Learn Wisdom from the Wise Men
Matthew 2:1-12

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. The word from God through which the Holy Spirit draws us to Jesus is Matthew 2.

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 in the east and have come to worship him.”

When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.’”

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. (Matthew 2:1-12 NIV84)

Dear friends in Christ, fellow saints washed clean in the blood of our risen Savior:

The visit of the Magi, or wise men, is so familiar. We might breeze by it figuring we’ve already know it well enough. Or we become sidetrack with unanswerable questions: How many wise men were there? Where did they come from? How did they know what the star meant? What exactly was the star?

Today, though let’s revisit the story. And although you know it well, how much wisdom we can still gain as we contemplate these familiar events and apply them to our lives, putting them into practice! We're not going to speculate on those unanswerable questions; rather, we want to learn wisdom from the wise men. That’s the theme today: Learn wisdom from the wise men. This wisdom confronts us, comforts us, and compels us.
A. Wisdom that confronts us

Those wise men were certainly people of means. Look at the gifts they brought: gold, incense, myrrh—not stuff that you’d pick up at the Dollar Store. They were no ordinary travelers. Look at the stir their arrival in Jerusalem caused. They were prominent enough to have an audience with King Herod himself. I think it’s safe to say that whatever this world had to offer—wealth, wisdom, influence, power, fame, prestige—all was in the reach of these wise men.

But none of that could satisfy what they needed most. How could they be right with God? No amount of wealth could buy him off. No amount of wisdom could persuade him to excuse our sinfulness. No amount of fame could attract his kindness toward us. How could they be right with God?

Even before they set out on that journey, they knew that their own desire, effort, or skill could not bring them to God. Rather he would come to us. He would come through the Jewish people, through King David’s family line. He would come to bring us into his kingdom. He would come, and that star announced his arrival. So on seeing the star they pursued their relationship with God to honor their newborn King. They left the comforts of their homes. They made the arduous and dangerous journey. Even with all their wealth, traveling in those days was no luxury cruise. They spared no cost in this pursuit to honor this King. And when the clear word of God, recorded through the prophet Micah, directed them to the small town of Bethlehem, they did not turn up their nose or try to find a more “reasonable” interpretation. They took God at his word and were not put off by the smallness of Bethlehem or the humbleness of the house that Mary and Joseph were staying in.

How this confronts me with my own spiritual laziness and shallow satisfaction with the earthly! What do you pursue in life: a secure future, good relationships, getting ahead, having enough, being happy with what you do have, finding joy in the beauty around you, living healthy, learning more? What do you pursue in life? What I’ve listed can all be good, god-pleasing pursuits. Yet when I compare my heart to the wise men, a grave deficit inside confronts me. A large part of my heart is satisfied to stay where I am spiritually, even though I have plenty of time and and energy to pursue other things. Those pursuits aren’t wrong in and of themselves, but they so easily run ahead of pursuing my relationship with God. It’s so much easier to measure progress and success in earthly pursuits and to be put off by the humbleness of the spiritual. But that would be like the wise men looking up at the star back home and saying, “Look, God’s announcing the birth of our Savior. What good news! We’ll honor him for this hour and then get back to our daily business.”

But what did they do? They left behind the comfortable and pursued their relationship with this new-born King. How that confronts you and me with our spiritual laziness and lack of zeal for the Lord! This spiritual laziness deprives us of more fully enjoying the true comfort Jesus brings. It deprives of that joy that overflowed from the wise men when they saw the star again after leaving Herod. Yes, dear friends, the wisdom that exposes our spiritually laziness confronts us, so that we see all the more how much we need the wisdom that comforts us, truly comforts us.
B. Wisdom that comforts us

“Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews?” (Matthew 2:2 NIV84) the Magi asked. But take careful note, the Magi were not Jews. The Lord had chosen the forefathers of the Jews—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—to carry the promise of the Savior. He had rescued the Jews out of Egypt and gave them his law at Mt. Sinai. He had established the Jews and given them David’s family as their kings. He had sent his prophets to the Jews and the Scriptures were written down in their language. No wonder the Magi referred to him as the King of Jews.

