

## Lessons of Wise Men and Shepherds

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In the last part of last week's message, I challenged us that one of the things we need to make a high priority in this new year, 2009, is the Great Commission given us by Jesus. We need to be about reaching out to lost people, captive people, with the saving and freeing message of Jesus Christ. We need to be in the business of making more and better disciples of the Lord.

But as soon as I say that, all sorts of roadblocks present themselves to us. Evangelism is generally stereotyped in two ways: One the one hand, we see Billy Graham Crusades and the smaller local revival service sort of thing. This leaves most of us out of the picture because we don't see ourselves as evangelists with the ability to preach convicting evangelistic messages followed by persuasive altar calls. On the other hand, we see the door-to-door salesman approach. This approach presents evangelism as the task of convincing strangers to buy what they don't want, because whether or not they know it, they really need it. This turns most of us off, because we don't want to be seen as rude or as religious fanatics, or both. Besides that, most of us are afraid that given the opportunity we wouldn't know what to say.

The real problem with our objections to embracing the Great Commission, however, is neither the stereotypes of evangelism nor our inability to speak to strangers. The real problem is our habit of removing the Holy Spirit and the ever-living almighty God from the evangelistic enterprise. As long as it is seen as a purely, or even mostly, human endeavor--something we need to do by ourselves or by ourselves with sufficient training--it is doomed to failure. Unless God is in the center of this work and unless we are inspired, empowered, and guided by Him to do this work, it will not succeed.

Today is listed in the bulletin as the first Sunday after Epiphany. The traditional date on the church calendar for Epiphany is January 6th, and commemorates the appearance of the Christmas star to the wise men, who then made their way many miles to Judea to find the new Messiah. This new star appeared to them, led them to Bethlehem, and led them to Christ. It is interesting to note that those we refer to as wise men were stargazers long before they saw the star that led them to Jesus. Matthew 2:1-2 says, as translated in The Today's English Version of the New Testament, "Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem, in the land of Judea, during the time when Herod was king. Soon afterwards some men who studied the stars came from the east to Jerusalem and asked, 'Where is the baby born to be the king of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east, and we have come to worship him.'"

Matthew tells us that the wise men were men who studied the stars; although Matthew doesn't elaborate on this, it is likely that the wise men were professional stargazers, ancient astronomers and/or astrologers who made their living studying, charting, and making predictions based on "signs" they saw or thought they saw in the night sky. And so, we can say that the wise men were just doing what they normally did when they saw what we might call an anomaly--something unusual that broke into their routine, and started them on a search that changed their lives. It is also interesting to note that in this case the only evangelist who pointed the way to Jesus was the evil king Herod. It was Herod who inquired of the chief priests and teachers of the law to find out where the Messiah was likely to be born, and it was Herod who passed this information on to the wise men and pointed them in the right direction. It's rather humbling to think that God could use even Herod as His evangelist.

I can't help thinking also that the shepherds who came to gaze upon the baby Jesus and believed Him to be their savior, were also stargazers. I don't know from personal experience but I have talked with people who have been in the Middle East or who served in the Navy and sailed on the Mediterranean Sea, and they tell me that the night sky there is something to behold. The stars seem so close that rather than feeling separated from them by a great distance, it is more like one is living among them. The stars are more around you than above you. But the point is that the shepherds, too, were just going about their normal nightly routine. They were watching their sheep by night, enveloped by the stars there on that hillside, when they too saw an anomaly. In a sense I think they had more of an epiphany than the wise men for what they saw was great light and angels. They heard heavenly music, and the evangelist who spoke to them was an angel of the Lord. So evangelists can be found among evil kings and angels and everyone in between. The evangelist is not nearly so important as the message which points the way to the gift that God has given us in Jesus the Christ.

Now all of this may be interesting, but what does it really say to us and to the task of reaching others for Christ and the kingdom? The first thing we see in this is that God is always at work, bringing lost and captive people to Himself. Jesus said in Luke 19:10, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost." Jesus said in John 5:17 "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." He elaborates on this in John 5:19 where He says, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." So, if the Son came to seek and to save lost people, we can be

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sure that God the Father is behind it and that the Holy Spirit is involved with it. Jews, Gentiles and Samaritans in between, God's love reaches out to them all. His call to everyone goes forth. **God is the first and greatest Evangelist, now pointing all of us to His Son, Jesus Christ.**

The second thing I see from meditating on the wise men and shepherds is that God's call and invitation in our lives are regularly experienced as anomalies in the midst of our ordinary professions and everyday walks of life. It is most significant that the wise men were just doing what they normally did when they saw the star. They were looking at the stars. The shepherds were doing what they did every night when the angels came to them. Their epiphany came in the midst of the ordinary. This was true of Moses who heard God's call from a burning bush on Mt. Horeb. It was true of Isaiah who saw the Lord high and lifted up in the Temple. This could be said of the fishermen disciples and of Matthew the tax collector. It was true of Paul on the road to Damascus. God showed up as an anomaly in the midst of whatever they were doing and set them off in a new direction, changed them so that they were never the same again and had no further desire to be the same again. And, in each case, God Himself, through the Son and/or through the Holy Spirit, was His own evangelist.

