Christmas Conversations
“DON’T BE NAÏVE!”
Between Herod/God and the wise men
Matthew 2:1-12
December 7, 2014
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By all accounts Neville Chamberlain was a ‘smart cookie.’ Why for starters he came from a smart family, his father being a prominent politician and his older half-brother a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. But soon Neville made a name for himself -- rising in British politics ‘in his own right, first as a member of parliament -- then Chancellor of the Exchequer -- then minister of health -- and then finally prime minister, in 1937. But that all changed in 1938 when Chamberlain signed the Munich Pact, giving parts of Czechoslovakia -- to of all people -- Adolph Hitler! You see ‘smart cookie’ Neville Chamberlain naively thought charismatic Adolph Hitler could be trusted, appeased. Translated: Chamberlain didn’t discern Hitler was a ‘bad guy.’ And so Chamberlain returned to Britain from Munich declaring: ‘peace for our time.’ But Chamberlain was naïve. Hitler could not be trusted. There was no peace, as Hitler soon annexed all of Czechoslovakia – and then – brutally invaded Poland! Well eventually Chamberlain did declare war, but it was too late. Adolph Hitler was ‘on a roll,’ seemingly unstoppable. And so to this day, Neville Chamberlain is not remembered as a wise man, but a gullible man – who couldn’t recognize evil when he saw it.

As we enter our biblical text -- initially -- the Wise Men or magi -- appear unable to recognize evil when they see it. For as they encounter ‘the Adolph Hitler of their day’ – charismatic, but horrific Herod – they appear gullible. I mean Herod’s narcissistic, power-hungry reputation was well known, yet the Wise Men demonstrate no pause as Herod requests them to “Go, and make a careful search for [the Christ] child…so that I too may go and worship him…” (Matthew 2:8). Now the text doesn’t reveal details of the conversation between Herod and the Wise Men; apparently there was little conversation, at least any questioning of Herod’s request. Why Matthew 2:9 simply says: “after [the Wise Men] heard… [Herod] -- they went on their way and the star they had seen in the east went ahead...until it stopped over the place where the child was…” (Matthew 2:9). No inquiry, no suspicion -- the Wise Men just trusted -- and went.

But Herod was not trustworthy. I mean Herod appeared credible as one of the greatest builders ever, erecting cities such as Caesarea, along with amphitheatres, and hippodromes. But Herod’s real character increasingly seeped out, as news of Herod’s atrocities went viral, especially atrocities toward his family. Why Herod poisoned his father -- killed two of his sons – and wreaked the lives of multiple women, having been married ten times; is it any wonder one writer noted it was better to be Herod’s pig than a member of Herod’s family. Yet Herod’s charisma charmed many a person, including -- apparently -- the wise men. But in fairness to the Wise Men, that’s the nature of charisma -- it seduces a lot of us, making us gullible, naïve. Is it any wonder God advises Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7, in reference to charismatic Saul – “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the heart…” (1 Samuel 16:7). Friends: this Christmas we’re called to look at the heart and not outward appearance. Otherwise: we’ll be gullible, susceptible – naïve. For trust me: all that trumpets is
not trustworthy – all that shines is not safe. Thus, we too need to be alert and discerning, especially during this holiday season.

That begins as we -- Genuinely Seek A Deeper Life. I mean let’s just say it: so much of Christmas is so surface, so shallow: ‘glow in the dark Santa’s – plastic poinsettias – and rock hard fruit cake that often doubles as a prop to keep a pesky door open! But wise men and woman, like the Wise Men in our text – seek a deeper life. For at first the Wise Men start out fine, truly seeking God’s voice, not Herod’s voice, as they come to Jerusalem asking: “where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We have seen his star in the east and have come to worship him…” (Matthew 2:2). Frankly we don’t know a lot about the Wise Men except they appear to be notable individuals, marked by outward accomplishment and success. Specifically the Wise Men are believed to be Zoroastrian priests hailing from Persia or Southern Arabia, known for their interest in astrology; thus they had a scholarly or scientific bent, widely hailed as magi or wise men. But as they set out to seek the king of the Jews, the Wise Men model that true wisdom is not gained from outward accomplishment -- but inward accomplishment -- as they seek deeper meaning and deeper life -- not from a star, but a Savior – Jesus the Christ.

In Bible days, one of the most accomplished cities ever was the city of Shechem. Why it was a major center of trade between Jaffa and Beirut on the east -- and the Transjordan region on the west -- manufacturing coarse woolen fabrics, delicate silk, camels hair cloth and exotic soap. Yet all this outward activity was not the real reason for Shechem’s success. The real reason for Shechem’s success was invisible activity -- deep beneath the ground. For deep beneath Shechem were over eighty different springs, welling up and giving life to the inhabitants of this arid, dry, parched city. Friends: I’ve got good news: you only need one spring to give life to your arid, dry, parched being – the Living Water, Jesus the Christ – who in the words of John 4:14 – becomes a spring inside all who believe -- all who are born again -- “…welling up into eternal life…” (John 4:14).

But such inner water only saturates life, as we Bow Down, Allowing Jesus To ‘Lord Over Us.’ It’s interesting: when the Wise Men finally find Jesus, their reaction is far from tame. Why they’re demonstrative, totally “…overjoyed…” (Matthew 2:11). In fact as they approach Jesus’ birth place they immediately “…bowed down and worshipped him…” (Matthew 2:11). But there’s more: “…they opened [the treasures they had brought with them] and presented [Jesus] with gifts of gold…incense [better known as frankincense] and of myrrh [a powerful anointing oil]…” (Matthew 2:11) – all gifts normally given to a king – to one who now was granted permission to ‘lord-over’ -- have dominion -- and have control.

Friends: that’s a key strategy for jettisoning naïveté, for getting wise. We need to grant Jesus permission to ‘lord over’ – have dominion – and have control. Translated: to saturate us from ‘head to toe’ with His presence – His power – and His peace that passes understanding! For especially during this anxious holiday season – how we need the controlling peace of Jesus. There’s a great story about a young father in a supermarket pushing his son, in a shopping cart, strapped in front. Frankly, his kid was a disaster, pulling cans off shelves left and right -- acting up big time! As the kid did just that, his father just kept repeating the same words: “easy now, Donald -- keep calm Donald – it’s all right Donald!” Impressed by the father’s composure, a shopper declared: you certainly know how to talk to an upset child. And with that the shopper
bent down and spoke to the little boy: “now Donald, what seems to be the trouble?” “Donald?”
the father exclaimed. “I'm Donald – he’s Henry!”

Friends: during the holidays we’re all Donald.’ But better than self-talk is Jesus-talk – as we give
ourselves totally to the Lord of the Universe – listening to His voice. And what does that voice
say in the midst of our anxiety? Prophet Isaiah says it best: “The people walking in darkness
have seen a great light -- on those living in the land of the shadow of death -- a light has
dawned…For unto us a child is born -- to us a son is given, and the government shall be on his
shoulders. And he shall be called: Wonderful Counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father.
Prince of Peace…[In fact]…the increase of his…peace will [know] no end…The zeal of the
Lord Almighty will accomplish this…” (Isaiah 9:2; 6-7).

But the zeal of the Lord does even more. It not only grants peace, it grants protection.
Specifically protection from naïveté and danger. And so Listen For The Lord’s Warnings;
Access The Lord’s Safety. At the conclusion of our text, the Wise Men do just this. I mean even
after encountering the Christ-child; even after saturating themselves in the presence, power and
peace of the Lord – they’ll still not wise – fully intending to return to Herod after all, as Herod
requested, to reveal the location of the baby Jesus. But then the Lord’s protection manifests
itself in a dream and the Wise men are “…warned…not to go back to Herod. [And so] they
returned to their country by another route…” (Matthew 2:12).

Friends: the Lord wants to do the same for us. In the midst of our blind stops -- our naïveté –
our stubborn gullibility – the Lord wants to warn us directly; to see a situation differently – to
make a different choice – to take a different route. But we must listen for the Lord’s prodding,
not just His peace – what I like to call “God’s holy kick in the pants” – as God admonishes us to
‘wake up’ out of our ill-informed, gullible, self-reliant assumptions – and move toward His
incredibly sage -- well-informed -- wise way of life. For as Solomon clarifies: “By wisdom a
house is built, and through understanding it is established; through knowledge its rooms are
filled with rare and beautiful treasures. A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge
increases strength…” (Proverbs 24:3-5).

In 1989, a collector spent $4 at a Pennsylvania flea market for a painting of a dismal, dark,
county scene with a signature he couldn’t make out. Why? Because he loved the gilded and
ornately carved frame it was in. Well immediately, he discarded the dismal painting – but then a
few days later -- surprisingly -- he discarded the frame as well -- discovering it was cracked and
largely irreparable. But he did keep the old envelope that was tucked away in the backing of the
frame. Oh at first – he thought he would throw that out too – but something prompted him to
hold on to the envelope; and so he did. Well days later the collector opened up the envelope –
only to find not the old, dated letter he expected – but, get this – a rare first printing of the
Declaration of Independence – which he subsequently took to auction, selling for over 1 million
dollars. Musing later the collector noted: how ironic – he assumed he had nothing of value –
when in fact he had everything of value – because he chose to listen to an unexpected prompting.

This Christmas season: listen to an unexpected prompting. Listen to the Lord’s voice! Not just
as the Lord grants you peace – but as the Lord grants you protection -- a ‘holy kick in the pants’
– nudging you to see a situation differently – to make a different choice – to take a different route.

Because the Lord doesn’t want you gullible – the Lord wants you wise -- finding value, even when you think there is no value. And so seek the Lord this Christmas! Better yet bow down to the Lord, allowing the Lord to control your life. Like the Wise Men – surrender your best, presenting to Jesus your gold, frankincense and myrrh. Listen: I know there are Herod’s all around. There are powerful, charismatic characters that are trying to manipulate you, seduce you, and trip you up. But there are other voices you can access – most importantly the voice of the King of all Kings, who is coming this Christmas. For prophet Isaiah is right, this Christmas: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light -- on those living in the land of the shadow of death -- a light has dawn…For unto us a child is born -- to us a son is given, and the government shall be on his shoulders. And he shall be called: Wonderful Counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father. Prince of Peace…[In fact]…the increase of his…peace will [know] no end…[For] the zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this…” (Isaiah 9:2; 6-7). Friends: that’s what wise men and women claim this Christmas. And so I pray you’ll be a wise man or women -- and find life through Jesus – a life filled with peace -- a life filled protection -- a life filled with unexpected and priceless treasure!