

"IN THE AFTERGLOW OF CHRISTMAS"

INTRODUCTION Resting today as we do in the afterglow of Christmas, I thought that it might be interesting for us to turn to another side of the Christmas Story. Those of you who were here last Sunday morning, will recall that we attempted to lose ourselves in the wonder and beauty and mystery of the Christmas Story as it's told to us in the familiar second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. However today we turn to another side of the Christmas story, to the story of the Wisemen as it's told to us in the familiar second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. It's a story in which fact and legend are so beautifully blended that it's difficult for us to tell the one from the other. And so the sermon today is a quiet meditation on the Story of the Wisemen, a story concerning some men who studied the stars.

DEVELOPMENT We do not know for sure what their names were. We do not know for sure how many of them there were. We do not know for sure what they were like. Later legends have supplied us with a great many of these facts and have given the men names, numbers and even thrones, but in Matthew's original account, they are namesless, numberless and throneless - simply "Wisemen from the East". But this much we do know however, that they studied the stars. Men have always been fascinated by the stars; by their beauty, if by nothing else; by their arrangement in patterns, patterns as simply as a dipper in a woman's kitchen, or a hunter's bait and horn.

The men in this story studied the stars seriously, just as seriously as people study the stars today. They didn't study the stars in exactly the same way however that we do. We study the stars today, if we study them at all, to find out more about the stars themselves. To find out whether there's any life on them or not, to find out how many of them there are shining in the heavens, to find out how far they are from our world. But the wisemen of old studied the stars for a different purpose; they studied them to find out more about their own particular world. From their observations, they knew that the heavenly bodies had a great deal to do with their human life. For instance, if the sun failed, the crops failed. They probably suspected that the moon had a great deal to do with the unusually high tide that appeared once in every thirty days. It's easy for us to see how they came to believe that the stars had some direct control over their lives, and that by studying the stars, they could predict human events. This was astrology; not astronomy. And this is where it began - in Babylonia, in the place from when these wisemen probably came.

Now the men in this story, like so many others of that time, were looking for the man who would come into the world and set it right. But instead of looking for him in the life that was going on all around them, they looked in the sky and watched the stars. One night, they saw the star that they were looking for, rising in the East. It was a sure sign to them that the man they had been looking for had come into the world.

I think that these wisemen had their hands on a great truth; it's difficult to put this particular truth into words for the moment that you do, you're only telling half of the story. But if we were to put it into words, it would be something like this that man is never completely his own master. Man is never completely free to go his own way. There's a force that is far greater than ourselves that controls

and influences our lives. That there is a divinity, so to speak, that touches and shapes our lives. That there's a past that partly determines our future. This is the truth that the Wisemen had a hold of, and it's a truth all of us with our great love for independence and freedom are sometimes likely to forget.

THE STORY SUGGESTS
A WARNING TO US...

At the same time, this story of the Wisemen suggests a warning to us against two things. The first warning can be stated in this fashion.

There's a temptation on the part of all of us to pry too much and too far into the future. These men were predicting the future by the stars, and there are a great many people today who would like to do the same, predict the future by the stars or by any other means that's available to them. You and I are often impatient to see what's going to take place in the future, but the future, fortunately for us has been hidden from us by the wisdom of God. And perhaps it would be best for it to remain hidden until such time that God chooses to reveal it to us. There are some things of course about the future that you can know by putting two and two together and using your common sense. But the warning of the Wisemen is not to try to see too far ahead, and to do the best with each day as it comes, and to leave the future for the most part in the hands of God. In so doing we'll be saving ourselves a great deal of worry and anxiety. It's a thought worth holding on to as we stand today on the threshold of another year.

The second warning suggested by this story can be expressed in these words. There's a temptation on the part of many people to count too much on the stars to tell them what to do. Back in ancient times whenever people were confronted with a problem or a question or a decision, they would consult the priest. The priest in order to find an answer to their problem would usually do one of two things. He would either take an animal and cut it up and study its entrails, or he would study the stars. The answers would be found in one of these two ways. Most of us I think have given up on the former method of inquiry, but there are still a great many people who still cling to the latter method. I was shocked to read recently where there are some men in Washington, high in the circles of government, who will not make a major decision without first consulting someone who pretends to know what the stars have to say, or who pretends to be able to tell what the lines on a person's hand has to say.

I'm not passing on the sincerity of these men. But I would like to suggest a reason or two as to why we ought not to rely upon horoscopes and such things. Is there any danger in such things. I think the danger would be this. It's the danger of substituting impersonal directions for personal decision. One of the marks of maturity is the ability to make one's own decisions and then to stand by them. When a person looks to the stars, he's letting the stars do his own thinking for him. It's the danger of becoming a slave to an impersonal fate rather than becoming the child of a personal God. When Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemana, in order to work out the major decision of his life, he did not turn to the stars, he turned to his Father in Heaven. He found the answer in him.

BACK TO THE WISEMEN

But getting back once again to the wisemen, if the wisemen had done nothing else but study the stars, he probably would never have heard of them. But the story goes on to tell us how they followed a particular star. When they saw the

star that they were looking for they stopped studying and began travelling. Here again is another thought worth reflecting upon. I suppose there are numerous lessons that could be drawn from this, but the one that came immediately to my mind was this: there's a time to be quiet and a time to be active; a time to sit still and a time to be up and doing; a time to think and a time to talk; a time to be silent and a time to speak out. And the person who knows when to do which is indeed a wise person, and perhaps this is one reason why these wisemen were called wise. When they saw the star, they stopped studying and began to travel.

