FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"THE WISDOM OF CHRISTMAS"

Scripture Lesson: Matthew 2: 1-12

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 24, 2025 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Matthew 2: 1-12

The Visit of the Magi

1 *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem,* 2 *asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage."* 3 *When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him,* 4 *and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.* 5 *They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:*

6 *'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,*
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

7 *Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.* 8 *Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."* 9 *When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was.* 10 *When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.* 11 *On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.* 12 *And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.*

The Wisdom of Christmas

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Our journey to Christmas Eve began a long time ago. Long before the Christmon Tree was decorated, long before the Advent wreath was lit, and long before the beautiful poinsettias adorned this sanctuary with their amazing foliage.

Ah, those things are lovely, and they do matter, but they are more so the outward and visible signs of a journey that spans generations. In fact, it is not even enough to say that our journey to Christmas Eve began when Christmas Eve first journeyed to us, for it goes back long before that blessed and silent night when God entered into our world and revealed to us His everlasting light.

In that sense, the story of Jesus does not begin with Bethlehem. Indeed, Scripture bears witness to the truth that the One born of Mary did not come into existence that night. While Jesus did enter into our human

experience upon His conception and was born at Christmas, He existed long before that. As John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," which is to say that Jesus was and is coeternal with the Father.

At Christmastime, we celebrate that the very God of all creation was born in the flesh, revealing to us a divine love that has always been there. Now, to know this truth about God is a gift of faith, and it is part of what it means for us to be spiritually mature and spiritually wise.

The characters in the Christmas story to whom we most often attribute the virtue of wisdom are the magi, the wise men, those astrologers from the East. They were the ones who were drawn by a star and crossed borders. They were the ones who asked a most dangerous question: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" That's a loaded question, especially when we consider that they were asking it of the King whose name was Herod.

But it was also noteworthy because until they saw the star, they weren't seeking the Messiah. They were minding their own business. They were studying the heavens and basically doing what they had always done, but then God interrupted their ordinary routines with an extraordinary star.

That star has been discussed for centuries. Was it a star? Was it a comet? Was the star literal or metaphorical? Believing as we do that God inspired the Scriptures, what we see here is that the God who created the stars out of nothing chose to move one of them. Those of us in Reformed theological circles often emphasize that in providing a star to guide the wise men, God was doing something wholly revelatory, with the most emphasis being placed on the fact that God was doing it.

The Westminster Confession of Faith puts it well: God "freely and unchangeably ordains whatsoever comes to pass," and that includes the various ways by which God draws people to Himself. For God—be it a star, manna in the wilderness, or a bush that burned but was not consumed—the miraculous is not a violation of God's created order; it is the fulfillment of it. Christmas is God stepping into His own story and showing us, in both the miraculous and the mundane, that something is happening, and God alone is making it happen.

Matthew called the travelers in our story "wise men," and while we do not know exactly who they were or where they came from, we do know they weren't Jewish. They were religious outsiders, Gentile foreigners, men formed and fashioned by a completely different worldview; and yet they are counted as wise.

This should shed some light on how we perceive wisdom. We sometimes think of wisdom in terms of education, but there were plenty of educated people who did not accept Jesus. Or consider King Solomon, Israel's third king—he was granted an unparalleled measure of wisdom. He had wisdom and power, and in our reading this evening, we can quickly surmise that Herod had both in abundance, but his was not the kind of wisdom that mattered.

So, maybe knowing the Scriptures is what makes us wise? We recall that when Herod needed to determine where the Magi could find Jesus, he consulted the chief priests and scribes. They knew the chapter and verse: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel." They knew what the Scriptures said, yet not one of them moved at all toward Bethlehem—only the wise men did.

We notice also that what happens in Matthew's Gospel immediately after quoting Micah signals a turning point. The long-prophesied "King of Kings," the one upon whom all authority rests, has arrived! From that point forward, Matthew never again refers to Herod as "king"; he is simply Herod. To my point, knowing the Scripture is not enough. We must respond to God's revelation.

And that's what made the wise men truly wise—they responded. Oh, how often do we try to explain that star away in our own lives, saying, "I'll follow, but later, at some more convenient time." Friends, that is not wisdom. Biblical wisdom is not a matter of knowing everything; it is about trusting God and taking that next faithful step, whatever it is.

We often romanticize the wise men, imagining a short walk, a few camels, maybe music swelling in the background, when in reality their journey was exhausting, dangerous, and expensive. They probably traveled hundreds of miles across deserts and unfamiliar terrain. Make no mistake about it, theirs was not a spontaneous Christmas Eve outing; it was a serious commitment of time, talent, and treasure.

Matthew's Gospel says as much. By the time the wise men arrived, Mary and Joseph were no longer in a stable but in a house, and by that time Jesus was more likely a toddler. Before we get disoriented, we need to remember that the differences that exist between the birth narratives in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew are by no means contradictory. God may no longer employ stars to direct our initial path, but God's inspiration still comes. Our response may not be to travel to a distant land, but it always looks like a journey of faith.

Even for the wise men, the star was not the end-all and be-all. The star led them first to Jerusalem—it was the Scripture that revealed to them where to go next. And where did the Bible tell them to go? Bethlehem, a town so small that it barely appeared on the map. This is one of Christmas' great reversals: God chooses what the world overlooks—a little clan of Judah, O Little Town of Bethlehem.

When the wise men finally arrived, they did something that no one else in the nativity story did: they knelt and worshiped, and they offered gifts proclaiming who Jesus was and is—a king, a priest, a sacrifice. Here again, we see a precious glimpse into the mystery of Christ: this is not merely a child born into history; this was the eternal Son of God now dwelling within it.

Having been warned in a dream, the wise men returned home by another way, and that detail matters because an encounter with Jesus should change our path. We may still live in the same house, work at the same job, but we do not walk the same way. Grace does not simply bring us to Christ; it sends us back into the world differently.

Oh, pray our journey mirrors theirs. God is at work long before we notice, the Holy Spirit stirring our curiosity, our longing, and our restlessness. God does this sometimes years before we can name it. It begs the question: what stars are we following? The world offers all kinds—careers, success, recognition, pleasure, control. These stars shine, but they also burn out. Not the light of Christ Jesus, our Lord.

The miracle of Christmas is not that God removes the darkness, but that God enters it, and the light of Bethlehem does not fade. Jesus Christ, the true light of the world, still calls and guides; it still leads God's people home. And part of the good news is that we do not have to travel thousands of miles to find Him. By the Holy Spirit, Christ is born again and again, as the great carol affirms: "Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."

To receive Jesus today looks like trusting that God knows the way, even when we do not. It looks like following the light that we have been given in God's Word. It looks like kneeling in worship and rising to walk a new path. It looks like believing, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, that the God who has brought us safely thus far will be faithful in leading us home.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let us pray: Gracious and loving God, by your light, guide our steps; by your grace, shape our hearts; and by your Spirit, lead us always to Jesus, the true star who shines forever. In His holy name we pray. Amen.