

The three wise women of Christmas

Sermon - Gregor Henderson

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Luke 1:39-45, Luke 2:36-40, Luke 2:1-20

So far tonight they've been mentioned only once, in the second verse of O Holy Night - those three wise men, astrologers or kings who came from afar to visit baby Jesus. We give them short shrift tonight because they weren't there immediately after the birth of Jesus. They ran late, possibly only 12 days late, but maybe as late as two years.

Their lateness in getting to Bethlehem has led to the question of what would have happened if they had been three wise women rather than three men. And the answer given is that the three wise women would have been willing to ask for directions instead of relying on some weird star, they would have arrived on time instead of 12 days to 2 years late, they'd have helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, looked after Mary, and brought sensible gifts such as clean straw, disposable nappies, and a fridge full of food. Three wise women, sounds good to me!

But when I think a bit more I realise, hang on, there are already three wise women in the Christmas stories - and we've read about each of them tonight.

The first is Elizabeth. She's a relative of Mary. She too has become pregnant in rather sensational circumstances, for we're told earlier in Luke's gospel that she and her husband "were getting on in years" and that she's "in her old age". Given that the life expectancy of the time was around 48, Elizabeth is probably around 40 or so. Her child is John the Baptist. When Mary visits Elizabeth early in Mary's pregnancy, baby John kicks in her womb, and she realises that something special is happening with her cousin Mary. These two women, one very young, one much older, must have had lots to talk about. Elizabeth's wisdom, as our first wise woman, is that she discerns what God is doing in Mary's life, that Mary's son to be born is indeed of God, and she shares wise counsel with Mary about pregnancy and about faith in God. Thank you Elizabeth.

The second wise woman is even less well known at Christmas. She's Anna, a prophet who spent most of her senior years in the temple in Jerusalem. If the Bible thinks Elizabeth is old in her 40s, then goodness, Anna is really old. She's either 84, or a valid alternative translation is that she's been a widow for 84 long years and therefore must be 100 or so. She meets baby Jesus in the temple, he's 40 days old. Like Elizabeth, she sees what God is doing with Jesus, she praises God and prophesies about how God will bring good news of liberation, and salvation through Jesus. Thank you Anna.

Then there's Mary herself, our third wise woman. Probably only in her mid-teens, she has to cope with extraordinary news. An angel appears to her, tells her she'll become miraculously pregnant and that the son she'll birth will be the Son of God!! And Mary accepts it, she's unfazed, she goes quietly about her life and pregnancy, gives birth far from home in a stable, receives wild-eyed shepherds and star-struck wise men, marries Joseph, and raises Jesus. The only tiny hint of her being stressed out by all these happenings is that once or twice we're told Mary treasured and pondered these things in her heart. Wow, what equanimity, what self-control, what wisdom. Thank you Mary.

There's other wise women in the Christmas story too - a midwife for one, maybe the innkeeper's wife, probably Mary's mother. There may even have been additional wise men.

What's their wisdom? What is it that makes us call these women and men wise? Surely it's because they perceived what God was doing in Jesus, accepted it, and followed it wholeheartedly.

So friends, what's wisdom for us? I think wisdom can be defined in Christian terms as seeing what God is doing and getting on board for the ride. And there are at least three parts to it.

- First, there's the wisdom of seeing God at work in Jesus. We wouldn't be here at this crazy hour tonight if we didn't have at least some inkling that God was at work in Jesus. Jesus shows us who God is, the life-force of the universe who is love, who loves all creation and who loves every human being. And wisdom is receiving this love from God and living as God wants us to live.
- Second, there's the wisdom of seeing what God is doing in our own lives. Through knowing ourselves, knowing the particular abilities and character traits God has created in each of us, through our prayers and our sensing of God's guidance, we can each see what God wants us to do in our lives. That's the way to a truly abundant life - living with integrity in ourselves and with God.
- And third, there's the wisdom of seeing what God is doing in the world. God is wanting to work with us people for the good of the world, for justice and compassion and wellbeing. So God is particularly reaching out to the poor and the suffering this Christmas, wanting them to receive his love and wanting us, his people of faith, to love and care for the poor and suffering in every way. God wants to free people from captivity, from oppression, from addictions, from hopelessness. God wants his world to provide abundant life for all. God was at Cancun, God is on Christmas Island, God is in Haiti - loving, loving, loving.

Wisdom, friends, is seeing what God is doing - in Jesus, in your own life and person, in the world - and joining with God for the ride.

Three wise women at Christmas, along with three wise men. Let us learn from their wisdom, friends, and be wise women and men too, this Christmas.

To the glory of God, Amen