

“More Specific Directions Needed”

January 6, 2019

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Matthew 2: 1-12

For generations and generations, the United States of America has rightfully been criticized for being too arrogant to learn other languages. Because we have been the world’s economic center of consumption for decades, we have said, “If you want to visit us, trade with us, or share in any of our natural or intellectual resources; you will have to learn to speak English.” So far we have been big enough and economically powerful enough to get away with it. But God is not that way.

The miracle of Christmas is that the most powerful being ever, the creator and sustainer of this world, came to earth. The mighty came to the lowly. God didn’t make us learn His ways in order to communicate with Him. He came to us in our ways. God sent angel messengers to Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, and the shepherds because they were all members of God’s family and believed in God and angels, but the coming of God’s Son was too big a news for just Israel. Jesus was a gift to the whole world and God wanted to share the Good News with the whole world, but other peoples had very different understandings of who God was and how God worked, so God sent them signs they would understand. God spoke to them in their language.

Our Scripture is about wisemen or magi from the east. We really do not have any idea who these people were or where exactly they came from. All we know for sure is they were star gazers who believed the moon, the stars, and comets somehow revealed what God was doing. Since that is where they were looking, that is where God showed them what was happening. God put a special star in the sky that they might take notice and come to see the baby Jesus. This kind of thing is nothing new for God. God has always been getting our attention anyway we have been willing to listen. From Moses’s burning bush to Aaron’s walking stick that turned into a snake to Pharaoh’s plagues of flies, frogs, locusts and death to Elijah’s fire from heaven to Ezekiel’s chariot to Daniel’s lions and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s safety in the fiery furnace; God has been speaking to us in ways we were willing to recognize Him.

The special truth this episode of God reaching to strangers with a sign brings us is in the journey. First of all, the journey was not quick or easy. The wisemen had to methodically, persistently and sincerely follow that star. As best we can tell, the journey took around 2 years. For people to come to Jesus from other faiths – even if that faith is just faith in themselves and their own abilities and beliefs – it takes a long time. The journey is hard and takes incredible patience and persistence. I also need you to notice that they needed help. The sign God gave them – the star in the sky – brought the wisemen to Jerusalem, the capital of Israel, but it took a conversation with God’s people to find God’s true presence on earth. Foreign visions and holy signs only bring you so far, then you need the established Church with its history and experience to bring you the rest of the way.

Church, this is a huge part of who we are. This church exists for those who are not yet members of it. God continues to send signs, hints and opportunities. Sometimes those come in the form of a funeral of a loved one when a person has to come face to face with their own mortality. Sometimes a tragedy is interpreted as a sign. In the last 50 years, the highest non-Christmas or Easter church attendance day in America was on September 19, 2001 – the Sunday after the planes struck the twin towers. Sometimes the sign or hint is more personal: a response to an article they read, a promise they made a grandparent, a restlessness, or a still small voice inside them. Whatever the sign, they go looking for God. Some will search far and wide including everything from internet searches to wilderness excursions to sweat lodges and Eastern meditation to silent retreats and eventually to church. All those other things may get them close, but they will need the established Church to bring them to the presence of God on earth. The 3rd chapter of Ephesians speaks of a great mystery which God only revealed to the church. A mystery of how all the people of the world are invited into the family of God through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on the cross.

But it's not just about knowledge. The chief priests and scribes shared accurate, insightful knowledge and they never saw the wisemen again. What people are looking for is knowledge in relationship. They need to see and experience what that knowledge looks like. Our job is not just to tell them that the great commandment is to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength; but to show them and help them experience what that looks like. We love God directly through worship, study, devotion and ethical living; but we also love God by actively loving and caring for the things that God loves – people and creation. When the bad guys want to silence you and stop you from bringing them to justice, they threaten your family and threaten to destroy the things you hold most dear. It works the other way to. If you want to show someone that you love them, you support and care for their family and those things they hold most dear. God has adopted the people of this earth as His family and He has a special place in His heart for the lost, the broken, and the hurting. Caring for them, empowering them, and helping prevent the brokenness that causes their pain is part of loving God. Church, we need to be that. Knowledge is important, but it is not enough. If all we have to offer is knowledge, then we have been replaced by the internet and the library. We need to be knowledge within relationship.

Mike Van Heyningen