

Sermon – January 3, 2021  
“The Wise Men Witness”  
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, and fill us and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Good morning! Merry Christmas, Happy New Year and Happy Epiphany! Christmas ends on January 6<sup>th</sup> with the celebration of the coming of the wise men. That is the time when many of the people living in Latin America exchange gifts, as the wise men brought gifts to the Christ child. So, there is still plenty of time to give gifts to each other in response to the coming of the Christ child. There are several items in the life of our Charge that I would like for us to celebrate this morning. First, I would like to praise God for the beautiful music that we were able to enjoy as the Pandemics played Christmas music for us during our Sunday evening worship time last Sunday at Fairfields. If you were not able to attend, I believe a video of the event is still up on Facebook. Stop by the Fairfields Facebook page and check out the gift of music they shared with us. I think that we should also celebrate the time we were able to spend with our families and friends over the Christmas holiday. It may have been a different sort of event, like a video connection to a home far away, but let's give praise to God that we have been blessed with fellowship in new forms in this year of challenges to our normal Christmas gatherings. Next, I would like to praise God for the opportunity to give gifts to others in response to the birth of the Christ child. I hope that you had that opportunity as well. I am deeply thankful that some of you have picked up one of the cards from the altar rail and are seeking to develop a new relationship with a family with the plan of giving them your card next December. Keep praying about taking one and seeking to bless a family next December. And finally, let's praise God for the end to 2020 and the beginning of 2021, a new year for us to work in Jesus' mission here in Northumberland. Let's look now at this morning's scripture.

This morning I would like to bring our attention to the witnesses that Matthew and Luke's gospels bring to the birth of the Messiah. First, let me remind us of those witnesses that

we have met in the last several weeks that are found in Luke's gospel. The first witnesses, of course, are Mary and Joseph, who were witnesses to the birth of the Christ child. They have listened to the messages they have received from God and have ordered their lives so that they may live in a manner that honors God. They are seeking to live according to God's law as they understand they should. They have been blessed with Mary's firstborn son, Jesus, and were witnesses to his arrival.

Next, we have as witnesses the shepherds who respond to the angel's message and the sign that was given to them, and, in response, have gone and witnessed the sign. They have gone to Bethlehem in great haste and found the baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. The humble shepherds have been witnesses to the coming of the Messiah, the "good news of great joy for all the people." Their witness was great joy and it has been shared with all they could find in Bethlehem and the surrounding areas. The last witnesses from Luke's gospel are Simeon and Anna. They were well seasoned adults who were filled with the Holy Spirit, responded to God's call to come, witnessed the arrival of the Christ child in the temple, praised God for this greatest of all gifts, and spoke words of prophecy over Jesus and Mary. These witnesses found Jesus in the temple. While there was no recognition of Jesus by those who were the religious leaders of the temple, the Son of God came to the temple and his presence was witnessed by these two seasoned followers of God.

Now we move our search for witnesses to Matthew's gospel. The first witness we encounter there is the rising of a new star, if this is a star as we know stars. The star is the witness of creation to the arrival of Jesus. All of creation responds to the coming of the Messiah, the salvation of all people, the greatest gift given to all by God for their redemption. Not everyone seems to notice the rising of this star. Those who do are those who may not be followers of the one true God, but are those who look to creation, to the movement of the stars and planets, to find understanding in their lives. They represent a vast number of people outside of Israel, a few of whom notice the arrival of a king star and allow that sign in creation to stir a desire within their hearts to go and find this king the heavens witnessed to. They travel, seek, find, give homage to the newborn king, and become witnesses of the world to the newborn king.

The next witness we encounter is scripture. When the wise men come to Jerusalem seeking to find the newborn king, they are met with an unexpected response from the current leadership under Herod. There is no newborn king in his family that would meet their criteria.

Herod is not in the line of David and could not have a child who is the Messiah. Herod is the son of an Idumean adventurer and, as such, has no ancestral right to the throne. This news from the wise men of a new king's birth is a challenge to his rule and reign under the authority of the Romans. His response is not joy but fear. Herod summons the priests, who still do not seem to be aware that the Messiah has arrived, and asks where the scriptures say the Messiah will be born. The priests are able to share the witness they find in the scriptures to the coming Messiah and give his birth place as Bethlehem. The scriptures have much to say about this coming king of the Jews. They are a rich source of witness to the coming of the Messiah.

