

## Wisdom and Awe--Matthew 2: 1-2 (January 6, 2019-Epiphany)

Who are the wise people in your life? What makes them wise? For Matthew, knowledge was an important aspect of wisdom. The wise men, students of the heavens were the scientists of their day, such as it was. In Matthew's gospel, the wise men help to bolster Jesus' identity as the messiah, the righteous king of the Jews. Matthew associates Jesus with that other great Jewish king—Solomon. Solomon, who received the visits of scholars and nobility from the farthest reaches of the known world. However, there is more to these wise men than knowledge. Something more was required to perceive the presence of God in a stable or else many more would have been there to witness Jesus' birth in Matthew's account. That "something more" is wisdom. Today I am starting a sermon series on what the story of the wise men can teach us about wisdom. This morning's sermon is entitled "Wisdom and Awe". We'll take a break in the series for the baptism of Jesus and then follow that with "Wisdom and Fear" and finally "Wisdom and Change".

Listen to some of this folk wisdom I came across; "Things turn out best for those who make the best of the way things turn out", "We do not quit playing because we grow old, we grow old because we quit playing", "The young man knows the rules, but the old man knows the exceptions", "The only difference between a flower and a weed is.....judgement".<sup>1</sup> Wise words resonate with truth because they are grounded in reality, in experience. When I think about the wise people in my life one of the hallmarks of their wisdom is to see things as they are, without illusion or deception. Reality is the ground of wisdom; wisdom is the learning that comes from the experience of perceiving things as they are. Therefore, wise people are humble people; life is the teacher, they are the learner.

Spiritual wisdom is no different. Spiritual wisdom is also about seeing things as they are, seeing God's activity and God's presence in creation. Spiritual wisdom also requires the humility of a learner. At the root of this humility is something else. The late Rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way; "Humanity will not perish from lack of information, but only from want of appreciation...life without wonder is not worth living...The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe."<sup>2</sup> The beginning of wisdom is awe. Awe re-defines us; awe re-positions us within creation. Awe takes us out of the centre, awe is an acknowledgement that creation does not revolve around us, there is something else at the centre, a mystery, and the best we can do is stand in awe before it and learn from it. Spiritual wisdom flows from this stance towards life.

It's the stance of the wise men in our faith story. God come into the world in the form of a baby born in a feeding trough in an out of the way village, but only a few perceived

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.1-love-quotes.com/cgi-bin/viewquotes.cgi?action=search&Category=folk+wisdom>

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, [http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/jan2004\\_tikkun6](http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/jan2004_tikkun6)

it, only a few saw what God was doing. The wise men saw, they perceived what was happening because they were willing to wonder at the meaning of a star, they were willing to let the heavens fill them with awe. They were willing to place mystery at the centre of creation, and they were simply travelers who journeyed toward the mystery, lead by wonder and awe. In the end, they saw things as they really were, a God who inhabits creation, a God who takes on flesh.

Awe is the antidote to cynicism, which is the great enemy of wisdom in the spiritual life. Let's face it; it is easy to be cynical these days. The evidence of leaders' motivation by self-interest is all around us. In the face of the overwhelming challenges of climate change, poverty, racism and more, we easily doubt whether any of our actions are worthwhile. Some would say these days that cynicism is the true wisdom; cynicism is the true expression of how things really are. There is a place for healthy skepticism and suspicion in the life of faith, that's part of perceiving the world as it is. But for a person of faith, for a follower of the way of Jesus, cynicism on it's own is a dead end that leads us away from spiritual wisdom. Cynicism is the great enemy of wisdom in the spiritual life because it puts us at the centre of life—there is no mystery, there are no surprises. We've got life all figured out, we know the rules of the game. We close ourselves off to the deeper rhythms of life, to the subtle, vulnerable movements of love and grace. Awe on the other hand opens us up to God's ways. Awe takes us out of the centre as we look for what God is doing, where God is moving and leading.

What brings you to wonder? What fills you with awe? What makes you go "wow"? For years I had an image on my computer desktop of our galaxy, I look at it and when I realize that our solar system, not our planet, but our solar system is a small dot on the outer edge and that there are billions of galaxies I say "wow". I sometimes joke that every Sunday is "bring your family to work" day for Ministers. One time I had the privilege of witnessing my wife at work. I took my then young daughter to a story time program that my wife was running at the library. Watching Andrea relate to the children, her ability to speak on their level, to understand their world, the respect and love she demonstrated for them, wow, I was in awe. As a minister I am privileged to be let into so many lives and to be witness to people's grace and courage in the face of adversity, disability and death, to acts of compassion and generosity done anonymously, to lives dedicated to serving others, wow, it's an awesome privilege! Awe is the doorway to spiritual wisdom. Awe puts us in a position where we can see beyond the machinations of power and perceive the sacredness of reality, the truth of incarnation, of a God who inhabits creation and takes on flesh. This insight is wisdom.

As much as any spiritual tradition is rooted in awe, it will have wisdom to offer. The wisdom of Judaism, the reality that the Jewish faith perceived is the unity of creation. In rejecting multiple gods and choosing to worship one God, Judaism perceived a great reality, the oneness of creation. The wisdom of the Christian faith comes in perceiving another great reality, incarnation. The divine inhabits creation; God takes on flesh. This wisdom comes to us when we practice awe on a regular basis, to see in small, everyday things the hand of God, the spark of the Divine. In the majesty of creation, the wonders

of our bodies, the miracle of life, the resilience of the human Spirit, our capacity for love and compassion, the energy of a child, the peace of an elder, the outer and inner beauty of a person, the diversity of peoples and of the entire natural world.

The more we practice awe, the more we will see the world as it really is, the more we will see the reality of the incarnation and the wiser we will become. May we be blessed in this way.