

Dec. 30- Jan. 3, 2024 Edition

Following

The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 156

The Wisemen & The Star Of Bethlehem

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;O) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Matthew 2:1-2 (NLT)

There is a man in your kingdom who has within him the spirit of the holy gods... this man was found to have insight, understanding, and wisdom like that of the gods... King Nebuchadnezzar- made him chief over all the magicians, enchanters, astrologers, and fortune-tellers of Babylon. Daniel 5:11 (NLT)

Reflection: This week we are looking at the story of Christmas from the perspective of the Wise Men who came to Israel in search of the newborn King of the Jews. What led to their journey? Why did they think a King had been born?

Well to get a grip on that we have to go back several hundred years before this newborn King was sent to our world. About 500 years before Jesus was born a man named Daniel was taken by the nation of Babylon as plunder after they had destroyed the southern kingdom of Judah. The northern kingdoms of Israel had fallen a couple hundred years earlier, destroyed by the Assyrians. In both instances the strategy of the conquerors was very similar- remove about 80% of the people from the defeated country and move them to other places in the empire. Then replace those 80% with people from other conquered nations. Why did they do this? To try to get rid of any kind of nationalism that might lead to rebellion over time. If there were very few Jews left in Israel how could they ever rebel and drive the invaders out? And just to chase this little rabbit trail a bit further... it worked perfectly in every case with one exception- the Jews.

They are the only people group who did not become assimilated into a massive repopulation campaign. You will never hear about Polish Philistines, or Spanish Edomites, or Russian Midianites. But in every corner of the earth there are still pockets of Jews retaining their distinctive culture and traditions.

Anyways... Daniel was taken to Babylon along with many of the other most promising young men from Judah. Some of the most amazing stories in the Bible are about Daniel and his friends, but one small but very important fact gets overlooked often- that Daniel does so well working for the King of Babylon (and then Persia) that he becomes the High Priest of the Magi. The Magi were the wise men and magicians who advised the King. Since Daniel was able to interpret dreams and since he obviously had the favor of God the King put Daniel in charge of an organization that had, up until that point, been a family affair. It was a hereditary appointment and now these Babylonian Magi were told to follow someone who not only wasn't part of the priestly family, he wasn't even Babylonian!

Well, the Magi didn't like that one bit. They did everything they could to get rid of Daniel which is what leads to the story of Daniel in the lions den (but that's another story for another time). The main point of this story for understanding where these Wise Men (or Magi) from the east got their information about a coming King in Israel is that Daniel ends up living out the rest of his life in Babylon (and then Persian when they conquer the Babylonians) as the High Priest of the Magi.

Fast forward about 500 years. A star appears in the heavens and this signifies to the Magi (direct descendants of the priesthood that Daniel oversaw until his death) that the King of the Jews has been born. Why? Well, there are a couple of possibilities. One is that the book of Daniel, found in the Old Testament of the Bible is a book of prophecy. Prophecy isn't easy to follow or decode but if the Magi had been trained to understand the prophecies that Daniel wrote about then it's probable that having read passages like this one they knew about the time when the King would be sent from Heaven:

After this period of sixty-two sets of seven, the Anointed One will be killed, appearing to have accomplished nothing, and a ruler will arise whose armies will destroy the city and the Temple. Daniel 9:26 (NLT)

Sixty-two sets of seven? What does that mean? Well I'm not sure but these guys apparently understood what I don't (and probably a WHOLE lot more than just that) and because of that they were waiting expectantly for something to occur. There is speculation that Daniel wrote another book that isn't found in the Old Testament scriptures. A book for the Magi of the East. A book that quite possibly talked of a star that would appear on the night that, while a nation slept, God stepped into our world and became a Baby. Is that a lot of speculation? Maybe. But why else would the star signify to these guys that the King had come?

And it wasn't just the people in the East who were looking to Judah for the birth of a great leader. There was a rumor that was circulating around the Roman world that was very well known that a mighty ruler would come out of Judea. Virgil, a Roman poet and historian wrote about it. Suetonius, another Roman historian wrote about it. Josephus, a Jewish historian wrote about it. In fact, Vespasian, a Roman general who went to Judea when there was a Jewish uprising in 70 AD... those of you who love that kind of history will have heard of Masada, and the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Vespasian was the general who destroyed Jerusalem and conquered the nation of Israel. Later when Vespasian was campaigning to become the next Roman emperor he referenced that well known prophecy and said that the great ruler to come out of Judea wasn't a Jew at all... it was him. Vespasian. And it worked... he became emperor. But where did that prophecy come from?

