

“Living Wisely in 2019”

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus and a Happy New Year to all of you.

Before turning to your text, allow me just a few personal notes. First of all, Mary and I had a wonderful break over the Christmas holidays. We spent Christmas Day with our family here in San Jose. That same day, we drove up to Arnold and spent the next four days just relaxing and kicking back. We started, (what we called), the puzzle-a-day club: four 500-piece puzzles in four days. Just for the record, it wasn't a record and it wasn't my idea, but it was time well spent.

Second, a word of thanks to all you, members of St. Timothy's, for the ongoing support you offer to your pastoral staff. I know I speak for Pastor Jonna (and Brian) in expressing our thanks for the cards (and gifts) we received at Christmas, as well as for the generous financial gift you gave to us on Christmas Eve. Your support and encouragement (in a variety of ways) throughout the year is much appreciated.

Third, this is now the beginning of my 25th year here at St. Timothy's. When we started here at the end of 1994, none of us ever thought we'd be here this long. (You're probably thinking the same thing, if you know what I mean.) When we first arrived, our oldest son, Tom, was in first grade and our youngest son, Andy, was three months old. Our two girls, Elizabeth and Rebecca, were five and four, and now they're all grown and working and it's all good.

And that leads to the final (personal note) I want to share, and that is, if you haven't already heard, our daughter, Elizabeth, and son-in-law, Joe, had their first child over the Christmas break. Avery Claire Hill was born on December 29, 2018. 7 lbs, 5 ounces, 19 inches tall, she and her mother are doing just fine. Avery's father is looking (more tired) than normal, but as proud a father as you will ever find.

That also means that, for the first time ever, I am now married to a Grandma! Wow! How did that happen? And, because I'm now married to a Grandma that means that I'm now a Grandpa.

Now, just to be clear (and fully transparent), I want you to know that I will never be one of those grandpas who pulls out his phone (or wallet) every chance he gets, to share pictures of his grandchildren with people who don't really care. I won't be that guy.

If you want to see pictures of our new granddaughter, then you'll have to talk with her grandmother (or grandmothers) or her other grandfather, but not with me. I won't do that. If you ask, I'll tell you about what she's doing, how smart she's becoming and how cute she is, but I won't bore you with an endless stream of pictures.

If you want more detail, you can talk with Avery's mother (who is doing just fine) or with her father who is stepping up like I've (never before) seen. They're both doing a great job. For now, just know that we truly feel (and are) blessed. Avery is yet one more clear-reminder of how good and great our God truly is.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your goodness to us and for the clear reminder we have in Jesus that we are loved eternally by you. We thank you for the church we have (and we are) here at St. Timothy's and for the chance we share each week to worship you as we do. As we begin this New Year together and as we look to what you have in store for us in the months ahead, help us to keep our eyes on Jesus, the One who came into this world on that first Christmas to show us and to reveal to us how much we are loved. In his name we pray. Amen.

Let's get right into it this morning. There are a number of things about today's text that are worth mentioning upfront. One, it's a familiar story. It's one that is often connected with what happened on that first Christmas. The story of the Wise Men who came to see (and to find) the newborn Christ.

Two, it comes at the beginning of a New (calendar) Year. As we consider what might lie ahead for us (individually) in our own lives, as well as (corporately) as a congregation, to remember the story of the Wise Men and (what they did) and how they reacted is not a bad place to start.

And, three, it also lands on a day (in the Church year) we call Epiphany. This year, on January 6, it lands on the exact date, twelve days after Christmas.

To have an epiphany is to experience a new insight, to have a new revelation, to understand something we didn't before know. The story of the Wise Men was God's first revelation or "making known" or "epiphany" to the Gentile world that God had come into this world (in the flesh) in Christ.

All three of those connections – the story of the Wise Men, the beginning of a New Year, and the celebration of Epiphany – all three are tied together by wisdom. All three challenge us with considering what it is (in life) that makes a person wise.

Let's talk (for a moment) about our story. There's a lot of (tradition) around the story of the wise men, but there's really not a whole lot we know about them. Who they were? Where they came from? How many there were. What they were all about? We don't even know for sure when they arrived.

Based upon what we know about (King Herod), in the story that (follows today's text) and about how he had all of the babies two years of age and younger killed, most likely, it was within the first two years of Jesus' life. Beyond that, all we know is what we're told.

Matthew says they "came from the East;" maybe from Persia or Arabia or Babylon. He tells us that they had "seen a star." They were scientists, astrologers, they studied the stars. And (he says) they came "following a star" to find the one born "king of the Jews."

Now, to us, looking back, it's easy to put (all of that) together. A star in the east, a newborn baby, a search in Jerusalem and beyond that led them to Christ. It all makes sense, especially looking back.

But to them, looking forward, as it was happening, it's hard to know what they knew. They didn't have the kind of perspective that we have after 2,000 years of history has played out. All we know (for sure) is what they did. All we know (for certain) is what they brought. All we know (without question) is that these wise men were wise.

There are a number of lessons in our story, things we find in our text from which we can learn. Let me highlight some of the more obvious ones. There are a number of things.

#1 (verse 8): It says they made a "careful search" for the child. (It says) they searched carefully to find the truth. They wanted to be certain. They wanted to make sure they got this right. It was that important.

Now, let me ask you a question. You tell me. Do you think most people today are honestly and carefully searching for the truth? Do you think most people today are wanting (more than anything) to get this whole truth-thing (about Jesus) right?

I don't know if they are. (There's no way to really know.) I doubt if it's happening. I think more people than not (these days) are actually trying to avoid it. I really do.

Busy with other things. Priorities (for life) that are contrary to the way God has called us to live. Trying to get ahead, working to make it to the top. Raising a family, running ragged, doing everything they can to make life work.

Next thing you know, life has happened and it's still not working. I (personally) believe there are many (in our world) today, who go through life without understanding what it's all about. There's an emptiness in their lives that (they know) needs to be filled (by someone) or by something, but have no idea how to fill it.

Here's the bottom line. Do you want to be wise in the coming year? Do you want to make the most of the life you've been given? Then follow the example of the Wise Men and search until you find the truth. Follow the example of the Wise Men and don't let anything in your life stand in the way of your search to know this Christ.

The wise men searched for Jesus until they found him. Wise people (of every day) search for the truth until they know. The truth is we will find the truth, if we search hard enough. (Better yet), if we search hard enough, the truth will find us. #1, they searched for the child.

#2: It says they followed a star. They followed a star. Now, we don't have a star in the skies to lead us to Jesus. If we did, we'd all be following it.

I'd follow it to China, if I knew it was leading to Jesus. I'd follow it to Africa, if I knew it would lead me to Christ. I'd follow it to the Middle East or to the far West or to the North Pole. I'd go anywhere, if there was a star leading to Jesus. (My guess is, so would you.)

Now, we don't have a star to follow, like those wise men did. What we have is something better. The apostle Peter says, "We have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well (he says) to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place..."

The psalmist says the same thing. He says, “God’s Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.” That’s our star. That’s what God has given us to follow. And we can follow it, (and we will follow it), if we are wise.

#3: It says, “When they found him, they bowed down and worshiped.” (It says), when they came to him, they knew (exactly) what to do. Learned men (or not), it didn’t stop them. What it did was the opposite. Do you know what made them wise? Their humility, that’s what made them wise. Understanding their own need, that’s where they found their wisdom.

Solomon says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and with knowledge of the Holy One comes insight.” James says, “Who is the wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by deeds done in the humility that comes from (being wise).”

Do you want to be wise in 2019? Then follow their example and leave any of your self-centered confidence behind when you come into his presence. (There’s far too much of that in our world today.) We’re all beggars in the presence of Jesus. We’re all sinners in need of the one who can save. The Wise Men set us a good example. It’s up to us to follow.

#4: It says, “They offered him their gifts.” They gave Jesus what they had. (You know the story.) They gave their best: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And there was no holding back. Do you think it was a sacrifice for those Wise Men? Sure it was. (That’s what made them wise.)

