

Epiphany

The holiday season is filled with many cherished rituals, from buying and receiving presents, eating too much, visiting with friends and families, going to church, but the last holiday ritual of each year requires a decision: what is my new year resolution?

I don't know how long people have been making new years resolutions, I only know that I've been making them all my life, and over the years I've noticed 2 things about them: first, they are generally aimed at things that are pretty unimaginative, like losing some weight, and second, they rarely make it as far as February.

This second point makes me wonder how much resolve there really is in our resolutions, which brings me to the real focus of this sermon: the wise men who followed the star which led them to the infant Jesus.

Today we celebrate the feast day of the Epiphany, which is the traditional end of the Christmas season, but which we rarely celebrate anymore because it only falls on a Sunday every 7 years or so, depending on leap years, so I decided to transfer it to the nearest Sunday, which is today.

But January 6, the Epiphany, is actually the original celebration of the birth of Christ dating back to the 2nd century, with the December 25th celebration originating later in the 4th century. Over time the two days became combined with those in between and came to be known as the 12 days of Christmas.

The difficulty is that December 25th has become by far the bigger celebration, which has clouded certain elements of the Epiphany story of the wise men. What I mean is that when we picture this story we tend to place it in the story of December 25th, with the wise men arriving shortly after the shepherds, but that is not how scripture describes the story. When the wise men went to Herod, asking about the child, Herod ordered the slaughter of all the children in the Bethlehem area that were 2 years old and under, implying that the child Jesus had been alive for some time up to 2 years before the visit of the wise men.

Second, the Bible never says that there were three of them, what the Bible does say is that there were three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and from that reference tradition assigned three wise men to the three gifts: naming them Gaspar, Balthasar and Melchior.

Third, the NT never refers to them as Kings. The notion of Kings comes from today's OT lesson where we read in Isaiah "Kings will come to the brightest of your dawn" and "they shall bring gold and frankincense". And, of course, it comes from the hymn "We three Kings."

All right, so they didn't arrive Christmas night, we don't really know how many of them there were, and we know they were wise men but probably not kings. So what can we say positively about the wise men?

We can say that unlike most of us, they had resolve. They saw that star in the east, knew that it was a sign that something important was taking place, and followed that star, as the hymn says, "wherever it went." They came from the east, which means they were from Israel and thus it was a long trip. They must've been tempted at many points to abandon their journey. Perhaps at a desert oasis, perhaps in a city, perhaps there were times when they simply wanted to go home.

So, as we sit here on the first Sunday of the new year, contemplating our own rather half hearted new year's resolutions, perhaps this is a good time to make a real resolution for this new year. To follow Christ with the same resolve that the wise men showed in following the star to Christ. To love God with our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves. May our prayer be for that kind of resolution to characterize our year, our church, and our life.

I'll leave you with a quote from CS Lewis's book "The Last Battle" which always reminds me of the wise men, and of our own spiritual journeys. It is this: "All find what they truly seek." Amen