Probably from the book of Daniel. Not the one in the Old Testament, but the one that the Magi dedicated their lives to. That's who came to search for Jesus. They didn't have all the information they would need to find this baby. a baby that slipped into the world without an entire nation who had been waiting on Him to come for thousands of years realizing it. How did they end up finding Him? They were wise... they asked for directions. Tomorrow we'll learn more.

Tuesday:

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Matthew 2:1-2 (NLT)

I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true." "What is truth?" Pilate asked. John 18:37-38 (NLT)

Reflection: Ok... so these Wise Men came from the east when they saw "his star" arise. What does that tell us about these guys and what can we learn from them? I'm glad you asked!

First of we learn that these guys were serious seekers of truth. They had to travel an amazing distance through some of the most forbidding and dangerous land in the world. They could have just stayed in the east and speculated about this baby. They could have speculated about what He would look like, what He would do, where He would live. Perhaps He was born in a palace and is lying in a golden crib with servants attending to Him and guards protecting Him. Perhaps His parents are part of the royal family (they were but not the way King Herod and the rest of the world understood it) and He was born to become King. Perhaps...

You get the picture, right? None of those guesses would have been close to the reality that Jesus had been born into. Do you see why it was so important that they make this journey? I mean, what did they find when they got to Israel? Well, first they went to the palace in Jerusalem. Can't blame them for that. That's where the King was. It was the logical first stop. They went and asked for help in locating this baby that the members of their group had been waiting for for over 500 years. And that is one of the greatest signs of wisdom there is. The wise are not immune to speculation, but they hold on loosely to their ideas. They ask for clarification whenever and from whomever they can. When their speculations are proven inaccurate they adjust their beliefs, attitudes and behaviors accordingly.

That's exactly what the Wise Men do. When they learn that the location of the King's birth (which must not have been recorded in the book Daniel left behind for them but was recorded in the Old Testament scriptures that the Jews had access to) was not to be in Jerusalem but in fact in the city of Bethlehem they adjusted their lives accordingly. They didn't fight against the truth (what good would that do after all?)... they adjusted to it.

I think I could learn a lot from these guys. So often I fight the truth in my own life. I find that I've been working on a faulty presupposition (nothing wrong with that... happens all the time... God doesn't fault us for that, but He does watch closely to see what we will do when we are finally presented with the truth) and have to decide how I'm going to proceed. I can't tell you how often I've tried to continue on the path I was on fighting against the truth. I'll let you in on a little secret- that never works out well for me. I want the journey of my life to be on the path God has provided for me, but sometimes I can get a little off track. It's never pretty.

But when I finally listen to the voice of God (you know, it's funny, so often the voice of God is heard most clearly in my own life through the voice of my wife but I digress) I find the road often smooths out in front of me and becomes so much clearer. Doesn't mean no problems or troubles... the Wise Men and Mary and Joseph can attest to that. But there's just something about walking on God's path and following His truth that makes life make sense. That's one thing I think we can all learn from the Wise Men.

Wednesday:

After this interview the wise men went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! Matthew 2:9-10 (NLT)

When you call on me, when you come and pray to me, I'll listen. When you come looking for me, you'll find me. Yes, when you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I'll make sure you won't be disappointed. Jeremiah 29:12-14 (NCV)

Reflection: So one sign of a truly wise person is that they pursue the truth. In the case of the Wise Men they were pursuing THE TRUTH. Jesus rarely ends up fitting into our preconceived notions of how things will be. Instead He leads us by the hand into a life we rarely saw coming and are mystified at as it arrives. In order to find the life we have been designed by our creator to live we have to remain open to His guidance and leading.

The Wise Men weren't sure where the newborn King was so they stopped and asked for directions. After seeking advice from people who had information that they didn't they continued to look for God's signs and direction. This time it appeared to them in the form of a star that led them right to the house where the little family was living.

Wise men and women have been debating for 2,000 years what that star was. Perhaps it was a supernova some will say. Maybe an unusual planetary alignment that caused an extremely bright "star" in the sky. I'm not sure about you but that doesn't sound like what Matthew is describing here. Have you ever gone outside and tried to figure out which house in your neighborhood was under a specific star? I don't know about you but this doesn't sound like some natural phenomenon. To paraphrase a quote from the movie about the Kennedy assassination, "that was one, magic star!"

Did you know that God is always sending stars into our lives too? They don't usually take the form the star of Bethlehem took for the Wise Men but they're out there. God is continually speaking into your life, whether you recognize it or not. And when/if the day ever comes when you are willing to follow, those stars will start to become apparent. All we have to do, is follow them (at least we'll follow them if we're wise). And as we follow do you know what will happen? We'll become wiser and we will start to see God's hand in our lives and His power flowing into and through our lives in ways we never would have dreamed was possible.

