

What Are They Doing Here?

Matthew 2:1-12

The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights

January 7, 2007 (Epiphany Sunday)

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“Hmph! What are THEY doing here?”

I don't know about you, but that's a question that I heard asked quite a bit around the Holiday Season. It's not always with the same inflection, or overtone, but I bet that you've heard that a few times in the past weeks.

Maybe you asked it yourself when you came in and saw that the decorations were still up here in the sanctuary. The marketers have already issued their Christmas sales reports. We're into the first quarter of 2007, now. Why are we still singing about angels and Noel?

Maybe you saw a new or old face around the Christmas dinner table. “What is SHE doing here? I thought they broke up. I don't even have a card for her...” or, “Didn't he move? I thought he was gone!”

And maybe you were one of the folks who crowded in here a little late on Christmas Eve and saw that “your” spot was already taken – by someone who hasn't been here in months! What are THEY doing here now? That's my seat!

I know for sure that's a question that many were asking the day that the so-called “Wise Men” stumbled into Jerusalem 2000 years ago. These guys just didn't belong, and they caused a stir. Matthew tells us the story in a tightly-constructed drama.

As we look at the text today, let's be aware of a few things. First, notice that in this drama there are really only two characters, or maybe three if you count the star. The Magi, who are a group, but who speak and act and move as a single character; and King Herod, who is the reigning monarch in Jerusalem. Oh, Mary and Jesus are seen in this play, but they don't have any lines. Joseph is not even mentioned. And there are no shepherds or angels, either. They were there on another night, in another place. No, today we are really talking about a group of Kings: Herod, and these men from the East. What are they doing here?

Who are these “wise men from the East”? We don't really know. They are obviously outsiders. Astronomers, probably. Wealthy. They are searching for something, seeking something. We see them as people who worship and people who give and people who listen. One key that struck me about this morning's reading was that they left home without knowing everything. They saw a star, and figured that it meant something special, but they didn't really know where they would end up or who they would meet there. They were *on the way*.

Listen to this: the birth of Jesus is profoundly *good news* to people who do not have everything all figured out! Earlier this week, I was speaking with our

friend Jeff, who plays in a band named “Good Brother Earl.” We talked about the hectic nature of the crowds on Christmas Eve at our respective churches, and we wondered, why is it that so many people come to church then? Is it only that our nation is overrun by some sort of mushy sentimentality that reaches a peak on December 24 at 7 pm? Is it only force of habit? What we decided was that maybe there is within our hearts and within our culture a deep-seated longing for meaning. In our heart of hearts, we want to re-connect with hope. When it’s all said and done, we want there to be more to life than the things we’ve managed to put under the tree – and a candlelight service is one way to express that hope and continue that search.

It seems to me that the Wise Men ought to be heroes for those among us who can’t stop asking questions, who aren’t sure where they are going, or who long to have hope for something different in life. We cram into this building on Christmas Eve not only to recapture some sense of having been here with grandpa, but because we hope that our stories are being folded in with that which is eternal. Christmas is *great news* for those who see their lives as unfolding every day.

I want to make a parenthetical comment here about the gifts that Matthew describes. The wise men bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There are a lot of stories that have grown up around the uses for these objects, such as the fact that frankincense was the perfume used in the Holy of Holies and myrrh was used to prepare Jesus’ body when he died. But if we make too big a deal out of these symbolic uses of the gifts (that are not mentioned in the text), we make the wise men “wiser” than they really are. They didn’t know anything about the Holy of Holies and the burial of Jesus. Here is the basic fact: these are gifts that, in the eyes of the wise men, are fit for a king. And, to their estimation, Jesus is a King. So he gets those gifts. The kings are presented as those who come, give their best, and then keep listening for what to do next.

What about Herod? What is he doing here? He is, as you might know, the Jewish ruler of the territory. He’s put there, not by the will of the people, but by the power of the occupying Roman army. He is respected, at least begrudgingly, by the local population. He is eager to maintain the status quo, and violently resists any notion of a new king in town.

And in Herod’s part in this play, we see a second truth: the birth of Jesus is *incredibly difficult* for those who think that they have it all figured out. Virtually every aspect of all of the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus is somehow unsettling. When Mary comes to grips with her miraculous pregnancy, she bursts out in a song we know as *The Magnificat*, which celebrates a God who drives the powerful from their thrones, sends rich people away empty, and lifts up the lowly and the poor. When the angels do show up, they make prophets and truth-tellers out of lowly shepherds. And in our story today, it’s Gentile royalty, not Jewish nobility, who come to worship the savior. None of this is how it’s “supposed” to be. That’s not how we do things around here! And if there were any doubt about the disturbing impact of the birth of Jesus, look at how King

Herod responds in verses 16-18 – he sends his boys into town to wipe out all the baby boys in Bethlehem, just in case one of them *might* be a king in waiting.

I'm not kidding you – for people who think they know exactly how things ought to be; for those who don't have any time for questions; for anyone who has lost the capacity to wonder...Christmas is a dangerous and disturbing event.

So today, as we celebrate our first worship service of the new year; as we linger over the last worship service of the Christmas season; as we approach the table for communion...

Bless you who are not sure!

Bless you who have questions!

Please, beloved, please! Do not limit those times of wondering and hoping to December 24th. Come into worship and poke around a bit. As the Wise Men showed up and gave what they had, can you simply be here and offer what you have – and who you are – to him?

And for those of us who are so certain that we know the truth and understand the mysteries...can we just hold on for a moment? Can we affirm the truth that God is doing new things, even today, in Jesus Christ?

If you've been a part of this congregation for, say, the last ten or twenty years, I think that you will have to agree with me that this is a congregation that is in the process of becoming re-vitalized. We are seeing all sorts of new growth and opportunities from places that had once seemed lifeless. Why do you think that is?

In one conversation I had recently, the following notion came to light: it seems to me that a significant part of the revitalization that we are now enjoying began to occur when we opened the communion table to children. Some of you know that old-line Presbyterian theology taught us that the Lord's Supper was a special and sacred event that is to be reserved only for those among us who really "get it". Back in the day, people who wanted to have communion had to meet with the elders ahead of time. They had to be members. They had to know the answers and have the training. And, without going into all of that right now, I need to acknowledge that there was some solid foundation for some of these practices, although I think that they got a little too stringent in many places.

But the newer understanding of the theology of the Lord's Supper is that our Lord Christ is the host at this table, not me, not the elders. And Jesus invites those who are seeking to know him better. Those who want to follow him. And, as most of you know, children are great askers. They are fantastic wonderers. They are ardent seekers. Maybe in opening up the communion table to children, we have been better able to teach them that faith is for right now! Maybe in being able to share the sacrament with our grandchildren, we are reminded that none of us really has this thing figured out, but that if we go through it together,

we can explore the call of Christ more meaningfully (and, perhaps, be ourselves explored by the Lord himself!). I'm not ready to say that everything good that's happening here is because we took the fence away from the communion table, but I think that it's a point worth pondering.

Let me close by asking you this: what new thing is God doing in your life? Where do you find yourself clinging to something too tightly? Where is a place you need to let go?

See those Wise Men, the "strangers from the East"? What are they doing here? Same as you, I hope...seeking to worship...looking for hope...asking for strength to journey in the days to come...listening for God's direction on the path they should take next.

What are you doing here? I'm glad to see you here. And better yet, so is Jesus. All of you. Amen.