

January 2024

Rev. Dr. Belton Joyner, Jr - Based on the scripture lessons from Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

January 7

Text: Proverbs 2:8-9; Matthew 2:1-12 "The Magi: Wisdom and Worship"

When I was a little boy, there was always competition when putting together the Christmas pageant. All of the boys wanted to be one of the wise men. After all, the shepherds and Joseph had to wear bathrobes but the three kings got to wear special costumes with crowns and were given beautiful jars and jewelry to carry. Who wouldn't want to be one of those three?

The biblical wise men were probably astrologers who knew something special was going on when they saw the rising of a dynamic star (Matthew 2:2). The text in Proverbs talks of a time when wisdom and knowledge begin to shape us (Proverbs 2:9-10). That happened to these three. They followed the star even when they did not know exactly where it would lead. Have you ever answered a call from God when you did not know exactly what was going to happen?

One of the significant ingredients in this week's lesson is the fact that these traveling worshipers were not Jews, but they sought the "king of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2) that they might honor and worship him. The Gospel writer Matthew recognized that God's loving relationships included Gentiles as well as Jews. The "king of the Jews" came to save the world, and not just one corner of it.

The wise men brought Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11). There were other times when people brought such to Jesus (John 12:4; Mark 16:1). What would be today's equivalent offering? Here's a thought. In today's culture, the gift of time might be the most precious and honoring gift we could bring.

Back to Christmas pageants. I remember watching such a play once when a fellow who was one of the wise men turned to see if the others were following him down the church center aisle. When he turned, he banged into a pew, dropped and broke the beautiful vase he was carrying. He paused for a moment, and then he picked up the fragments of the vase and carried them to the baby Jesus. As I reflect on it, that encourages me, because seldom do I have an unbroken self to bring to our Lord. Let us kneel and pay Him homage (Matthew 2:11)!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Shirley Erena Murray (Hope Publishing Company, The Faith We Sing, Abingdon Press) has written a hymn that begins: "Star Child, earth Child, go between of God, love Child, Christ Child, heaven's lightning rod, This year, this year, let the day arrive when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive!"

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Even now, I come to You, O Lord. What gift do I bring?..."

January 14

Text: Proverbs 2:11-12; Genesis 50:15-21 "Joseph: No One As Wise"

You probably remember a lot of the story of Joseph and his brothers. When they were growing up, their father seemed to treat Joseph with special favor (Genesis 37:3), so the other fellows decided to kill him (Genesis 37:20). They end up selling him to some passers-by (Genesis 37:28), so Joseph ends up Egypt and gets in high favor with the powers-that-be (Genesis 39:2; 41:42). Hard times hit where Joseph's birth family still lived (Genesis 41:53), but Joseph made it possible for them to get food (Genesis 42:25). The story continues until finally the brothers come and ask Joseph for forgiveness (Genesis 50:17). Then, Joseph forgives them, acknowledging that they had meant to harm him, but God had used it to provide for God's people (Genesis 50:20).

Joseph saw that God can use even our failures as a tool to serve God's greater purposes. This, of course, is not an invitation to do all the bad things we can so God will have plenty with which to work! It is, rather, an invitation not to give up on the journey even when we make mistakes of judgments and mistakes of practice. Here is how the apostle Paul put it: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). No wonder Paul exclaims "How unsearchable are (God's) judgments and how inscrutable His ways!" (Romans 11:33).

I remember once when a friend of mine was harming a lot of people, mostly with his false accusations. I felt like I needed to go to him and confront him, but I could not get the courage to do so. Finally, his world collapsed when all these people turned against him. He was at a low point in his life when he came to me and said, "When everybody else hated me, you still did not accuse me, so I thought I must be worth something to somebody." He took that grain of semi-truth and began a journey of caring, support, witness, faithful outreach, and service to God. In other words, God used my weakness and lack of courage to create a new beginning for my friend. Don't give up even when you fail; God ain't through with the situation yet! I guess that is what Solomon meant in Proverbs 2:11: "prudence will watch over you."

