

NOTICING

Epiphany Sunday

Matthew 2:1-12

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We all notice different things. Sometimes following an event, in the car or after we get home, Robin might say something like, “What was the name of the woman in the red dress?” My usual response is that I need more of a clue than that. She will just stare at me and say, “She was the only person there in a red dress.” Well, she may have been, but that is not much help to me. If someone had come in a clown suit or something outlandish, that may have caught my attention but, by and large, I don’t notice what people are wearing. By the same token, if you get a dramatically different haircut and I do not comment, please do not be offended or think I do not like it. Should I notice it, I am never sure if it is new or if you got it cut differently months ago. So, as not to embarrass myself, I just don’t go there. If I ever had to give a description of someone I saw robbing a store, that is one thief who would get away.

Now, lest you think that I am just oblivious to all that is around me, there are things I do notice that many others do not. I like hawks. I don’t know why, I just do. I see them all of the time. I pick them out of trees and sitting on posts when most have no clue they are there. I notice if Steve plays a note differently than it is printed in the hymnal or, when reading, I notice if someone contradicts something they said chapters earlier. We all see things others do not see and do not see what others do see. I think it mostly comes down to what we choose to notice.

The men who came from the east to bring gifts to the baby Jesus noticed a new star. We sometimes call them kings, as in the hymn we just sang, but Matthew does not call them kings and there is nothing to suggest they were kings. Depending on the translation you use, Matthew calls them wise men, or astrologers, or magi, which is properly said “may gi,” but since nobody says it that way, we’ll stick with magi. The fact is they could have been all of these things, except kings. Across cultures, especially in the east from which these men came, priests or shamans were often a highly educated class, wise men, trained in science and dabbling in what would be considered magic, magi, and considering that much of science was related to astrology, they paid attention to the stars. If they asked you your sign, it was not a pick-up line. They seriously wanted to know. Our best guess then, and it is a guess, is that they were well-to-do, well-educated, priests-scientists: wise men, astrologers, magi.

All of which mattered little to Matthew. Most important to Matthew was simply that they were not Jews. They were pagans. Look, Matthew is telling us. Even people

from a different country, a different culture, a different religion, recognized the specialness of the birth of Jesus. So special, they went on a serious journey to find him and brought him some extravagant gifts.

Today these men are lifted up as models. Wise men went looking for Jesus. Consequently, today you can read in dozens of places, from Christmas cards to plaques to bumper stickers, wise men still seek him. Indeed, but I wonder if it is truer to say that wise people notice him. After all, to be literal, we do not have to seek Jesus, we do not have to go looking for Jesus, because Jesus is already here. The point of Christmas is that God came looking for us, that the Word became flesh to dwell among us. God is already wherever we are.

This is what we read in Psalm 139. There it is put the opposite way--not that we have to look for God, but that we cannot get away from God. The psalmist wrote: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast." Earlier he wrote, "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me."

Jesus is here. We just have to notice. What impresses me about the wise men, then, is not so much that they took a road trip to Bethlehem. No, what impresses me is that they noticed the star. You can say they were astrologers, that's their business, but come on! There are like a billion stars in the sky. I don't know the number, but it is a lot. Remember, there were no electric lights. Their town was not lit up like daytime. You know how it is when you are in the country and go out on a clear, dark night. The sky is plastered with stars, so many they blur together in what we call the Milky Way. There could be a thousand new stars tomorrow and who among us would notice, or a thousand could burn out and who among us would miss them? Noticing one star? That's like watching Rockin' New Year's Eve and when the camera pans Times Square saying, "Hey, there's a new person in the Square. They weren't there before."

O.K. Maybe it is not exactly like that. And maybe the star was a little brighter or a little lower or somehow distinctive, so it stood out from the others. Maybe, but that does not detract from the point that they noticed it. If I can miss a red dress, they can miss a star. Case in point, they were not the only magi in the east, but Matthew does not say that a caravan showed up in Bethlehem. Others either did not notice or did not care. These wise men noticed. And they did not just shrug and say that's interesting and move on. They not only noticed the star but they recognized it as a sign. The star made it clear that something significant had happened and that's why they hopped on the camels and headed west.

This begs the question: what do we notice? Understandably, I think we tend to notice everything but the presence of God in our midst or the activity of God in our lives. I say understandably because other things clamor for our attention. The sun, of course, is a star. No one misses the sun. It is blinding when you look in its direction. Not so much for a star pointing to Bethlehem. It is far more subtle. A royal birth gets a lot of attention worldwide. Not so much a baby born in Bethlehem off the beaten path.

So it is in life. God is active every minute of every day. There are signs of healing, signs of grace, signs of hope, signs of beauty, signs of exactly what the kingdom of heaven must look like all around us. But often they are subtle, off to the side, unheralded and unannounced. In contrast, signs of violence, signs of hurt, signs of brokenness, signs of ugliness, signs of what the realm of hell must look like are obvious and loud and splashed on headlines and television screens. Consequently, it is easy to see what is going wrong and easy to miss what is going right.

Depending on what report you read, it is said that it takes anywhere from five to ten positive words to counterbalance one negative word. It is because the hurt is louder than the praise. Have you ever received a job performance review that was glowing, full of accolades, but you stewed the whole way home because at the end it said here is the one thing on which you can improve? That one line somehow stands out more than the dozen other lines. We can recall in excruciating detail exactly what someone said or did to us that hurt us while being unaware of the numerous acts of kindness done to us by family, friends, and even strangers. Other things distract us from the signs of God's presence and God's action.

But those signs are there. We were talking about signs of God's presence and action in our staff meeting this week. Jane Webb shared a wonderful story that illustrates this well. I have asked her to share it with you. [Jane Webb shared a story of how she returned to a store because of something she forgot, engaged in a conversation, discovered a need, and put it out on social media getting a huge response on Christmas Eve.]

Listen to the highlights. She learned of the need only because she forgot something. It should have been too late to do anything about it. But an S.O.S. went out and persons who did not know Jane or know the one in need responded. All of that happened as quietly and as unobtrusively as a baby being born in a manger in the dead of night. But to those who saw and noticed, it was a new star in the sky.

I cannot tell you who wears what because I do not choose to notice what people wear. We all have things we do not notice because we choose not to notice and that is just fine. We can, however, should, however, choose to notice the signs of God's presence and God's action. We can pay enough attention to the stars to know when a new one shows up. And when we are alert to the signs, we begin to see God everywhere,

including in situations we never before imagined. We start to notice love and grace and kindness and beauty and even miracles. I don't know what, if any, resolutions you made for this New Year. Let me suggest this for everyone's list. Choose to notice. Be on the lookout for the signs of God. You will like what you see.

Amen.