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Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

“Wide-Open, and Wary”

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My guess is that none of you would be surprised if I urged you today to read your Bibles more in 2020. But why is it so important for Christians like us to read our Bibles? Especially, why is it crucial that we read the Gospels, the parts of the Bible that tell the story of Jesus?

Two crucial reasons. First, we learn more about Christ. We get valuable information about him that we need. If we're going to believe in him, if we're really going to follow him, we need to know who Christ is, what Christ did, what Christ said, how God's plan to save us was fulfilled through Christ. But, second, in every story about Jesus, we also learn more about our Christian living. See, the more you know about Christ, the more you know about your everyday life in this world as a Christ-follower.

Today we read a familiar story about Jesus, when he was a little child, the visit of the Wise Men. Let's dig a little deeper into this Bible story, and see what we can learn: first, about Christ, and, second, about our own Christian living.

St. Matthew tells the story in an interesting way. He portrays this shocking contrast, between Gentiles who travel from afar to adore Jesus, and the king of the Jews, Herod, who opposes Jesus.

First, let's talk about these Gentiles who adored Jesus. The Wise Men were astronomers, apparently, star-studiers from a distant land, probably Babylon. They weren't Jews themselves, it seems; but they had some familiarity with the Jewish prophecies about a Savior, a Messiah, a new king. They followed a star, a very special star which God used to

guide them to the Holy Land. The Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem, and they started asking, verse 2, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

We don’t know the names of the Wise Men, or how many of them there were. But we do know that, somehow, wondrously, their hearts were fascinated by that star, and by the Messianic hope of the Jews. They brought costly, precious gifts, and they had every intention to worship and adore the Christ Child.

We learn, in this story, that Jesus is not just the Savior of the Jews. He didn’t only come to rescue his own people. God sent his Son into our human flesh to save all people from their sins. Matthew, in his Gospel account, goes to great pains to make sure that his Jewish readers learn how Jesus was the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Messiah prophecies. In this story, though, Matthew makes it clear, right off the bat, that the Christ Child was the Savior of the Jews and the Gentiles. The Wise Men from Babylon, or wherever they came from, were the first wave of Gentiles – outsiders – who came to worship Christ; and you and I are part of the same blessed flow.

Consider what this all means for our lives as Christians. There’s a strong mission message in this story of the Wise Men, isn’t there? Followers of Jesus, like us, have to have an openness to other cultures, to people from different backgrounds. It’s easy to see people out there who don’t look like us, or speak like we do. But the spiritual reality is that they’re all exactly like we are. Every human being on this planet needs a Savior. Every person struggles with sin. Every human has to answer to God. And Jesus Christ is the one Hope for all of humankind.

So, as followers of Christ, we have a mission to reach people for Christ, whoever they are; to connect with people, wherever they are, whatever their lifestyle or culture or language, for the sake of the kingdom. The life of a Christian can't be closed, can't be bigoted, can't be clique-ish. The life of a Christian has to be wide-open. "Who can I help today? Who can I serve? With whom can I share the love of Christ today? To whom can I proclaim the story of Christ's remarkable love?" We learn, from the story of the Wise Men, to be wide-open, as Christians.

But, at the same time, we also have to learn to be wary. Now, I can't explain why those Wise Men thought it wise to walk into the capital city of the Jewish king, Herod, and to start asking about a new Jewish king. But they did. And King Herod took offense. He was a cruel, violent, oppressive ruler. And Herod tried to manipulate the Wise Men for his own devious purposes. Verse 8: "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." But Herod wasn't planning to worship Jesus, was he? He wanted to to destroy him. While the Wise Men came to adore Jesus, Herod, in his heart, opposed Jesus.

And how prophetic this story is, about the future fate of our Savior. Christ came to reveal God's love, on a mission of mercy. But Jesus was opposed, time and again; rejected, despised, and, in the end, crucified. And this is a vital truth for us to know about Jesus. In a very real way, he was born to die. He came to be the sacrifice for our sins, and all human sins. And despite the Herod's of the world – those who opposed Christ – Jesus did what he had to do. He gave his life, to make us his own.

In our Christian living, especially in this country, it's pretty easy for us to avoid opposition, or to ignore it. But there's an

urgent message in this story of the Wise Men and King Herod. The Gospel will always be opposed. The mission of Christ will always be opposed. In our world today, many governments, many rulers, many evil forces strongly oppose Christ. In our American culture, there are many people, many trends, many laws, that are opposed to Christ. We Christians can't be so comfortable, shouldn't be so relaxed. The Bible never tells us that it's supposed to be that easy to be a Christian. Jesus warned his disciples, and he warns us, too, that there are dangers ever-present, opponents all around.

We need to be watchful, cautious, wary. Always wide-open to reaching people for Christ; but, at the same time, not so naïve, not so blind to the opponents of Christ around us. Wary of those who oppose Christ.

We learn a lot about Jesus Christ from the story of the Wise Men. But we learn, also, about being a Christian – being wide-open, and at the same time being wary. Let's pray about our Christian living.

“Lord Jesus, with the Wise Men of old, we worship you today. We offer you our gifts, our hearts, our devotion. Give us joy in reaching other people with your story, in accepting others into your fellowship. And make us diligent, attentive. May we never fear those who oppose the Gospel, but may we never take them lightly, either. Help us all to live faithful Christian lives this week, and help our church to carry out its mission always. In your name we pray. Amen.”