

LATE!

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

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

January 6, 2018

I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date, no time to lose, hello, goodbye, I'm late, I'm late, I'm late, I'm late." Occasionally, I find these words from the Rabbit in Alice in Wonderland popping into my head. I don't remember the Rabbit ever saying exactly how late he was, but I do remember him looking at his pocket watch as he hurried about muttering those words. Of course, one thing I've learned over the years is that people have different definitions of what is late. For some people, if they are not 15-30 minutes early, then in their minds they are late. For others, arriving within five minutes of the designated time is what it means to be on time. For still others, being 30 or more minutes late is just typical and therefore mostly considered by them as being on time. There are those who say that being late is inconsiderate, others say it's fashionable; some, of course, say "better late than never," no matter when they arrive. Wherever you place yourself on the "timeline" of lateness, I think we can all agree this morning that arriving two years late is undeniably late!

I know we like to think those wise men dressed in fine clothing, traveling on camel back, bearing their gifts for Jesus arrived in time to see the baby lying in a manger, but they did not. In fact, when the wise men finally made their visit to Jesus, it was not at a stable, but in a house. In the Gospel of Mathew it says, "On entering the house, they saw Jesus with his mother Mary, and they knelt down and paid him homage." Moreover, the Greek word to describe Jesus at this point is not the word for baby; the word is more accurately translated as child or toddler. Therefore, most theologians believe that Jesus was as much as two years old when the wise men finally arrived in Bethlehem.

So, what this means is that typical Christmas manger scenes miss the mark when they yearly include the wise men. For unlike the shepherds who "went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger" those wise men did not make it to the stable celebration. And perhaps, you already know this, but nowhere does the Bible refer to the wise men as kings, and neither does the Bible say there were three of them. Yes, there were three gifts, but there could have been a dozen wise men.

On this Epiphany Sunday, I invite you to consider why those wise men were so late. Why did it take as long as two years to arrive in Bethlehem and to honor the Christ child? I can easily understand a couple of months or so, after all, travel in those days was not as fast and efficient as it is today. Traveling meant walking or riding on the back of an animal, and that kind of traveling takes awhile, but two years?

As we consider why it might have taken those visitors from the East so long, we are going to focus on the Bible's description of them as "wise" men. In that day and age this description most likely meant they were intellectuals, and in particular, ones who studied the stars and interpreted their meaning. Today, we might call such intellectuals astronomers; however, in that day, intellectuals were typically "general practitioners" which means they were also likely skilled in the studies of general science, medicine, as well as philosophy. When wise men spoke, people listened, because they were respected as those who had devoted their lives to studying and

learning. As someone with both a Bachelor and a Master degree – who in the seven years it took me to earn those degrees spent many hours sitting in classrooms listening to those more knowledgeable than I, I both appreciate the value of knowledge and respect those who have spent their lives pursuing it.

As educated, wise men of the first century, I imagine them surrounded by scrolls depicting the various maps and scientific diagrams of that day. I imagine them discussing the positioning of a new star, and debating its meaning. Perhaps additional wise men were consulted as scholarly discussion and debate took place over the course of what was likely several months. When those wise men eventually concluded that the star would lead to the newborn king of Israel, they had to then decide whether they should go and find the child and honor him. Perhaps a representative group of wise men should go, and if that was the case then who among them should go? After all those decisions were made, then they had to plan the details of the trip itself and gather the necessary provisions for such a journey. By the time they debated, discussed, and made plans, there is little wonder why they were late.

And you'll notice that even with all their research and knowledge, they went to the wrong place. They arrived in Jerusalem, not Bethlehem. It was in Jerusalem that they asked King Herod, "where is the child who has been born kind of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." Jerusalem was the place where all the kings of Israel had lived and ruled; it was the place where the Holy Temple was located. It made complete sense that the newborn king of the Jews would be in Jerusalem. But despite all their research and discussion, the wise men got it wrong. The Messiah was not born in Jerusalem but in a humble stable located several miles down the road in Bethlehem.

And did you notice that the gifts they brought to give Jesus were gifts worthy of a king? The royal household was adorned with gold. Frankincense was a costly incense that people of royalty burned in their palaces. Myrrh was an expensive perfume with which people of prominence anointed themselves. Despite all their discussion and their careful preparations they went to the wrong place and even though they brought well-meaning gifts worthy of a king and filled with symbolism, they were hardly appropriate gifts for a baby born of poor parents.

As we consider the wise men on this day of Epiphany, I can't help but wonder if their late arrival might have something to do with the fact that they relied too much on their heads and not enough on their hearts to guide them. Yes, they made educated, intellectual deductions, however, God's wisdom is not solely contained in the mind. In fact, God's Spirit is often found to be at work in the heart, beyond the bounds of intellect – telling us that more is less, and the last are first, and that self-sacrifice is the way to find true life. Certainly the mind is a precious gift and is meant to be used. But, God also calls us to listen to and rely on our hearts. Sometimes, God calls us to respond not after we have discussed, debated and then formed committees for further discussion, but quickly, with a sense of urgency.

Consider the shepherds. They were not the educated people of their time. They were not even considered particularly religious. In fact, their dirty work in the fields put them in the category of being ceremonially unclean and therefore unfit to even enter the Temple and worship with others. But when the announcement came, and the words of the angel stirred their hearts, they acted immediately.

Knowledge is important; the knowledge of God's Word and our Christian heritage helps inform our faith and provide a solid foundation. As people of faith, we should always be engaged in knowledge acquiring activities such as reading the Bible, and participating in Sunday school and Bible Studies. We should know what we

believe and why we believe it. However, faith is much more than what we know, it is also about our hearts and whether God's Spirit lives in our hearts. What our heads tell us only take us so far without the passion of our hearts moving us to action and enduring commitment.

We need to consider how often our heart says, "yes" to God, only to have our head delay us or talk us out of it. Like when the Lord lays someone on your heart, but your mind says you don't have time to call or stop by to see that person. Like when you know the Lord is compelling you to respond and get involved in something that will make a difference and yet your mind just keeps coming up with all the logical excuses of why you can't. There were those in Jesus' day whose heads told them to "stay home, take care of parents, make a living," even when Jesus was looking straight into their eyes and extending a personal invitation to follow him.

As we leave behind another Christmas season and enter fully into a new year in which there will be continued discussion, even debate on what it means to be a healthy church, and to fulfill God's purposes. But in the midst of those discussions, let us always be willing to follow the leading of our hearts, the leading of God's Spirit. And let us each be willing to consider how our heads might be holding us back, talking us out of responding in faith to God's gift of love. This year, may your heartfelt faith lead you to respond with passion and commitment to God's call upon your life and God's will for this church! Amen.