

## **Right God, Wrong Place** by Jeff Strite

Matthew 2:1-2:12

My home church met in a huge building. The main sanctuary had four sections of pews that ran back 12 rows or so and the back section had another 2 sets of pews. Then there were two balconies that ran along the sides of the main area. They said they could seat over 600 people in that building.

Because it was a such big church, Christmas was a BIG production. They had an entire closet dedicated to robes and crowns and shepherds' staffs and so on, for the Christmas Pageant. And they put it all to good use on the Sunday of the Pageant.

It started out with Mary and Joseph making their way solemnly down the center aisle. Mary was beautifully adorned with a blue satin dress and a lace head covering and Joseph walked protectively beside her in the traditional garb of a Jewish man of the day. They took their place on stage in front of the manger, with Mary seated in front of the manger and Joseph standing by her side.

Then the shepherds (who had taken their place off to the right of the stage looked up to the balcony to see an angel brightly lit by a spot light who proclaimed the birth of the Christ child. And suddenly with that angel there was a heavenly host of children - dressed in white gowns and wearing wings and halos - singing alleluia to the new born King. As the lights dimmed on the angels, the shepherds made their way onto the stage and kneeled before the manger.

Then – last of all – came the Wisemen from the East. I got to be one of them. I was dressed in an elegant robe and bearing a crown on my head, I brought one of the gifts to Jesus. And the 3 of us marched reverently down the center aisle to the song "We 3 Kings".

"We three kings of Orient are,  
bearing gifts we traverse afar.  
Field and fountain, moor and mountain,  
following yonder star.  
O star of wonder, star of night,  
Star with royal beauty bright,  
Westward leading, still proceeding,  
guide us to thy perfect Light."

You could almost feel the camels under us rocking back and forth to the beat of the song as we sang "We 3 kings of orient are, we'll come up on the stage where you are..." (I made that last part up).

It was all great fun... but it was a bit misleading.

First of all, the Bible doesn't say how many Wisemen there were. There were 3 gifts, but there may have been more Wisemen in the group.

And then there was the fact that the shepherds probably weren't anywhere nearby when the

Wisemen showed up... because the Wisemen were late to the party. Scripture says they found Jesus in a house - not a manger. And there are hints in the text that Jesus was at least 1 ½ or 2 years old by this time.

Some scholars believe Wisemen traveled about 1000 miles by time they got to Jerusalem and speculate it might have taken them 2 to 3 months just to prepare for the journey. And it wasn't a "safe" journey. Thieves and robbers plagued many of the roads and so these Wisemen probably traveled in a large caravan.

One man I read speculated that "at a minimum they would have brought full military escort along with their servants. The total party could have amounted to more than 300 people." (Brian Bill)

So, picture in your mind this host of distinguished men and armed soldiers coming to the gates of the city of Jerusalem and saying: "We're looking for the child who is born to be the King of the Jews we've seen His star in the East and we've come to worship Him."

You can imagine the attention they'd have received from the people in Jerusalem -these Wisemen from a far off land coming to worship a baby they said was to be King of the Jews. And they've come to the very gates of Jerusalem.

(PAUSE)

As I was reading through the text for this morning's sermon, there was one question that suddenly came to my mind:

What are Wisemen doing in Jerusalem?

Why do you think they were there? (Ask for feedback).

Looking for directions? Of course they are. They ask "where is the child?" And that's the main reason most of think the Wisemen were in Jerusalem.

But there's just one small problem with that answer.

In Matthew 2 we're told that they'd seen His star in the East and had come to worship Him. But then - after they left Jerusalem we're told: "... they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east WENT AHEAD OF THEM until it STOPPED OVER THE PLACE where the child was." Matthew 2:9

If the star guided them to the EXACT spot where Jesus was in Bethlehem, why didn't it lead them there in the first place? What were the Wisemen doing in Jerusalem? Why hadn't the Star led them ALL the way to Jesus' home?

Answer: God wanted them in Jerusalem.

Think about it:

WHO made the star?

God did.

WHO is guiding the star???

God is.

If God was guiding them with the star and He didn't see fit to use that star to guide the Wisemen directly to Bethlehem, then the only possible conclusion (for me) is that God MUST have wanted these men to go to Jerusalem in the first place. THEY may have gone there to ask for directions, but God apparently had another purpose in mind.