Sometime we may be the brothers; sometimes we may be Joseph. Either way, God can use us.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Dianna E. Anderson has written (Damaged Goods, Jericho Books): "Certainty is the enemy of faith, and doubt and questioning are necessary companions on our journeys through the sacred and profane realm that is human life."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Use my weakness, Lord..."

January 21

Text: Proverbs 2:3-5; 1 Kings 3:3-15 “Solomon: Discerning Good and Evil”

Solomon had a dream in which God invited him to ask for what he thought God ought to give him (1 Kings 3:5). Solomon asks for the ability to decide between good and evil (1 Kings 3:9). God is pleased with Solomon's request and grants the wish (1 Kings 3:11-12). God promises a long life if Solomon keeps God's commandments (1 Kings 3:14). Then, Solomon woke up from the dream (1 Kings 3: 15).

God did indeed give Solomon great wisdom for making decisions. Biblical tradition says that the Book of Proverbs is a collection of the wise things that Solomon expressed (Proverbs 1:1).

When we use our own insights and our own devices to determine what is good and what is evil, we shall often miss the mark. Human standards are not the same as divine standards. As Jesus prayed, "Not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

How do we determine what is good and what is evil? One way is to ask "Which one looks more like Jesus?"

How do we determine what is good and what is evil? One way is to reflect on how the Scriptures speak to the issue.

How do we determine what is good and what is evil? One way is to confer with others who are on the journey.

How do we determine what is good and what is evil? One way is to submit oneself to steady and constant prayer.

Solomon's wisdom to do the right thing came from recognizing that the source of that wisdom is God. It's hard to improve on that!

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *You Are Not Special* (Ecco), David McCullough, Jr., wrote: "...live deliberately (as opposed to automatically), pay attention, front the facts, come to know by experience, eschew nonsense, give true account, be wary of canned answers, know what you're for, try your best. This is wisdom."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "O Holy One, who with care spoke to Solomon, come now and speak to me. Speak to me so that my service will be according to Your will..."

January 28

Text: Proverbs 2:6-7, Daniel 2:14-30 “Daniel's Wisdom-Seeking Process”

The writer of Proverbs (Solomon) says that wisdom comes from God (Proverbs 2:6-7). What are we to do with a fact that Daniel considers---that God sometimes gives wisdom to non-believers? In fact, Daniel gets word to the king not to destroy those wise ones in Babylon (Daniel 2:24). Who would have expected wisdom from those who did not believe in Israel's God? Daniel understood that God plants wisdom in lots of places!

In our political culture, Democrats find it hard to believe that a Republican could have a good idea and Republicans are not usually accepting of an idea that emerged from a Democrat perspective.

In the life of the Church, traditionalists are often suspicious of any insight that comes from a progressive; progressives are usually quick to doubt that there is any truth in an observation by a traditionalist.

On a personal level, even before I read a book by certain authors, I am sure that I am going to find wisdom; on the other hand, I have no expectation of wisdom from some writers. (I'm too embarrassed to call names!)

Daniel gives God the credit for any understanding that comes (Daniel 2:28). When the prophet got some clarity on the king's mysterious dream, Daniel gives credit to God (Daniel 2:21). Much of what Daniel used in his interpretation no doubt came from his years learning from the Chaldeans (Daniel 1:4). Who would have expected God to use the pagan culture to educate one of God's chosen?

Daniel wanted to make sure that God, not the Babylonians, got the credit for any knowledge and skill that came to Daniel. That was when he set up the ten days of comparing what the rich royal rations provided or simply eating vegetables. At the end of the experiment, it was obvious—even to the pagans—that it was God who provided the real strength, the real understanding, the real wisdom (Daniel 2:17, 20).

To God be the glory!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Sibley Towner (Daniel, John Knox Press) wrote: "Truly, God is the source of all wisdom...and those to whom God has revealed wisdom are of the light, sent into the world to oppose the 'sons' of darkness."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "O Source of all wisdom..."