And so they left their comfortable homes and turned westward toward the unpredictable dangers of the desert. Human beings seem to have a unique way about them for always reaching out for things that are beyond their grasp. No matter how many obstacles may be in the way, no matter how many dangers may be facing them, human beings have an almost irresistible desire to reach out for things that are beyond their grasp. They keep climbing higher and higher until they reach the top of Mount Everest. They keep skirting around the dangerous ice floes of the Arctic Circle until they pass underneath the North Pole. They keep running faster and faster until they break the four minute mile. They keep swimming farther and farther until they cross the English Channel, and then they start looking for some other body of water to conquer. They keep making rockets and firing them at the moon until one day we'll hit the moon. Yes, we belong to this strange tribe of creatures who not only are fascinated by the stars, but also follow them. Danger doesn't daunt us, it dares us. All of us have this spirit of adventure.

Now without preparing the way for this statement and without saying anything further in the way of preparation for it, I am going to make a statement which I hope you'll keep in your minds and think about in the weeks that are before us. It seems to me that the supreme adventure of our own time is not to find a way to the moon, but to find a way for the people of this earth to live together in peace and happiness. It seems that the supreme adventure of our time is not so much in the material and physical world as it is in the spiritual life of humanity. How can so many people, with so many different backgrounds and from so many different cultures, speaking so many different languages, holding so many different political points of view, thinking in so many different ways, and behaving in so many different ways, live so close together in peace.

It seems that this adventure calls for more daring, more imagination, more dedications, and more sacrifice than any mountain, sea or star ever called for. And what I'd like to see each one of us do in the year that's before us is to do what we can, personally, to make the portion of earth that we inhabit, more habitable. And we do this, of course, by beginning right where we are - in our own homes, and from there we branch out into the various walks of life - the schools, the offices, the factories, the various walks of life represented in a congregation such as this, doing what we can to bring people together into a community experience so that in spite of their differences, they can live together in peace and happiness. It's not easy; it doesn't mean that we have to have an emotional experience with every person we meet and know; it doesn't mean that we can't have disagreements, for as you know we can have disagreement without being disagreeable. What I'm suggesting is that we make it our supreme adventure this year to sow some of the seeds of Christian warmth, affection, and happiness and peace in those various walks of life that we touch during the days of the week. I can't put it in any more simple and direct terms than that.

THEY FOUND WHAT THEY
WERE LOOKING FOR....

This story of the wisemen has always been one of more popular stories in the Bible. It's not difficult to understand why. It appeals to some of the things within us....our thirst for adventure, our willingness to risk everything in our search for the highest. But there's still another reason as to why it appeals to us. It is also the story of some men who found what they were looking for. They traveled west as far as they could, at least, by land, and then they did what seemed to them a very sensible thing to do. They made some inquiries in Jerusalem; and they learned from a worried king that this child might have been born in Bethlehem; so they went directly to Bethlehem and there they found just what they were looking for. Mary, Joseph and a little baby. They presented their gifts and then returned by a different rout to the land from whence they had come.

I wonder if they were disappointed with what they found? I wonder if they wished they had stayed at home where it was comfortable. So much for so little. I wonder whether it was something of an anti-climax when they arrived in Bethlehem. We'll never know the answer to these questions. But we do know this, however, that the men who told this story told it because they believed that Jesus is the end of every man's search. They told it because they believed that in Him was gathered together the very essence of God. They told it because they believed that in Him "all the hopes and fears of all the years are met" and satisfied.

The more I grow in my own understanding of life, the more I am impressed with the fact that God seems to reveal himself in specific terms as well as in general terms, in singularities as well as in multitudes, and that he reveals himself more intensely in the one than in the many. All of this is leading up to this thought: in ancient times there were many poets, but there was only one man who sang like Homer sang. In ancient times there were many great nations, but only one Israel, only one nation did and said what Israel said and did. In modern times, there have been many poets, but only one Shakespeare. Many scientists, but only one Einstein; many explorers, but only one Columbus. And yes, there have been many, many good men, but there was only one Jesus of Nazareth - only one Parable of the Good Samaritan, only one Parable of the Prodigal Son, only one Gethsemane, one Calvary and one Empty tomb. (Only one Sermon on the Mount). God revealed the fullness of Himself in that little child of Bethlehem born centuries ago. And over the place where he lay, there appeared a star. And that star attracted wisemen from the East. And his star has been attracting the wisemen of every generation.

"Who are the Wisemen now, when all is told?
Not men of science; not the great and strong.
Not those who wear a kingly diadem;
Not those whose eager hands pile high the gold.
But those amid the tumult and the throng
Who follow still the star of Bethlehem.

LET US PRAY: We thank Thee O God, for the star that appeared in the night sky over Bethlehem. We thank thee for those who of every age have been attracted by His star and have come knelt before the Christ Child. As we enter into a new year, may we allow ourselves to be led by his star, for in so doing, we too shall find peace and happiness. We ask this in His name who came and dwelt among us. Even JC...

Prayer Before Sermon.

In those areas of life, O God, where we are inclined to be satisfied, make us willing to be challenged. And in those areas of our own personal lives, where we are apt to be anxious, help us to be comforted. All this through the spirit and teachings of thy Son, in whose name we pray. Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen