

SERMON TITLE: "Starting the New Year Well: Mentally"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 1, 2017

INTRODUCTION

One of our church members, Stephen Boyer, sent me an interesting Christmas letter this year. Besides telling a little bit about himself, Stephen wrote in his letter some interesting facts about the history of Methodism in Utah. Stephen noted that the early Methodists made a great contribution to the development of education in this state. The LDS folks were engaged in a struggle for survival that didn't allow for a concentrated effort toward education. Methodists who arrived in this area had more financial resources to put toward the cause.

Stephen wrote, "From the Methodist church arrival, at Promontory, Utah, in 1869, until 1894, Methodist education in Utah thrived." In that 25-year period, "a total of forty-two schools were established. Not all of the schools were open at the same time, and some lasted only a year. Young women representing the Methodist Episcopal Church's Women's Home Missionary Society made up a majority of the teachers within the schools. In 1890, the most successful year, there were 26 schools operating with 32 teachers and 1,467 pupils."

According to Stephen's research, Methodists helped persuade the Utah state legislature to establish a free public education system, and Methodists helped support Westminster College, which was founded by the Presbyterians in Salt Lake City in 1875. In 1896, the Methodists opened a college of their own right here in Ogden at 24th and Jefferson. Unfortunately, there was a massive recession two years later that caused most of the Methodists to move away. Whatever was left of the Methodist college was then incorporated into the LDS Weber Stake College, which later came to be known as Weber State University.

I'm passing along this interesting Methodist educational history because today is the Sunday when Christians traditionally celebrate Epiphany, the day when the Wise Men learned about and worshiped Jesus. Today is also the beginning of a New Year, and the first in a series of sermons I will preach on "Starting the New Year Well." In this New Year's series, we're going to explore what it means to start the New Year well physically, emotionally, spiritually, creatively, societally, relationally, and financially. But before we get to all those ways, I invite you today to reflect with me on Matthew's story of the Wise Men, and think about how we might start the New Year well mentally.

1—BE OBSERVANT

We can learn many things from the Wise Men who visited and worshiped Jesus. The Gospel of Matthew and Christian tradition tell us that they were wise, first of all, because they were observant. They knew that a child had "been born king of the Jews" because they had "observed his star at its rising." If we are going to start the New Year well mentally, then we can certainly take this tip from the Wise Men. We begin by opening up our eyes so we can see what's around us. Astrology or astronomy was an important science of that day. Those guys were paying attention to the clues that God had provided in nature. They had come from an eastern nation, and they followed the star on its westward track, which naturally took them to Jerusalem.

Today, we too can be wise when we pay attention to what nature and science are telling us. How many of you watch the local news mostly so you can get the weather report? Why do we do that? Because we want to be wise about how we should plan our lives: What will we wear, what will we do, where will we go, how will we drive?

Of course, mental wellness requires more than observing the weather and nature. It also requires observing people. Matthew 3:12 says that the Wise Men were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. I have a hunch that that dream was the product of some kind of anxiety that Herod roused up in one or more of the Wise Men. I know I'm more likely to dream about something that has caused me

to worry. Herod may have cooperated in calling together the chief priests and scribes and gaining information for the Wise Men. And I'm sure a man of his power and prestige was pretty good at bluffing his way through most situations. But I suspect his fear and jealousy about a king being born must have shown through to the Wise Men because they were sharp-eyed and perceptive people. They were mentally strong because they could see things. They paid attention to details. They noticed. Their health and well-being was dependent on the fact that they were observant.

So, I ask you, on this first day of this New Year, what are you observing? What do you pay attention to? To what do you give notice? What do you see, hear, taste, touch, and smell? Being aware of these things is an important part of being observant and mentally well.

