

THE UNUSUAL WITNESSES

MATTHEW 2:1-12

It was just a few days before Christmas. Two men who happened to be next door neighbors decided to go sailing while their wives went Christmas shopping. While they were out in the sailboat a very bad storm came up. The water got very rough and the two men had great difficulty in keeping the boat under control. As they maneuvered their way toward land, they hit a sandbar and the boat was grounded. Both men jumped overboard and began to push and shove with all their strength trying to get the boat into deeper water. One of the men – almost knee deep in mud, the waves bouncing him against the side of the boat, his hair blowing wildly in the wind – grinned at his friend and shouted, “It sure beats Christmas shopping, doesn’t it?”

Ah, the joy of Christmas! Some of us find it by going to the mall. Others of us find it by staying out of the mall. I want us to think about joy this morning – how you find it and how you keep it - as we consider several more witnesses to the wonder of Jesus’ birth. So far we’ve looked at Joseph – the forgotten witness. Last week we considered the angels – the supernatural witnesses. Today, I want to consider with you King Herod and the wise men who might be thought of as the unusual witnesses. Let’s read their unusual story.

HOW YOU CAN FIND THE JOY OF JESUS.

This story of the wise has captured the imagination of Christians down through the centuries. All sorts of legends and myths have been written concerning their identity and what happened to them after this encounter with Jesus. Frankly, we know very little about them. Did you know, for instance, that contrary to the tradition of there being three wise men, the Bible itself doesn’t tell us how many of them actually made this trip to Bethlehem? Was it five, ten or twenty? Who were these wise men or magi? They were known throughout the ancient world as men skilled in philosophy, medicine and the natural sciences. They also interpreted dreams. They believed in astrology – as everyone else did in pagan cultures of that day and time. They foretold the future and people’s destinies from the position of the stars and the planets. Now the Bible makes it clear that Christians are to avoid astrology, but that isn’t the point here. The magi represented the very best of pagan wisdom and religious perception at that time. These men were honestly seeking God the best way they knew how through the revelation of nature – the stars and their movements in the night sky.

Where did they come from? The best guess I’ve heard is the area around ancient Babylon in present day Iraq. Some 500-600 years before Jesus’ birth, the Jewish people had been exiled for 70 years in that part of the world. That might explain the magi’s knowledge of Jewish prophecies concerning a coming Messiah. What was it that they saw in the night sky? Some believe it was a supernova or a comet that shone with unusual brilliance. The most intriguing theory I’ve heard is that they saw a very rare, planetary conjunction of Jupiter,

Saturn and Mars – a phenomenon that only happens about every 800 years. Scientists verify that such a conjunction was in fact visible back in 7 or 6 BC which coincides pretty well with all the historical information we have. But whoever these wise men were, wherever they were from and whatever they observed in the night sky, it's very clear that they knew someone important had been born that demanded their immediate and worshipful attention.

It's interesting to observe three reactions to Jesus in this story. First, there's King Herod, the Jewish ruler of the now Roman province of Judea. Herod was very old at this time. He'd proven himself to be a capable, ruthless and utterly evil leader. He was insanely jealous of anyone who might conceivably take away his throne. Historians tell us that this fear incited him to murder his favorite wife and her mother. He also killed three of his own sons because of his fear that they would overthrow him. With that in mind, why should we be surprised that after the visit of the wise men Herod ordered the mass execution of every male child under the age of two in and around Bethlehem? It also explains why Herod was so keenly interested in the wise men's reasons for coming into his domain.

King Herod is like the person who seeks joy in whatever this world has to offer – power, wealth, prestige. Since this world and this life is all there is, you don't hesitate to walk over other people in order to get what you want. The whole mission of your life is to look out for and advance yourself. Who else is going to do that for you? And pity the poor soul who gets in your way. But can you imagine anyone less joyful than King Herod? Even though he must have known that he couldn't live much longer, he was threatened that a little child was somehow going to interfere with his life, his power, his legacy and his influence. How pathetic! His first instinct towards Jesus was hostility.

There are still people whose first instinct towards Jesus is hostility. Why is that? Like Herod, they're immensely threatened by Jesus. They see Jesus as Someone who is going to interfere in their lives. He's Someone who will tell them what to do. They see Him as Someone who wants to control their lives. And, of course, they're right! If your greatest concern in life is to be in charge of your own life or to be the king or queen of your own little world, then Jesus truly is your greatest threat. Jesus is and always will be the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He doesn't negotiate terms with the likes of you or me. Instead, Jesus demands unconditional surrender. But there's an inevitable and sad fact about anyone and everyone who – like King Herod – wants to reject Jesus and seeks to destroy His influence. They never find joy. In fact, they're utterly joyless.

Secondly, the religious professionals you meet in v. 4 are typical of those who view Jesus with complete indifference. These were the Jewish chief priests and teachers of the Law who could answer any question about the Messiah. Oh, they knew their Bibles well enough! But beyond that head knowledge, you find no evidence that they were even curious as to why the wise men were there or that their search might actually lead them to the Messiah.

Their attitude reminds me of the prevailing attitude of our own American culture towards Jesus: complete indifference. That's the dominant attitude of most of your neighbors and friends towards the Babe of Bethlehem. It's not that Jesus makes them mad (like King Herod); it's that Jesus just doesn't matter. Jesus is completely irrelevant to the majority of Americans. Most people in our country seek joy in everything and everyone else but Jesus. Some turn to alcohol, drugs or casual sex to fill all the empty places in their lives. But of far greater concern are the millions of decent people who seek to find in everything else what they can only find in Jesus. Everyone is made for joy. You crave joy. You seek joy. But so often you look for it in the right kind of job or career. Or you try to achieve it by reaching a certain level of financial success. Others try to find joy in people – marrying the right person or creating the ideal family. And for still others, joy is sought by accumulating stuff – houses, cars, luxury items of one kind or another.

Doesn't God want you to find satisfaction in your work? Doesn't He want you to have a happy family? Doesn't He want you to live your life productively? Of course He does! But God never created you to find joy in those things. Not joy. Never joy. Joy is that wonderful by-product of a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. Most people in the Northland area, most people in greater Columbus, most people in the United States of America and most people living on this planet have concluded that Jesus is not where they're going to discover joy. Otherwise, every church in our community would be packed out every Sunday. Like the religious professionals, Jesus just doesn't matter.

There's something else here that strikes very close to home for me. The people in Matthew 2 who were so indifferent to Jesus were the very ones who were supposed to know God and His Word the best. Is it possible, then, to be religious, to accumulate Bible knowledge, to be all "churchified", to go through all the spiritual motions and yet, at the end of the day, to be essentially indifferent to Jesus? Does Jesus really matter to you? To seek anything else (even good religious or spiritual stuff) or anyone else – however commendable or worthy – more than Jesus Himself is always to find something less than joy.

Joy is what the wise men discovered in their search for Jesus. They weren't seeking joy. As best as they knew how, they began to seek the Lord Jesus Christ. They were seeking Jesus and they found joy as a result. Great joy. Profound joy. Wonderful joy. When at last they found Him in the town of Bethlehem – just south of Jerusalem – the Bible tells us that they were overjoyed. The literal Greek could be translated, "... they rejoiced with a joy great exceedingly." (Matthew 2:10) When they found Jesus, they found joy. I think of the Ethiopian man who found Jesus through the witness of another man named Philip. After surrendering his life to Jesus, the Ethiopian, "...went on his way rejoicing." (Acts 8:39 NLT) Another man, the guy who ran the jail in the town of Philippi, found Jesus through the witness of the apostle Paul. The Bible says of him, "... He and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God." (Acts 16:34 NLT)

The inevitable result of seeking and finding Jesus is joy. Why joy? Only Jesus can free you from a sense of guilt and condemnation for your sins. Only Jesus can free you from a life dominated by fear and anxiety. Only Jesus can give you real hope when you go through suffering of some kind. Only Jesus loves you exactly as you are today with a tenacity that will never let you go. Only Jesus can give you the desire and power to love others and reach out to them. Only Jesus promises you an indescribably wonderful future in Heaven. Only Jesus never fails. Only Jesus never changes. Only Jesus never leaves or forsakes you. When you find Jesus, you find a feast of joy. But if you seek joy in anyone else or anything else, you will only find famine.

A little boy lived out in the country around the turn of the 20th century. He'd never seen a traveling circus before and one was coming to his town on Saturday. When he asked his dad if he could go, his dad said yes providing he got all his chores done early. Saturday morning came and the boy finished his chores early. His dad gave him a dollar bill for his circus ticket – the most money the boy had ever seen at any one time. Off went the excited boy to his first circus ever. As he got close to town, he saw people lining the streets. He got his first glimpse of a circus parade. There were animals displayed in cages. Marching bands played. Finally, a funny looking clown brought up the rear of the parade. The boy was so excited that when the clown passed by, he reached into his pocket and handed him the precious dollar bill. Thinking he'd seen the circus when he'd only just seen the parade that came before the actual circus, that little boy turned around and went home! Isn't that like you and me sometimes? When it comes to a relationship with God, you can settle for the parade and miss the circus. You can look for joy in lesser things and miss the joy that only comes when – with all your heart and soul – you seek and find Jesus. It's one thing to find the joy of Jesus. Think with me for a couple of minutes just now about...

HOW YOU CAN KEEP THE JOY OF JESUS.

When the magi found the object of their search – Jesus - they bowed down in worship and presented gifts to Him. The meaning of the Greek word for “worship” there in Matthew 2 means to bow low in submission before the one you worship and adore. That might well be the best way to keep the joy of Jesus in your life: living every day in worshipful submission to Him. I've discovered in my own walk with Jesus that when I lose the joy of Jesus it's usually because God has put His loving finger on some area of my personal life I don't want to surrender or submit to Him. The joy comes back when I give in to Him.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is built over a cave that some believe to be the birthplace of Jesus. In order to get to this cave which is located under the high altar of the church, you have to go through a door that's so low that a person has to stoop to enter through it. That cave is probably not the real birthplace of

Jesus. But it's fitting, nevertheless, that the entrance into this place is so low that every person has to bow to get in.