You see, up until this time Jerusalem's been kept out of the loop. It's been about 1 ½ or 2 years since Jesus was born, and God sent NO ONE to Jerusalem... (pause in thought)

Well, I guess I shouldn't say "no one".

Do you remember who God sent the angels to when Jesus was first born? That's right – the shepherds. Luke 2 tells us that "When (the shepherds) had seen (Jesus), they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." Luke 2:17-18

The shepherds went EVERYWHERE spreading the news of Jesus' birth. They only lived about 5 miles outside of Jerusalem, wouldn't you think they'd spread the good news even to the great city of Israel? Of course they would!

God sent them shepherds... (PAUSE) but not the angels.  
And therein lies the rub.

Jerusalem was the great capital city of Israel. This was the seat of power for the nation. This was where the King and the priests and the Scribes and the Pharisees lived. When they heard that angels had appeared to mere shepherds they scoffed. Everyone had a good laugh and went back to living their lives. The very thought that God would send angels to common workmen, but not to the politicians and religious leaders of Israel, was absurd.

But that's what God did.

Why would He do it that way?

Why send the shepherds - but not the angels - to the people of Jerusalem?

Well, as I said last week – that's how God does things.

In I Corinthians 1 we're told that "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things— and the things that are not— to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

For centuries churches have believed they had to impress people to bring them to Christ. My home church was a monument of beauty. They had Greek colonnades and an impressive set of steps leading up the outside of the street side of the building to the main doors. Inside was a massive sanctuary filled with stained oak pews and the balconies were lined with polished brass railings. But the most elegant part of the building was the huge pipe organ... with real pipes set in behind the pulpit area. It was really impressive. It was so impressive that this was THE church to attend in my home town. I knew of at least one state senator, several judges, lawyers and doctors who were members there. Everybody who was anybody in town seemed to belong there. They build the building to impress and attract.

And it worked... for awhile.

That's what churches have done for centuries - building huge Cathedrals and Monasteries, decorating their buildings with beautiful wood and chandeliers and stained glass. And they courted the rich and the famous (they want these folks to be part of their church) because they believed that the more successful they appeared the more money and members they could attract.

It's an easy trap to fall into... because it DOES WORK... for awhile.

The thing is, that's NOT how God builds HIS church. God was more impressed with shepherds in the field than with Kings in palaces. God understands the wisdom of the old saying: "what you win them with is what you keep them with."

Power churches focus on POWER and SUCCESS and NUMBERS, etc.

But God wants us focused on His message.

What is our message?

Christ, and Him crucified! The hope of our salvation.

JESUS is the message!

If a church gets wrapped up in trying to impress people they can end up taking folks' eyes off the message and misplacing it upon the messenger.

ILLUS: When we built this new sanctuary, the contractor - a very nice man - asked us what kind of chandeliers we wanted. The Elders just laughed. They told him they weren't out to impress anyone with the building, they simply wanted the best lights for worship they could have. And that's what we got.

God isn't out to impress anyone, and that why He sent the angels to Jerusalem.

But if He didn't send them angels... why did He send them the Wisemen?

Well, notice the difference in responses:

- The angels go to the shepherds and what do the shepherds do?

They leave their sheep and go to worship Him.

- The Wisemen go to Jerusalem and does anybody go with them to worship Christ?

NO!!! And God knew they wouldn't.

But that's not why God sent the Wisemen there.

Notice what happens when the Wisemen show up.

"When King Herod heard (that the Wisemen had come to find the Christ child) he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

"But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel."

Matthew 2:3-6

And that's all that happens.

Everybody is "disturbed".

Everybody suspects there MIGHT be something to this... but nobody leaves town to check it out. Now, the Chief Priests and teachers of the Law are as disturbed as anyone else - and they don't leave town either - but at least they looked it up.

God knew NOBODY was going to leave town to check it out.  
But God had put Jerusalem on notice.

You see, Jesus started out His earthly life in humble towns like Bethlehem and Nazareth, but once His ministry begins Jerusalem becomes the center of His attention.