The people's fear is another witness to the coming of the Messiah, which we should not miss. The people and Herod are not aware of where Jesus is living, and the wise men are sent to find him in Bethlehem and report back to Herod so that he can go and "worship" this king as well. Herod's fear speaks to his witness, as the presence of the real king of the Jews would be a great threat in his mind to his own leadership and rule in Jerusalem. The people are also afraid. Their fear may be more a witness to the possible actions of Herod than to the presence of the true king of the Jews. Yet, the fear they have at this news is a witness to who Jesus is and what his coming means to their understanding of a Messiah. Their understanding of what the scriptures state about the coming Messiah will be challenged by this new king of the Jews. Their fear may be the fear of a changing paradigm in the understanding of God. The fear of Herod is more related to the fear that comes to people who have placed themselves in God's place and are confronted with the possibility that there is a true God. It is true for us today as well. When we place ourselves on the throne of our lives that God is to hold and then approach God, we too will find fear, fear that demands we surrender our rule and place the rightful king on the throne of our lives.

The wise men take the witness of scripture and act on it, heading to Bethlehem to search for the new king. The priests are quiet as if they don't believe what the wise men seek is the true Messiah. They are holding to their understanding of God's word and not to the revealed word of God that comes as God in the flesh. Their expectations may be very different from a foreign watcher of the stars that have heralded the arrival of the king of the Jews. The wise men again find the witness of creation given to them, and they are led to the place where Jesus is to be found. Once there, they pay homage to this new king, a child, and to his mother. They seem able to hear the witness of creation more than the cry of our human nature for a king to be born in a

royal palace in a manner that meets our expectations of a new king. Then they give gifts to this king, gifts fit for a king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. This is our response as well when we meet Jesus. We are to give gifts to each other in honor of the coming of this king.

Each of these witnesses brings a different aspect of who Jesus is to light. It also brings to our minds many questions such as, “Are we witnesses to the coming of the Messiah? What is our response to the coming of the Christ child? Do we have the joy of the humble shepherds and seek to share this great good news with everyone we know and meet? Do we develop fear and a deep distrust of what it might mean for us if Jesus is the king of the Jews, the Messiah, and were to displace our rule over our lives? Are our hearts open to hear the words of the scriptures and see the hand of the creator in creation and then go, seek, and find Jesus? When we find Jesus, are we those who will pay him homage? Will we give gifts? Will we seek to be a witness to Jesus?”

Our response to finding the Christ child should be to be overwhelmingly filled with joy in spite of our circumstances. This is not an easy response as we often are weighed down by the challenges in our lives and lose sight of the fact that the Messiah has come. We also need to be those who are seeking Jesus. Like the wise men, we should see in creation the signs that Jesus has come and then seek to learn who Jesus is and where we can find him. Our response is not to be afraid, but to go and search for Jesus until we find the Lord, and then to let the joy of the arrival of the Messiah fill our hearts. And when we find him, we are to give him a gift, the only gift we have worthy of a king, surrender of ourselves to him. Then we are to go forth into the world and share the good news of Jesus with all that we meet.

This is the first Sunday in the new year, 2021. This morning we are following the Wesleyan covenant renewal service in order to renew our own commitment to being or becoming witnesses to Jesus with all that we have, all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. John Wesley used this service as a watch night service, coming together with others on New Year’s Eve to reflect on the old self in the past year and how the love of Christ had shown through their lives in the past year, or not, and then to recommit themselves to live in covenant before God as those seeking to be renewed and to be effective witnesses for Jesus in the coming year. I hope that you will keep the copies of the covenant that were emailed or mailed to you and read the covenant throughout the year. As we read the covenant, let us always strive to be those who are seeking to allow our hearts to be drawn to a deeper relationship with Jesus. This

renewal service will lead into this morning's Communion service. As we continue the service, let us open our hearts to respond to the arrival of the Messiah by becoming those who are renewed in covenant with Jesus in this new year.

*Pray with me: Lord, I thank you for all of the witnesses that you have provided that point the way to Jesus. Lord, open my own heart to be one who seeks you, finds you, and is willing to be a witness for you in the coming year. Open our eyes to see the needs around us and to be willing to share our witness with those who are seeking to put themselves in the place of God. Lord, guide our feet, open our eyes, show us your witnesses, and let us become witnesses in this place. Amen.*