Jesus is the King. You never come to Him as an equal. The only way ever to come before Him is the way you first came – in complete submission. The only way ever to enter Jesus' presence is the way you first entered – in absolute surrender. You keep the joy of Jesus by moment by moment submission and surrender. Jesus captures the same thought this way, “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.... I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!” (John 15:5, 11 NLT)

You and I often lose the joy of Jesus because we stop worshipfully submitting to Him. Guilt, shame, anxiety, fear and worry start to dominate your life. There's many ways that joylessness can show up. You want to take charge of your life again. You refuse to give up some sin that God has convicted you about. You start to buy into what the culture says will give you joy – acquiring things, putting other people in the place of God, focusing on success, chasing prosperity, or just pursuing happiness above everything else. If your joy tank is running close to empty today perhaps it's because you're surrendering or submitting to something or someone else other than Jesus. There's only one place to find and to keep this elusive thing we call joy. The Bible says this about God, “You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.” (Psalm 16:11 NLT)

Keeping the joy of Jesus is possible even in the midst of life's struggles. When your joy is ultimately grounded in Jesus, then neither illness, death, hardship, opposition, failure or disappointment can take it away. Why? Because it's joy *in the Lord!* You don't have to like the tough moments that life brings. But you can know a deep, settled peace that God reigns and Jesus will never let you go. The next step in keeping the joy of Jesus is suggested by the wise men. When they came, they presented to Him gifts worthy of Him. What they gave is instructive. The wise men gave Jesus gold – a gift fit for a king. When you submit your life to Jesus, you recognize His kingship over you. The wise men gave Jesus frankincense – a gift fit for a priest. It was used in the Temple to worship God. A priest is a mediator – someone who represents people before God. That's what Jesus did at the cross, through the empty tomb and what He still does for us before His Father. The wise men gave Jesus myrrh – a gift fit for one who's about to die. Myrrh was used to embalm dead bodies back in Jesus' day and time. No doubt it was used to wrap up the body of Jesus some 33 years later after it was taken down from the cross. The wise men gave the best that they had. Like the wise men you're invited to give to Jesus the very best that you have. That's probably not gold, frankincense or myrrh. No, instead the gift that God most wants from you is the one you must keep on giving to keep on having the joy of Jesus. It's the gift of yourself – the deep, down inner you. Every day. All the time. Over and over again. That's how you keep the joy of Jesus.

The man I want to tell you about was no Scrooge. He was kind, decent, good, generous to his family and full of integrity in his dealings with other people. But he just couldn't bring himself to believe in all of this incarnation stuff which churches proclaim at Christmas time. It just didn't make sense to him and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He told his wife, "I'm really sorry if this upsets you, but I'm not going to go with you to the Christmas Eve service." He told her he'd just feel like a hypocrite. He'd much rather stay at home, but he would wait up for her and their children. And so, he stayed at home while the rest of the family went off to the midnight Christmas Eve service.

Shortly after the family drove away, snow began to fall. The man went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier. He went back to his chair by the fire and he began reading the newspaper. Just minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound, then another and then another one. Sort of like a thump. At first, he thought someone might be throwing snowballs against his living room window. But when he went to the front door to investigate, he found there instead a flock of birds, huddled miserably in the snow. They'd been caught in the storm and were desperately looking for shelter. Disoriented, they'd tried to fly through the large picture window in the man's living room.

Well, the man couldn't just let the poor creatures lie there and freeze. He thought of the barn out back where his kids stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter if he could just direct the birds into it. He put on his coat and boots and tramped through the deepening snow out to the barn. He opened the door wide and turned on the light. But the birds didn't come in. The man thought maybe some food would entice them in, so he hurried back into the house, fetched some bread crumbs, sprinkled them on the snow and made a trail to the lighted open doorway of the barn. But, much to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued just to flop around in the snow.

He tried catching those birds. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them and waving his arms. That only frightened them and they scattered in every direction. He thought to himself, "I'm just this big, strange, scary creature to them. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me, that I'm not going to hurt them and that I want to help them. But how? If only I could become a bird for a few minutes. I could mingle with them and speak their language. I could tell them not to be afraid. I could show them the way to the safe, warm barn. The only way they're ever going to understand is if I become one of them." At that moment, the church bells began to ring. The sound of those Christmas bells reached his ears above the sound of the wind. He stood there listening to the bells ringing out the joyful news of Jesus' birth. At that moment, Christmas became very clear to that man and he sank to his knees in the snow.

Do you have joy this Christmas? You find the joy of Jesus – like the wise men did - on your knees. And you keep the joy of Jesus the same way – on our

knees before the Christ. May you find and keep His joy this and every Christmas.