Jesus' ministry and the church's destiny were tied to Jerusalem

- Jesus took the message TO Jerusalem.
- Jesus died and rose from the dead IN Jerusalem.
- The Church began IN Jerusalem.
- And as the church grew, the Apostles headquartered themselves in Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was where the Passover was celebrated.

Jerusalem was and it was where Pentecost took place.

Jerusalem was the center of everything God had in mind for His people.

And so Jerusalem was important to Jesus and He had no intention of just giving up on it.

In fact, Jerusalem was so important to Jesus that He promises us that when He returns:  
"Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God..." Revelation 3:12

So Jerusalem was important to God.

That's why the Wisemen went there. Not because God expected the people there to suddenly drop everything and go to Bethlehem, but because He wanted to put this great city on notice that the great prophecy was beginning to be fulfilled. The promised Messiah HAD BEEN SENT.

So we find that the Wisemen go to Jerusalem and everybody stays at home.

And the angels go to the shepherds in the field and the shepherds go to worship Jesus.

What can we learn from all this?

Well, 1st we can learn that God presents His message to EVERYONE.

He sends it first to those who eagerly embrace it.

But He also sends it to those He knows will reject it.

ILLUS: We have these invitation cards here and you might be tempted to only give them to folks you think might want to come to church. People you feel comfortable with.

I mean, why waste your efforts on a co-worker that curses all the time.

Why invite a relative that's been nasty to you in the past.

Why give this card to someone you just KNOW is going to throw it in the trash.

Why give to someone who spends all their time down at the bar, who takes drugs or is sexually immoral?

Can you think of anybody like that?

Hold up your hand if you can think of someone like that.

Good. Because I'm going to give you an assignment.

I want you take this invitation card and give it to somebody you don't like. I want to give it to someone who doesn't like you.

Why? Because that's what God would do.

God would waste His efforts on them because God never really gives up.

You remember what that one verse says "God so loved (who?) the WORLD.

God wasted His time on people He knew were going to crucify His Son.

And He did it for us.

Why shouldn't we do it for others?

The 2nd thing we can learn from our study this morning is this:

God didn't try to impress people.

ILLUS: This is the Christmas season and lots of people have been out shopping. And the stores have done everything they can think of to get you to come into their stores. It started even before Black Friday... but I want you to notice something. When you go into stores, notice how items are packaged and displayed. A lot of thought goes into how to attract your attention with beautiful packaging and proper placement of sales items. Merchants have learned that it is important to package their goods so that you're be enticed to buy what they offer.

But notice how God "packaged" Jesus.

- He had Him born in an obscure town.
- Placed in a feeding trough in a barn.
- Worshiped by common shepherds.
- And ignored by the rich and powerful.

That's not how I'd have done it.

I'd have had the angels out shouting the news at every street corner throughout Jerusalem and the rest of Israel. I'd have placed Christ in a beautiful sanctuary and surrounded Him with the rich and powerful.

But that's not how God did things.

God's not out to impress us. Because God knows that what you win people with is what you win them to. And God didn't want anything getting in the way of His message. And what was His message? "Salvation is found in no one else (but Jesus), for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12

You see, people will not be saved by a pretty building.

They will not leave their sin because they've sat in padded chairs.  
They will not humble themselves before God because they've sung nice songs.  
People will ONLY be transformed when they come and kneel before the Savior.

People are only won to His humility and love. Jesus was the one "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!" Philippians 2:6-8

It's the story of the baby in the manger that sets the stage for everything else about Jesus ministry.  
And it's that message that changes lives.

CLOSE: I want to close with a true illustration of the difference this part of Jesus' story. There was a missionary team that had been invited to Russia to teach Christianity. It was Christmastime, and as they taught the story of Christ's birth at an orphanage everyone listened in amazement. None of the kids or the staff had ever heard it before.

One of the missionaries wrote: "We gave the children some materials and instructed them to create the manger scene that they had just heard about. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat; he looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. "As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. I called for a translator to ask why. Looking at his completed manger scene the child began to repeat the story accurately, until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

Then Misha started to ad-lib his own ending to the story.

"He said, 'And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mama and no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him forever.'

"Putting his hand over his face, Misha's head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. He had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him forever."

That's our ONLY message.

We serve a Jesus who humbled Himself.

A Jesus who became a son of man so that we could become sons of God.

A Jesus who loved us so much that it could change our lives forever.