

## Wesley United Methodist Church

January 3, 2016

"God's Love Letter."

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

One of the old saints of the church jumped up and stomped out of the annual Christmas play being held at the church. The pastor couldn't figure out what was going on so he hurried after him. When he caught up with the old man in the parking lot and asked what was wrong he was told, "Preacher, I've gone along with a lot of changes through the years, but this thing tonight just went too much, I mean who ever heard of the Three Wise Men walking up to the baby Jesus in the manger and presenting him with...gift certificates."

Christmas has changed a lot since I was a child. But the basic reason and purpose of Christmas hasn't changed one single bit. The characters and the Character of Christmas as God's gift to the world will always be the same. We may mangle it. We may wrap it in shiny paper. We may try to store it away with all the Christmas decorations (or already have), but like the star in the East, it will always be there guiding us back to the central purpose of Christmas, Salvation through God's unconditional love wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. That's what the Wise Men were seeking. And through that innocent baby, God was seeking each of us.

Only Matthew has the story of the visit of the Magi, the Scholars, the Kings or the Wise Men from the east. These characters of the Christmas story don't really seem to fit in anywhere else. Who were they? Where did they come from? How far did they travel? Why were they there? Those are questions preachers have pondered for years. The Scholars don't really know and there is a lot of speculation. It also indicates that people from other parts of the world, not just from Israel, were anticipating the Messiah. The Magi's visit underscores that Jesus came for all people, not just the Jews. The last words of this Gospel spell out that mission very clearly. (That's another sermon). When we observe Epiphany on January 6, we observe the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi.

We may not know a whole lot about the wise men, but from theory, we can know some things about their character. The Wise Men who followed a new star, came seeking Jesus. That was their whole purpose in the part of the story of Christ.

When our girls were young, we had an old nativity scene from my family and we would put it up on a little table for the girls to look at. Each character was set up carefully as the figurines were quite fragile. Mary, Joseph, the Wise Men, shepherds and a couple of sheep were arranged so we could see each character. The next morning I noticed that the Wise Men had been rearranged.

So, I unconsciously straightened all the figures again, leaving them in the same order they had been placed, but turning them so you could see the faces of the Wise Men. A day or so later I noticed that they were all grouped closer together and the Wise Men were turned around with their back to the room. So I started to straighten them out again when our youngest, Erika, informed me that she was the one who had moved them. I asked her why. She said, "The Wise Men came to see the baby Jesus, right? Then they'd be looking at him and not out at the room, wouldn't they?" I couldn't argue with that so I didn't move them again.

Erika was right, the Wise Men would have been looking at Jesus. Jesus was the reason they traveled so far and so long. Of course, they'd be facing Jesus. The purpose of the Wise Men was to seek the new king, Jesus.

That's not all we learn from them though. We also learn that while the Wise Men sought Jesus, through Jesus God sought us.

Christmas isn't just about a few days off from work and school and presents and parties and family gatherings. It's the story of the beginning of Christianity. It's the story of the birth of salvation and grace. It's the story of the beginning of second chances.

From my perspective it's the only way we can ever really make sense of all the unanswered questions floating around in the world. This isn't some fairy tale. This is the thing we hoped for and wanted every day of our lives. We just didn't know it until we saw Him, heard Him, and met Him. This is the promise of God.

When the angels sang "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth, good will towards all people." It wasn't just words of praise. It was a pronouncement of the promise of God. God's promise that we can have each day.

Hallmark cards have been saying it for years...but it's just as effective today as when they first said it, "If you care, then send the very best." God cares. God sent us his very best, not for one day a year, not for a season or a particular time, but for everyday of our lives.

Through Jesus, God sought us in order to show us and share with us God's unconditional love and grace, through forgiveness and resurrection. That promise came wrapped in swaddling clothes.

For forty- three years, at one minute after midnight on Christmas Eve, Bert Holloway of Cambridge, England has handed his wife, Ethel a love letter. The gift is a tradition that they started when they were first married. Mrs. Holloway says she treasures all the love letters she'd received from her husband.

Every year at this time we celebrate the greatest treasure ever given to humanity. It was a love letter from God in the form of a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes.

The Wise Men sought Him and through Him God sought us. I hope you'll take the time this Christmas season to read that love letter. And then take the time to read it every single day.