



**Pleasant Hill Presbyterian Church**  
*Connecting faith with everyday life*

## Sermon Archives

Date: January 8, 2017

Title: "The Wise Men—an Adult Version"

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Description: The wise men offer a model for following a glimmer of light when surrounded by darkness.

You already know the story of the three wise men so well that you don't need to hear it again; you can almost recite it along as someone reads it. There's a good chance you were once cast in the role as one of the three magi in a children's pageant from Christmas past. (We don't have to be specific regarding how many years past, now do we?) As a wise thespian from years gone by or as a video-toting grandparent, you have images involving nervous children in sequined costumes & large headdresses carrying gifts of *faux* gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and pretending to be stately, exalted royalty. Of course, once you watched the Monty Python adaptation of the wise men in *The Life of Bryan*, you may never again think of the magi in the same way.

You also know just about all the "lessons" the story has to offer. The wise men demonstrate that Jesus is for all the world, not just our friends & neighbors.

The first to recognize Jesus as king were foreigners, outsiders. The story also teaches that we all have something to give, and giving is the first response of faith. Those weren't Dollar Store re-gifts the magi bestowed; they were the most precious materials known at that time.

Do the wise men have any gifts left to offer us? Leaving gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the Christ-child, do they also have a gift for us in 2017? If so, they are not gifts suitable for all ages. This year offers some very adult challenges, and we need adult resources to meet those challenges. Let's see if we can discern some adults-only elements in the wise men tale, because these may be the very elements Matthew wanted us to notice.

The adult version is darker and contains far more violence. Matthew's adult version has an undercurrent of fear. Dread, distress, anxiety: fear may be what this story is all about.

It centers on King Herod, Who is soon in full-on panic mode. The wise men, astrologers, presumed that the sign of a star implied a message from God.

Maybe so, but Herod doesn't greet the news of a newborn king with joy, nor does he add to the collection of gifts to present the long-awaited messiah.

Why is Herod so threatened? Perhaps because often the one thing the powerful seek more than anything else is to remain in power. Gone is any memory that God placed them in their positions to serve. Herod's single program agenda is to preserve Herod in office. Herod wants what he wants, so he's immediately threatened by even the mere possibility of another king, even if scriptures indicate that new-born king is a gift from God.

Maybe this wave of fear comes from the possibility that the world is changing. Herod doesn't want help from God if this help is going to shake up his lifestyle. Even Herod knows that nothing can remain the same if God is at work to bring about change.

Herod is such a scaredy-pants coward fraidy-cat. Combine Herod's fear w/ Herod's ruthlessness—the man will do anything it takes—anything—And the resulting violence and slaughter is as appalling as Aleppo.

I'm ready to bring out the fire-and brimstone sermon and lay it on Herod and all who are like him throughout history. And you know who I'd be talking about, because it's almost anyone but us. Don't forget that one little phrase, that bothersome, inconvenient little phrase at the end of the sentence, "When King Herod heard this, he was afraid, *and all of Jerusalem with him.*" Everybody in town felt the same way Herod did. The entire population was stressed and anxious. They lived in a world of fear.

So do we. We live in a world riddled by fear, a world of terrorists' killings, of political transition, a time when innocents of every age die. The story of the wise men gives a realistic, adult picture of the world, then and now. It also gives us a faithful picture of hope. The story is dark and foreboding, but the wise men themselves model how to thrive in a world of fear.

They follow a star. A star of hope may offer only a tiny glimmer in a very dark sky, but that glimmer is from God. And it is not a sudden whim. Stars

may appear suddenly, but we now know they require eons to take shape and come into our view. God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year.

Think back over your own story of faith. Hasn't God most often reached you in times of darkness, times when you were afraid? Our "mountain top experiences" most often come to us in the valley of the shadows. Traveling by night, traveling in a country ruled by fear, surrounded by an anxious population these three were wise enough to focus on the glimmer of a single star. They followed that distant light and were not distracted by the darkness that engulfed them.

In 2017, we are under siege from those whose purpose is to make us afraid. When you become frightened, before you cringe and ask, "Who's to blame?" or "What needs to be done about that?" or "Who must be eliminated?" ask instead, "Where would faith call me to focus?" Be open to the illuminating presence of God, even when that presence comes in the form of a distant glimmer of hope. Even when that hope leads you to a vulnerable, tiny infant born in the back yard of a death-wielding power-that-be.

God did not create you to travel your journey cringing and cowering. God calls you to stand boldly and follow bravely. Try that, and perhaps you too may return home a different way.