Poet, Francis Thompson, names the Lord the "Hound of Heaven," who pursues us relentlessly until we die or yield to His embrace. I think all of us are apt to experience God, the Living and Loving God, seeking us in this way. He comes to us one day in the midst of our daily toil whether it be charting the movement of the stars, digging in the earth, or anything in between, and interrupts our routine. It can be anything really, the story of a co-worker, an accident, a stroke or heart attack, the death of a close friend or family member, an unexpected firing, a transfer, a promotion or demotion, what seems to be a strange coincidence or impossibility (it couldn't have happened and yet it did). Whatever it is or however the anomaly presents itself, it wakes us up, shakes us up, and opens us up to perceive the holiness of God and to hear the voice of God. The Lord reaches into the depth of our being, engages us in conversation, and sets us on a journey that leads us to His Son. God is always working, always pursuing us, until we turn and pursue Him in return. That's what it means to repent; it means to turn around, to run toward God and His will for our lives rather than running from Him.

I was reading a book this past Tuesday and was suddenly struck by what I was reading so that I had to set the book aside and worship God, to thank Him for His love for me and to tell Him of my love for Him. It was an anomaly in the midst of my reading; God met me in my

reading. I didn't expect Him there but He showed up, and I acknowledged His presence. Watch out for the anomalies in your life and allow God to draw you to Himself in the midst of them. **God works in mysterious ways, His wonders to perform.**

A third thing I see in thinking about the wise men and shepherds is that they were positioned to hear or to experience God's voice. The created world provides an atmosphere conducive to becoming aware of God's presence. Stars and planets in the night sky, sunrises and sunsets, thunderstorms and blizzards, beaches and mountain tops, deep forests, vast deserts, and rolling oceans, have a way of humbling us and showing us that we are not the center of the universe. It is also so huge and beautiful and orderly in the midst of it's chaos that no clear thinking person could believe it happened by chance.

Epiphanies come seldom to the self-absorbed and have a hard time penetrating the static created by our artificial worlds. Those who never leave the concrete jungles of our major cities or spend much time exposed to the artificial life of television limit their chances for a genuine encounter with God.

Had I been watching television on Tuesday rather than reading a book by a fellow Christian, I'm pretty sure it would have led more to depression than to worship. It was not insignificant that Moses met God on the mountain and Isaiah met Him in the Temple and that the wise men and shepherds heard Him speaking to them amidst the stars. Psalm 19 begins with the words: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world."

Some of us who would like to hear the voice of God, who would like to have an encounter with the living God, just need to get out more. We need to open our senses to the amazing universe that God has made and pay attention to what He is saying to us through His creation. **God's wisdom and mighty power are seen in all that He has made.**

Now coming back to the subject of evangelism and the Great Commission, we need to think this through. We are very junior partners in the enterprise of bringing lost and captive people home to God. It is God Himself who pursues them, Jesus who died for them, the Holy Spirit who convicts them of their need and convinces them that Jesus has met that need. We are but servants of this ongoing process. We do not begin it or complete it. We can't stop it, but we can

and we are called to participate in it. We are called to serve as guides, sign posts, witnesses, and instructors that help those who have begun this spiritual journey to find their way to Christ. We help people identify the fact that God is speaking to them. We offer them love and acceptance in His name. We bear witness of our own journey. Sometimes we even get to say, "Are you ready to give your heart and life to Jesus?" and sometimes we are given the wonderful privilege of praying for someone and watching someone being born again."

But the most important words in the Great Commission as presented at the end of Matthew 28 are the last ones: Jesus says, "And lo, I am with you always to the very end of the age." It is only as we follow His lead and enter into the work that He is already doing that we will find joy and success in the work of evangelism. We must pray for the people around us and ask for a spirit of wisdom and discernment as to how and when we can help them move closer to Jesus Christ. But when the time comes, we must pray for a spirit of boldness to share what God is compelling us to share. There is no greater privilege, no greater joy, than to help a fellow traveler give his or her heart to Jesus.

I would first encourage all of us to pay attention to what God is leading us to hear and do in our own lives. Then I would encourage us to be sensitive to what God is doing in the lives of those within our circles of influence, to be ready to assist them as they seek to respond to God's call.

## The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street  
Altoona, PA 16601  
942-1007/946-4110

4thstcog@pennswoods.net

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### Lessons of Shepherds and Wise Men Isaiah 42:1-7; Psalm 93:1-5; John 5:16-24

Jon R. Neely, Pastor