And then do you know what will happen? God will start using you to be stars for other people who are looking for Him. All of God's stars lead to the same place. The same place the star of Bethlehem led the Wise Men 2,000 years ago. All of God's stars lead to His Son.

Thursday:

The Lord replied, "Look around at the nations; look and be amazed! For I am doing something in your own day, something you wouldn't believe even if someone told you about it. Habakuk 1:5 (NLT)

Reflection: Even though God is continually telling us that what He's doing, we seem to have a tough time believing Him. It was true 2,000 years ago and it's still true today.

When Jesus was born, nobody saw Him coming. There were literally thousands of scholars in Israel whose entire lives were dedicated to pouring over the Old Testament scriptures and studying everything the Bible had to say about the King that was prophesied to come, and

yet not one of them recognized Jesus when he came. In fact, the only people who had an inkling that He had arrived were either told about it personally by angels (and that's kind of hard to ignore) or they were foreign priests who weren't even Jewish. But that's the way prophecy works... it's not so much so that we will see what's happening as it unfolds, but rather so that after it's happened we'll look back and say, "ohhhhhhhhhh... that's what that means! I didn't see it before but I do now."

This is a rabbit trail but I think it's an important one- there is a TON of prophecy in the Bible about when the end of the world will come and what that whole process will look like. There are a TON of scholars whose lives are dedicated to pouring over the Old & New Testament scriptures and studying everything the Bible had to say about the end times. So what, Pastor Ed? What's the point? I guess I'd just say hold on loosely to what anyone has to say about what the end times will actually look like. Nobody recognized Jesus when He finally arrived even after He started healing the sick, raising the dead and teaching like nobody they had ever known. So don't be surprised if when Jesus comes again at the end it's nothing like what we thought it was going to like based on the prophecies God has given us about those end times. Ok... now back to our regularly scheduled reflection:

Jesus is EVERYWHERE.

Anywhere you look you will be able to find Him. He may look slightly different depending on where you're looking but you can always find Him but sometimes we have a tough time. Why? See... here's the thing. The wisdom of the world is shallow... the world looks at this story and says, it's all wrong. And I agree... it's a crazy story, right? Why would somebody make up a story like this? Maybe that's one of the greatest pieces of evidence that this story isn't made up. I mean, why would somebody write a story like this? Only reason is if it's the way it actually happened. Even the Wiseman expected Jesus to be in a palace and yet when they show up it is not a palace that they find. It is a couple of peasants raising a little baby boy in an unassuming little town. Does that make sense to you?

How would you handle Jesus' public relations campaign if you were his PR manager? And I don't mean just getting him elected to office... I mean getting him to where he is today. Where 2000 years later every human being on the face of the planet knows his name. Where 2000 years later a quarter of the population of the world makes him the centerpiece of their lives. Where 2000 years later whether they recognize it or not half of the world has built their civilization on his teachings and his influence. How did Jesus do that? He did everything wrong. He avoided every seat of power, every institution of higher learning, he picked his management team from the least likely of candidates. He stayed out of politics and out of academia. He never wrote a manifesto or a book...

I mean even his birthday party was all wrong. Not only was it in the wrong place, but all the wrong people were there (shepherds, animals, foreign priests???) and none of the right people were there (Kings, scholars, Jewish priests and religious leaders). Even His family was all wrong (disgraced mother and ridiculed father). The things that we value so highly are missing from this story. We find our meaning and ultimate satisfaction in what makes sense to us and none of this story makes sense to us if we're really looking at the story. I mean, stop and think about it for a minute. I mean REALLY think about it. Mary is disgraced and

NOBODY is believing this story of immaculate conception. Even Joseph, her fiancé has to get a visit from an angel to convince him.

Once convinced they do something so shameful it impacts Jesus' life 30 years later- Joseph ignores the convention of a waiting period between betrothal and actual marriage by immediately taking Mary to his house after the angel visited him. 30 years later the people in Jesus' hometown ask Him:

Then they scoffed, "He's just a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us." They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him. Mark 6:3 (NLT)

So what's the big deal? That little phrase, "son of Mary". Nobody ever called a man the son of his mother. It was always the son of Joseph... but here we see the scandal is still alive and well- what they're saying is, "we're not really sure who your dad is... we know your mom is Mary but your dad... that's a little foggy."