But remember the Magi were not Jews, yet they came to worship the Jews. Jesus was certainly born a Jew from David’s family. He came according to the prophecies given by God to the Jews. Yet he came not only for the Jews. He came for those Magi. He came for you and for me as well, dear sinners.

Here’s the wisdom that comforts: When my heart accuses me for the failure I am, when the guilt of my spiritual laziness exposes how weak and helpless I am, when the futility of my earthly pursuits brings home my own worthlessness, and the hopelessness of hell envelops me, then what comfort to know, to truly know, that Jesus came not only for the Jews, not only for the Magi, but even for me! And he came for you, dear sinner. He came for you. What wisdom that is—the only wisdom that truly comforts!

Linger with the wise men as you kneel in that Bethlehem house. Here is your Savior. Here is your God who came to rescue you. Here is Love incarnate. Here is your Hope, your Salvation. For just as the wise men beheld Jesus in the flesh, so also he brings you his body and blood in the Lord’s Supper for you to eat and to drink. For you see, he wants you personally to know and believe with all sureness that he came for you, dear sinner, for you. What wisdom!

What comfort this wisdom brings! This good news moves us, you could even say compels us, to honor our King.

C. Wisdom that compels us

Please, don’t misunderstand that word “compel.” I’m not using it in the sense of forcing us against our will, coercing us, driving us like slaves, making us do it under compulsion. It’s not that in any way at all. Rather I’m using it like St. Paul did when he wrote, “Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15 NIV84). What wisdom! Christ’s love compels, moves, motivates, empowers us. His love transforms our will so that we willing, gladly, eagerly want to. His love strengthens us, moving us to act, propelling us forward. It’s compelling in the best sense of the word.

Look at the reaction of the wise men to his love. They gave their treasures to him and then followed the Lord’s command when he told them to go home another route and not return to Herod. That’s how they honored their King because of his great love that came to save them. So also, dear Christians, that wisdom which comforts us with the good news that this baby is our God and Savior, that same wisdom powerfully moves us, compels us, to eagerly, gladly, willingly give him our best and dearest gifts and to follow the Lord’s direction, obeying his commands revealed in the Scriptures. That’s how we
honor our King. Even as we pursue the earthly things the Lord gives us to do, we want to do it in a way that gives our King the best and follows his direction. We want him honored in all that we do whether at church, at work, at home, at school, out shopping, out fishing, dining out, playing sports, playing music, playing games, exercising, watching TV, and everything else. We want to honor him in all our pursuits, because of his love for us.

You see, the wise men were not driven by the threat of punishment or by the promise of reward. All the motivating techniques of this world fall into one of those two categories: punishment or reward, the stick or the carrot. Other religions use those as well to motivate their followers. Many even view Christianity as motivating people with the threat of hell for bad behavior and the promise of heaven for good behavior. But that’s not what the Bible teaches. That’s not the wisdom that compelled the wise men or you and me.

Rather our Savior acted first. He first loved us. He first came for us. He first laid down is life in our place. He first comes to us through his word and sacraments. And his great love that came for us changes us so that we willingly, gladly, eagerly give him our best and follow his ways, just as the wise men did. We do so not compelled by any sort of punishment or reward, but because of his love for us. That’s true wisdom.

So dear friends, marvel with the wise men at the King who loved you so dearly that he came to redeem you with his blood so that now he reigns in your heart. That never grows old, no matter how often we hear it. Learn wisdom from the wise men. This wisdom knows that our sin confronts us, but Jesus’ love, which is so much greater love than our sin, comforts us and compels us. What wisdom that rejoices in his love in all that we do, gladly giving him our best as we eagerly obey his commands. Amen.

The peace of God that surpasses all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.