

Wisdom = Seeing + Seeking
Lessons: Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-13

We began Advent reading the thoughts of the prophet Isaiah, who was a “magi” to the king of Judah, an interpreter of the signs around him and a predictor of the future that would come out of those patterns and anomalies. He said that the culture was in decline because justice and mercy and compassion were in short-supply. He said that kings who trust the future of a nation to their own power and their political deals with other nations would be the undoing of a national destiny. He said that salvation and a future always come from trusting a faithful God to save them. He said that God was already sending them a savior, who would walk in the ways of the Lord and lead God’s people like a shepherd who loves the flock.

But the kings and people of Judah followed their own wisdom instead of Isaiah’s. Not long after, they followed the King of Persia into the darkness of exile and a century of slavery in a foreign land.

The text today is not from that early time before the fall. The text today is from the later period after the nation had fallen. The passage was written by the followers of Isaiah. They read Isaiah in the light and darkness of their own time. They heard that the Light of salvation had come and it was time for them to “arise” and walk in God’s way toward the dawn of God’s glory among them.

Read Isaiah 60:1-6

A remnant – a torn scrap of the great garment of faithfulness, a small group of people who still trusted Isaiah’s message and saw God’s light in their darkness of captivity. Like a star, it would point the direction west, not back to the days before, but into the future where God’s light would turn to glory, where God would restore hope and possibility. They would return to rubble and rebuild a temple. Their sons and daughters would see visions and dreams of a new future in God’s will, and they would trust enough to walk in God’s way. The village of Bethlehem and the house of David would bring another king to rule God’s people with God’s justice and mercy and compassion. Other peoples and nations will travel to honor your rising, and offer gifts in praise to what the Lord has done through you.

The nation had risen and fallen again. It had been handed over in its captivity from the Greeks to the Romans, from a people of God to a people subjected to captivity and darkness. They had longed for another chance, another king in the line of David, a light for their rising – to restore the nation and make them a light to other nations. They read the prophets like Micah and Isaiah. They were not the only ones who read the Old Testament magi.

Now we can understand better why the early church put so much importance on these strangers who traveled from foreign places far away to find a baby who had been born to be the light of the world – much more than a new king for Israel out of Bethlehem. They were magi from another world who saw the wisdom of the old prophets.

In the telling of stories, we sometimes fill in details with a flourish and add some fancy with the facts in the telling. We Texans should understand this: A really good Texas storyteller can retell a bit of history with fact and imagination until it is impossible to separate the fact from

fiction – but you know that the truth is in there somewhere. And it is a great story worth the telling.

Let's listen to the story of this visit from strangers and try to find the facts in the fiction. Maybe we can also find a truth that is the reason they told the story.

Read Matthew 2:1-13

Did you hear the fictions that we have added to the story?

- ☆ They were not there at the “manger.” Matthew tells us they entered the “house” where the baby was residing.
- ☆ There may not have been three of them. Three gifts are mentioned. There may be been more travelers.
- ☆ They were not “kings,” and we have no idea where in the “Orient” they came from. They travelled far, probably from Persia, now Iran.
- ☆ They were not just “wise men.” They were “magi.” The word comes from the same word we use to get “magic.” They were “seers.” They were astrologers – a combination of religious priests and scientists in the day. They tried to look at the evidence in the sky, decide on patterns and anomalies in the movement of the stars, then discern or even guess at the means of the movements.

Did you hear the qualities in these travelers that made them memorable?

- ☆ They were focused on asking questions and wondering about the future – what might happen, and how it would change what would happen to them.
- ☆ They were open to truth from strange directions. These investigators had read Isaiah.

Where is the truth that we have hidden in the telling?

They did more than look at the stars. They saw the star as a light from God. They went searching. They listened to directions when they knew the source was dangerous, and they did not stop until the star stopped and they came to the truth and the end of their journey. They made the journey for worship and giving gifts worthy and costly. Like they say in the Appalachian mountains, “They sold the stove and joined the circus.”

“The wealth of the nations shall come to you, ...gold and frankincense, and you shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.” It was more than what they read. It was what they did. They saw the star, and they left all to follow it!

These men were wise because they recognized the baby as more than a new king for Israel. He was not born to the palace. He was born in a shed and found in a house. He was a different king for a different kingdom. He was a star from the heavens and a light to all peoples. He was the One to redeem more than Israel. They saw in this baby a hope for all people and all time. These men were wise, because they made the journey to worship him. Their seeking changed their seeing.

The new spiritual people of God in the new church gave themselves to the ONE light of the whole world. They knew that they were called to do more than see and worship. They were called to journey – to go into all the world. They saw Jesus was THE light. They left all, and they followed him.

The truth hidden too often in our telling of the facts and the fiction is that Wisdom is not in the seeing, but in the seeking. We have to leave some things to find what we don't know yet, what we trust may be that is not yet. Wisdom acts on the facts that shine in the darkness like stars, and trust takes the risk and hardship of the journey that does not end until the star stops and we worship and offer gifts worthy of the savior of the world.

It is a new season for Northwood to see the light of Isaiah's call and "Arise." It is time to look for the unusual in the unknown that can become a direction for future ministry. It is the dawn for salvation in the seeking new mission in emerging patterns that point to what can be that is not yet.

You have a relatively short history as the timelines of churches go. And looking back, you could see those periods of hardship, or congregational conflict, or struggles over issues of the time, or problems with pastors. Those are the dark places in your sky. You have to realize that focusing on them gives you no reason to "rise." The only choice in the dark is to wander around until you bump into something or sit for fear that you will.

Or you can look back to see the times you committed to justice in the society, the call to mercy that led to ministry, and the command to compassion when you saw need – the times you tried to make things different and better. In those times, there were stars in the darkness worth following, and they always led in new directions of the unknown that were worth the risk and worthy of the cost of the "rising."

A church does not thrive because it finds a fine pastor who will do great work for them. A church thrives because its people do great work when everyone seeks God's light and gives worthy gifts.

If you are wise, you will look for a new star that is rising – the new call for this time that is not like the call of any past time. If you are wise, you will search the skies and investigate the signs around you and read for new insight – maybe from unusual sources and sage advice in scripture. If you are wise, you will not pick just any star and start packing, and you will not let yourself be overwhelmed by the choices, or try to commit all the stars that someone likes. A star goes one direction, and a new star requires all of us to change our direction.

If you are wise, you will ask, "Where is God calling us to journey into this unknown landscape of our future mission so that we can worship our Savior and give gifts worthy of his glory?"

Wisdom is not just in the seeing. The people in exile rose to the light and made the journey to rebuilding. The Magi saw the star and came to worship, then went home "a different way" because the glory of God still guided them. The early church saw the light for the world, and left all to follow him.

Wisdom = seeing + seeking – the rising and doing.

We are wise when we follow His light.