **different ways of interpreting scripture and theological tradition.**

The Vision for the Commission

The Commission will design a way for being church that:

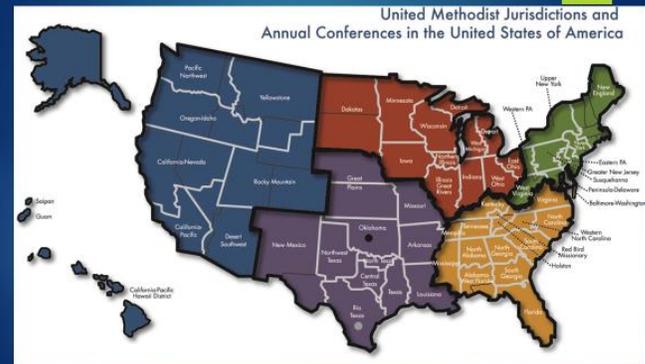
- maximizes the presence of a United Methodist witness in as many places in the world as possible,
- allows for as much contextual differentiation as possible, and;
- balances an approach to different theological understandings of human sexuality with a desire for as much unity as possible.

Connectional Conferences Model

Not recommended by Commission or Bishops

- ▶ Grounded in a unified core that includes shared doctrine and services and one Council of Bishops, while also creating different branches that have clearly defined values such as accountability, contextualization and justice.

- ▶ The five U.S. jurisdictions would be replaced by three connectional conferences, each covering the whole country, based on theology and perspective on LGBTQ ministry (i.e. traditional or progressive or centrist).



- ▶ Annual conferences would decide which connectional conference to affiliate with.
- ▶ Local churches could choose a branch other than the one chosen by their annual conference by voting to join another conference.

- ▶ **PRO:** Makes a place for all 3 viewpoints within the UMC and yet creates enough separation that there is clarity for each position.
- ▶ **PRO:** Conferences and local churches can make a clear choice on human sexuality and yet enjoy some of the missional advantages of remaining a global church.

- ▶ **CON:** Creates a complex structure that is more congregational than connectional.
- ▶ **CON:** It would take years of administrative work to put this in place and many constitutional amendments, which would be difficult to ratify in the annual conferences.

- ▶ **CON:** Churches may split over as they try to determine which branch they will join.
- ▶ **CON:** Some traditionalists will still be upset that LGBTQ is being affirmed in some parts of the UMC.
- ▶ **CON:** Some progressives will still be upset that LGBTQ are being discriminated against in the UMC.

