

WHAT DID THE WISE MEN SEE?

JOHN 1:1-18

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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A few nights ago, Naomi and I were sitting on the couch in a quiet living room, reading our books after the kids had gone to bed. The snow was falling, it was cold and white and dark. We were kind of just enjoying the stillness and peace of the tail end of the holiday season.

I told her, “I think we should light up the tree and the outdoor lights just a few more times. I’m not ready for Christmas to be over yet!”

Technically, my nostalgia was well founded. ☺ Christmas *wasn’t* and *isn’t* over quite yet. We are still in the Christmas season even if it feels like things are returning to “normal” and everyone is starting to gear up for the rhythms and routines of a new calendar year.

So, even though many churches will be focusing on Epiphany themes today, because we’re *technically* still in the Christmas season, I am going to preach one more Christmas sermon.

(I will incorporate a few Epiphany themes as well.)

Last week, I focused on the humanity of Jesus that the Christmas story makes clear. I talked about Jesus as an “adopted kid” with a questionable background full of sketchy characters.

This week, I want to look at the other side of the Jesus that we see at Christmas.

The great creeds of the church have always insisted that Jesus is “fully God and fully human.” Not half and half, not some kind of God-human hybrid. But *fully* God and *fully* human.

The opening sentences of John's gospel give us a window into the "fully God" part of Jesus identity and mission in the world.

It is one of the most theologically rich and dense passages in all of Scripture—a passage that gives us a window into the meaning of Christmas, the identity of Jesus, and God's entire plan for the cosmos!

I will never be able to cover all of that in twenty minutes!

This morning, I simply want to drop down into a few areas of this wonderful text.

I want to look at the meaning of Christmas through an Epiphany question.

Let me explain. Epiphany is this coming Tuesday. This is the season in which the church has historically remembered and celebrated Jesus' revelation to the Magi—to the Gentiles.

I want to ask the question, *What did the wise men see?*

Or, perhaps more accurately, *What did the wise men expect to see?*

It's impossible to say with 100% accuracy, but I think it is safe to assume that they thought they were coming to celebrate the birth of a political ruler, the king of the Jews, as it says in Matthew 2.

Yes, it says that they gave the child their "worship" but we shouldn't rush to assume that this meant that they thought that Jesus was divine—at least not in the sense that we do.

Pagan rulers often portrayed themselves, and demanded to be acknowledged *as*, "divine." On Roman currency, for example, was the inscription "Caesar is Lord." And Caesars often expected the worship of their subjects.

So the magi may have been thinking along similar lines when they came to the manger.

And what did they see? They saw a baby, yes. A future ruler, in some sense. Yes. A king. Yes. The one whose arrival was being heralded by a star. Yes.

But did they know the whole story? Did they know what they were actually witnessing? I don't think they did. I don't think they *could* have.

I don't think anyone really knew, not even Mary, from whose womb Jesus came!

We see this in the famous song (sung so beautifully by Joani and Claire a few weeks ago)
Mary Did You Know?

Listen to a few lines from this famous song.

(We like to sing Christmas carols for a variety of reasons, but among these reasons is that carols often have some of the most profound theology in all of Christian hymnody!)

Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you.

Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
And when you kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God.

Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
This sleeping child you're holding is the great I am.

The implicit answer to each of these questions is, "no."

Mary didn't know. Mary *couldn't* know.

How could anyone believe that the Great I Am, God himself, had taken up residence in a baby boy? How could anyone know that this child was God's very self?!

This was such a radical departure from the script.

In both Matthew and Luke's narrative, we get the sense that the characters are kind of along for the ride—they are more or less open-mouthed, faithful passengers who are fortunate enough to be along for the ride as God does a new thing. But they only understand in bits and pieces, fragments.

The whole story will require a life and a death and a resurrection. And a promise. It will require other storytellers and witnesses to come along to explain what just happened!

Like John.

John tells us what the wise men saw, what Mary saw. And it is breathtaking, once we truly understand it.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...

In the beginning.

These three simple words are meant to call our attention way back to Genesis chapter 1 which begins with the same three words.

Three words that link Jesus' identity with the Creator himself.

Three words that signify to the reader that the God who spoke a world into being is now taking the story of creation in a new direction, creating something *new*.

The same God.

The Word was with God, and the Word was God...

The Greek word translated "Word" is *logos* and would have signified different things to Jewish and non-Jewish hearers.

(It is the word behind all of our ologies, incidentally—theology, anthropology, sociology—words about God, words about human beings, words about social systems...)

For the Jews, *logos* could have referred to the Divine Speech that said "let there be... and there was." It could have referred to the divine wisdom at the heart of all reality. It could have referred to the Torah itself, the Law that was to govern all of their life as a community.