2—BE CURIOUS

Of course, the Wise Men didn't stop with being observant. They were mentally well because they were also curious. When they saw the star that rose in the east, they wanted to know more. Where did that star that traveled across the night sky go? Like Christopher Columbus who got in a ship and traveled west to see what was out there, the Wise Men also went west to see what more they could learn. By the time they arrived in Jerusalem, they already had deduced that the star represented a child who was born king of the Jews. But they had more questions, and they weren't afraid to ask. They weren't worried that someone might think they were dumb or a nuisance or out of line. If they were concerned about Jewish prejudice against them because they were foreigners, their strong curiosity overcame their fears.

Have you ever been so curious about something that you were willing to ask a question, even if you felt stupid or foolish doing it? I'm not suggesting that we should be rude to people by asking questions that are too personal and private. But isn't asking questions an important way that we learn?

Of course, to ask questions effectively, we have to put ourselves in a situation where we can actually get a true and helpful answer. Maybe that means we need to go where the experts are. If we

have a question about our car, for example, we might have to take our car to a garage and ask an auto mechanic who is a professional in that field. If we have questions about our body, maybe we need to make an appointment so we can ask a doctor. If we have questions about a place, maybe we can go on a tour. Or maybe we can learn about our topic of interest by reading a book, taking a class, or watching a documentary. The internet is one of my favorite places to gain information. If I'm curious about something, I often type it into a Google search and *voilà*, there it is. If we observe something, but don't have enough curiosity to follow up with a question, then our observation may not do much good. To be mentally well, we need to be curious enough to seek an answer.

3—THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX

A third way the wise men teach us to start the New Year well mentally is to think outside the box. The wise men didn't limit themselves to the knowledge they had gained in the east. They were willing to travel west. Nor did they limit themselves to the information they had attained through astrology or astronomy. Those scientifically-minded men were also willing to consult with governmental leaders of a foreign country and the religious leaders and holy scriptures of a different faith. As they engaged in their search for wisdom and truth, they undoubtedly were exposed to some different cultural practices and probably even ate different foods than they were used to. The Wise Men weren't untrue to their own values; they just opened themselves up to new information from additional sources. In their great desire to discover the answers to their questions, they were willing to stretch across all kinds of constraints and limitations.

The Gospel of Matthew tells this story of the Wise Men, in part, to exalt Jesus by showing that even the Gentiles of the world recognized that Jesus was the Messiah. Matthew is also indicting the Jews somewhat, by showing that even though the chief priests and scribes had access to the scriptural prophecies about the Messiah, it took outsiders to come there and figure things out. The Jewish scriptures and traditions alone didn't provide enough information. It took a mixture of data and

perspectives to get to the truth about Jesus. It took a willingness and openness to cross boundaries to gain the wisdom and insight about this child who was born king of the Jews.

Our mental wellness will require an open-minded perspective too. We can't be well mentally if we're closed off and narrow. To be well mentally, we have to seek information from a breadth of sources. I like the Wesleyan Quadrilateral that we talk about in the United Methodist Church. We say that our founder John Wesley and we United Methodists since him have four sources of authority: scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The Bible is a great and invaluable place to start our search for truth. But we don't stop there. We also seek wisdom from the traditions of faith. Then we ask what the most current scientific reasoning can teach us. And then we compare all of that with our own personal experience and the experience of people we know. It's the combination of all those things and more that give us the wisest answers to our questions.

Learning new things comes by stretching our minds to include a variety of sources of information—not just the same narrow ones we have used and trusted in the past. Starting the New Year well mentally requires us to think outside the box.

CONCLUSION

In church tradition, the story of the Wise Men is known as the Epiphany. An epiphany is a revelation, a realization, an insight. It's when a mystery is solved. It's when the light bulb suddenly comes on. Because the Wise Men were observant, curious, and willing to think outside the box, their minds were opened to the one who was worthy of their worship. They were willing to turn over their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh because this young king of the Jews inspired and renewed their minds.

On this Sunday after the birth of Jesus, I hope we will follow the example of the Wise Men. I hope we will be observant, curious, and willing to think outside the box in search of the truth. I hope we will start the New Year well mentally.