How about us in this coming year? How about you in the weeks and months ahead? Are you giving your best to Jesus? Are you offering what you have to the one who offered all he had for you?

Paul says, “I appeal to you to present yourselves as living sacrifices...” As living sacrifices: our talents, our energies, our words, our possessions, our deeds – these are the things we lay at his feet. These are the things we (are called) to offer (each day) to him. And it’s in offering these things (each day), more than so many (other things), that we become wise.

And #5: It says they did not compromise with the enemies of Christ. It says they “went out of their way” to avoid doing anything to support wicked King Herod.

Now, we don’t have the whole story. All we have is what we have. But what we have is a directive for being wise. Now, the time has changed, since this first happened. (No doubt about it.) It’s not the same today as it was back then. (It never will be.) King Herod is long gone. But times haven’t changed. No matter what time it is, (then or now), the Church must never compromise with evil, and neither should you and I.

The wise men were wise. They did what they had to do. They were not diverted. They didn’t fall for the easy way out. They were faithful. They did what they were told, and so must we.

At the beginning of a New Year, at the close of (another year), now gone by? I don’t know what challenges you face in your life. The evils confronting each one of us are different. But our response needs to be the same. Regardless of what we face, if it’s in opposition to Christ and the work of his Church, then we need to stand in opposition to whatever forms it might take.

And doing that might take some effort. (I realize that.) We (most likely), if we are going to do it, will need each other’s support. But if we are wise, we won’t give in, and if we are wise, we’ll work together in whatever ways we can.

And so, who are the wise men today? Who are the wise women today? Are they not the same (today) as they were back then? You and I can be numbered among the wise. This can be a wise year (for us), and it will be, if we follow their example.

And so, (#1), start searching (at the beginning of this New Year), and don’t stop searching. Even after (you’ve found Jesus), come to know the truth, keep on searching for a deeper relationship, a closer and more intimate walk with Christ.

(#2), follow the star. Keep your eyes on it. Look to the Word. Read it every day. Let it be your lamp and your light as you make your way through life.

(#3), commit yourself to worship. Make it a regular part of your life. Every Sunday, in humility, set your own agenda aside and make your sole agenda one of serving and honoring Christ.

(#4), Offer him your gifts. Give (what you have been given) back to him. And don’t hold back. Let nothing in your life stand in the way of presenting him with your best.

And, (#5), stay faithful. Stay faithful. Don't be lured by the Herods of our day. Don't give in to the temptations that seek to pull us all away from Christ. There's only one wise way in this life, and it's a life that faithfully follows Jesus.

Let me close today with a story, with a little twist on the story we just read. We just read the story of the star that shined over Bethlehem that led the Wise Men to the place where they found the Christ.

Did you know there's a place in England that's not called Bethlehem, but it's called Bedlam? Bedlam is a word (I'm sure) we've all heard before. The word "bedlam" means "a place or condition of great confusion." Things are (in bedlam) when they're confused and out of control.

What's interesting about the place called Bedlam (in England) is that (what it is), how it started was as a religious house established by the Catholic Church. The Bethlem Royal Hospital (short for Bethlehem) is what it was called. It was a "hospital", (built in the 13th century), supported by the alms or (gifts) given (by the people) to help the poor. It was a wonderful and supportive ministry of the church.

What happened was that the Bethlem Royal Hospital was given the name "bedlam" as it became (over time), by the 16th century, a home for the mentally ill. Now, it's a long (and complicated) story, and it wasn't a bad change (when it happened), but its name (over time) changed from Bethlem to Bedlam... a story with an interesting twist.

And so let me ask you a question, and I'll let you figure out the answer for yourself. (You tell me.) How in the world (has our world) moved from Bethlehem to bedlam, if it's not as a result of taking our eyes off of Jesus? How in the world has our world moved (over time) from God's intent (in Christ), given to us as the Prince of Peace, to becoming a place of "great confusion" and "out of control", if it's not as a result of failing to follow God's star that leads to Jesus?

The story of the Wise Men, the beginning of a new (calendar) year, on the day we call Epiphany. Don't let those three things (come and go) without making decisions (and commitments) in your life that are wise. Amen.