For the non-Jew or the Greeks, *logos* would have referred to reason itself, or a rational principle or organizational structure behind all reality.

And John is saying that the *logos* **is** Jesus!

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

For both Jews and Greeks, *logos* was a big word that described the governing laws behind all that is. It was an impersonal word. The *logos* did *not* refer to a flesh and blood vulnerable child born to bewildered parents in a small town and in a feed trough!

It would have been scandalous to even say such a thing. The One behind all things, the structure and rationality that sustains and upholds all reality *became flesh*? Dwelt *among* us?

We have this wonderful moment of cultural engagement with both worldviews – John surprises both Jews and Greeks by insisting that the *logos* became flesh!

At the heart of reality, John insists, is a *person*, not a principle or a law.

In her commentary on this passage, Karoline Lewis puts it like this:

The dwelling of God is a deeply intimate, personal claim and assumes God's *commitment to* and *continuity with* God's people. Moreover, in the Word made flesh and dwelling among us, now God not only *goes* where God's people *go*, but *is* who they *are*.¹

Or, more colloquially, we could borrow the words of the rock star Bono (from the band U2), who wrote these words in a year end reflection on the band's website:

The Christmas story has a crazy good plot with an even crazier premise—the idea goes, if there is a force of love and logic behind the universe, then how amazing would it be if that incomprehensible power chose to express itself as a child born in s*** and straw poverty.

Who could conceive of such a story?....

Who indeed.

Could Mary have known this? Could the wise men have seen this?

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2303.

Again, we hear echoes of the creation narrative in Genesis 1 where the Spirit of God hovered over the *darkness*, the formlessness, the void.

In Genesis 1 the darkness was no match for the creative power of God. The same is true in John 1.

The light shines...

Perhaps this is why we love Christmas lights... Perhaps this is why I wanted to keep them lighting them up around 5 in the afternoon for as long as I could!

Perhaps during the darkest and coldest time of the year, we fill the darkness with colour and light and beauty as a tiny little sign that we believe what John is saying here, that we believe that the darkness, whether literal or metaphorical, has *not* and *cannot* overcome the light.

Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given...

Some translations render this text, “we have all received grace upon grace.” Either way, it points to the truth that Jesus, the Word made flesh, is the grace of God directed toward us in a final, definitive way.

God’s call of Abraham was grace... the Law was a gracious gift... God’s promise to restore a people in exile was grace... Grace, grace, and more grace.

At so many points in the biblical story, God could have washed his hands of his chosen people, of the human race, of creation in general.

But. Grace.

And now, in Jesus, in a baby boy born in straw and poverty, in the *logos* made flesh and dwelling among us... Grace upon grace.

Grace in *place* of grace. Grace as the truest picture of who God is.

Grace and *truth*, made known by Jesus Christ.

There is no better word to begin 2015—or *any* year, for that matter—than grace.

Grace to remind us that the future does not depend upon us. Grace to remind us that God has already done enough, that all of our frantic striving is needless, that our futures are safe with God.

Grace to remind us that the darkness did not overcome the light then—even though it tried, even though a murderous king Herod tried to snuff out the baby boy’s life, even though power-hungry religious and imperial systems tried to ignore and silence this man’s teaching, even though fearful and confused human beings tried to snuff out the light on a Roman cross...

And the darkness will not overcome the light now.

I began this sermon asking the question, *What did the wise men see?*

I want to conclude by asking another question. *What do **you** see? What do **I** see? What do **we** see?*

As we make our way out of the Christmas season and head into a New Year, do we see a world full of problems and crises and trouble of all kinds?

Or do we see a world upheld by the Word of God who was in the beginning, the one in whom all things were made?

Do we look at our own lives and see confusion and pain and uncertainty about what the year ahead will hold?

Or, do we see the light that shines in the darkness, the light that the darkness can never overcome?

Do we look at the road ahead with worry and anxiety—for those in our family, our friends, our church, our nation, our world?

Or do we see the glory of the one and only Son, the one who has made his *dwelling* among us and has promised to never leave us?

Do we look at this child in the manger and see the one in whom all history holds together? Do we receive this child in faith or reject him and refuse him as so many did then and as so many still do today?

Do we trust that the one in whom all things were made can be relied upon to lead things to a good future, even when things look dark?

What do you see?

At the outset of a New Year, my prayer is that we would be filled with gratitude, with hope, and with great joy because of what we and countless others throughout history have seen, however partially, however dimly, looking back at that manger.

The life that *was* and *is* the light of all people.

The light that shines in the darkness. The light that gives light to everyone.

The light that welcomes us all home, as children borne not of natural descent or of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Amen.