Why? Because once Mary turns up pregnant there are only two possibilities (well it turns out in this case there's a third possibility but who would have ever thought that immaculate conception would be the true way of things?): either Mary cheated on Joseph and the baby isn't his or Joseph and Mary did something shameful before they were officially hitched and that's still a scandal in first century Israel.

Does that story make sense to you? Is that how you'd write it if you were making it up? It never should have worked. It never should have started a movement that changed anything... but it did. And people continue to be mystified by this story's ability to change the modern world. The wise people of our world continually say that Christianity is on its way out. That we have now found the answer to our problems. This answer will usher in a Golden age that will finally result in peace and tranquility and will allow mankind to finally get rid of all religion. For every generation that answer that will usher in the golden age changes and yet Jesus's church remains.

At one point mankind's brightest philosophers believed that wealth and prosperity would end all suffering. When that didn't pan out it was decided that wealth and prosperity was the problem. If we could just even the playing field and make everyone equal financially then all suffering and pain would go away. When that didn't work out it was decided that religion was the problem. Ever heard someone claim that all pain and suffering are the direct result of religion? What was the answer? The government would rid the world of religion and then all pain and suffering would end. And yet in the 20th century more people were killed in Russia, China, Viet Nam, Cambodia and places like that all around the world in the name of ridding the world of religion than the mind can even imagine. Is it possible the problem with mankind is... people? People who desperately seek power will use anything to attain it and hold onto it.

In spite of all of that, all across this world Jesus' message continues to move forward. It looks different in a lot of ways now than it did a century ago and yet you don't see centers for Platonic or so Socratic philosophy going up all across the world. No philosophy reconciles families or helps people break addictions or helps people find their true place in this world,

but Jesus' message is still doing all of those things. When Jesus' message is clearly and accurately spoken and lived out in this world lives are changed and that changes the world. And when you see that happening in your own life... there's nothing like it... it leads organically to joy and praise and gratitude and wonder. And you see that in the lives of the wise men... They pursued THE TRUTH, when the stars showed up to guide them they followed them. How about you?

Friday:

They entered the house where the child and his mother, Mary, were, and they fell down before him and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Matthew 2:11 (NLT)

When it was time to leave, they went home another way. Matthew 2:12 (NLT)

Reflection: What was the whole point of the Wise Men's journey? Well, it was to encounter this God who left His throne one night and stepped into our reality, becoming a man while the world He came to save slept completely unaware. The Wise Men were the only people who pursued THE TRUTH, followed the signs God put in front of them and then encountered this baby. And that encounter changed them.

That's what encounters with Jesus are supposed to do. They're supposed to change us. That's what I hope this Year of Jesus lesson series has done for all of us, myself included- change us. If not it's all been a big waste of time and hot air.

When Matthew says that the Wise Men left and went home "another way" I know he was saying that geographically they took a different route home so they wouldn't see king Herod again. But I like the ambiguous nature of that sentence. Did they go home another way or did they go home another way? I think both. I think they took a different route but I think they were also changed. Why do I think that? Because that's what encounters with Jesus do to people who are genuinely seeking Him. They change us.

Every year when I do this lesson I encourage people as they leave the church property to go home "another way". To take a different route home than they usually would and as they do that to think about whether they are going home "another way"... changed by their encounter with Jesus. Last year when I did that the weather was pretty rotten in Alaska. Lots of icy snow that day. About an hour after our final service at Riverside I got a call from someone who told me that they took a different route home and that because of that they avoided the dreaded Eagle River hill which was littered with cars in the ditch and accidents because of all the icy snow. They were very happy they chose to go home another way, but then told me that they also were searching their hearts for whether or not they had also gone home "another way" spiritually speaking.

What an awesome question to ask ourselves. What do your encounters with Jesus do for you? Do they change you? We would love for all of our encounters with Jesus to be like the one the Wise Men enjoyed, finally reaching the end of their journey and finding that while the reality of what they were seeking was different than they had ever imagined, the reality was also in so many ways superior to what they had imagined.

But not all of our encounters are going to be like that... it doesn't mean all of our encounters shouldn't change us. Often when the Bible invites us to "be changed" the literal language used is for us to "be being changed". The idea is one of a never ending process where we are continually becoming. Never stagnant. Never standing still. Always becoming.

I hope during this year with Jesus you have been becoming. I hope you have been changed by this baby Who didn't stay a baby. I hope you have seen for yourself the outrageous things He had to say about Who He is, where He came from, where He was going, and how His teachings and way of life could cause you to be becoming changed. In the end it's what Christmas is really all about. Living expectantly. I wonder what God will do in your life if every time you encounter Him you go home "another way?"