

“Oblivious Wisdom”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Matthew 2:1-12
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on January 7, 2018

You might say that the wise men are a bit clueless. They arrive in Jerusalem openly asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews?” seemingly unaware that this is a political question. They do not realize that no Jew is a king or that the king is Herod. They appear unsuspecting that the existing king might not want his position threatened. If anything about their private audience with Herod tipped them off they had entered dangerous territory by announcing the birth of a new king, they show no signs that they are perceptive of it. Later they must be warned explicitly in a dream not to return to old Herod as requested.

Furthermore, they approach this baby, king of the Jews, with seemingly no shame or hesitation about their own Gentile status. As readers we marvel every year at Epiphany about the glorious inclusion of the mysterious outsiders from the East. But the wise men do not view it that way. They do not see themselves as anything but wise men. They include themselves in the story and think nothing of it. They travel countless miles to meet the Messiah and never do they fret whether they are worthy of the journey or whether the Christ-child will turn them away. They simply go. As far as we can tell they are blissfully ignorant of the fact that Jews were often wary of Gentiles, that before long Christ’s new church will be arguing over matters like the importance of Gentile circumcision. The wise men, for all their clairvoyance, do not foresee these troubles. The wise men simply show up and offer their gifts.

I remember showing up to Truett Seminary under the impression that everyone there believed in women in ministry. For the first time I stopped hiding it that I wanted to be a pastor. Having left the Southern Baptists behind, I no longer expected people to recoil when I said it or look at me with weird eyes or ask me to defend myself.

Imagine my surprise years later—after graduation—when various seminary friends shared that they didn’t know what they thought about women pastors until they met me! I was the first woman they ever heard preach. This whole time we were friends I never even knew they were still working out their theology about women in the pulpit. I consider it a mercy that I didn’t know that, because I just bounced right along believing I was fully accepted. And then my belief became reality before I even knew there was a gap between them.

Of course, it doesn’t always go so smoothly. I’ve heard many women tell a story that goes something like this: Once upon a time, a little girl was sitting in church when the pastor gave an altar call. “Come forward,” he said, “if you are being called to the Gospel ministry.” And the little girl squirmed in her pew, a little nervous to stand up and walk forward in front of all those people . . . but the Spirit whispered and the Spirit tugged, and she said to herself, “I will be brave. Yes, Lord, yes.” And she wriggled herself down from the pew, squeezed past all the kneecaps of adults still stuck in their pews and made her way down to the front. “God’s calling me to be a preacher,” she whispered in the pastor’s ear as he bent down to greet her.

From there, things got confusing. The pastor turned to the congregation and announced that this young girl wanted to be a missionary to Africa! *Africa?* she thought. *I didn't say Africa, and neither did God. What's the pastor talking about?* And for the rest of her life, that girl struggled—not only to find her vocation but also to trust the voice of God when the voice spoke to her.

It is often when we are most oblivious to external obstacles that we are most open to following God. Before we are tainted by the opinions of the naysayers, before we are savvy about the difficulties to come, we are able to believe. We have more faith. We have a clearer channel to God.

My mom sent me a video this week about an adoptive mom—a middle-aged single woman, Lisa Harper who has this beautifully special relationship with her adoptive daughter—a little girl with HIV Lisa adopted from Haiti. Lisa said she'd "always wanted to adopt a kid that nobody else was standing in line for." Lisa herself had suffered a lot of abuse over the course of her life. When she first talked about her desire to adopt with her friends, a friend told her, "Lisa, I don't think it's a good idea for you to become a mom. You might unwittingly transfer the trauma you experienced as a kid onto a child. I think it'd be a much better idea for you to go to the Humane Society and adopt a dog, because you're so good with pets." After receiving that piece of advice, it was seven more years before Lisa pursued adoption, but in the end, the discouragers couldn't hold her back.

It's hard once life has knocked you down to believe in the miracle that God is calling you to stand up. Once people have questioned your motives and your competency, once you've learned that not everyone is for you and not everyone can see your potential the way God sees, it's hard to believe in the journey to which you are called. You internalize all the negativity about you and the negativity about people like you. You tell yourself you're too old or too young, too busy or too tired, too screwed up or too sensitive, too unpopular or too unwanted. You weigh carefully all the odds stacked against you. You examine all the good, logical reasons for not moving forward. You know the narrative of why you are stuck so well you could tell it backwards and forwards. You are an expert on your flaws, your weaknesses, your failures, and your setbacks. You know all the ways life has dealt you an unfair hand. You are very knowledgeable about all the things that are wrong with you and all the things that could go wrong on a journey . . . and despite all that knowledge, you still lack wisdom.

For there is a certain foolhardiness about the wise, a sort of optimism one might call naive, a sort of acceptance of the self that transcends all those rejections from the outside world, a sort of stubborn belief that God is not so limited as we've been told.

The wise men expected their search to be received with hospitality and their devotion to be welcomed by the Christ. It was, frankly, an irrational expectation not too grounded in historical fact or political awareness. It was grounded in something deeper—the mystery of God that had called to them in the night. It was grounded in a years long practice of trusting themselves and trusting the messages they heard from God.

They did not know for sure where the journey would take them. What they knew was that yes, they would take the journey. What they knew was that they would trust the prompting inside them despite any ridicule, any opposition, any obstacle. What they knew was there was a lot left to learn, but they'd never learn it by staying put.

I'd like to suggest that despite all the street smarts we've accumulated through the years, you and I can still be wise—that is, foolish enough to believe. Maybe we don't have to live jaded, afraid, always anticipating the next setback or the next loss. Maybe we can live excited about the adventure and ready to embark. I don't know what your next journey is. Maybe the journey for you is something small; maybe it's something big. Maybe it's something small that feels really big to you. The only important question about it is this: Will you say yes?

There may have been lots of things in the last year that have knocked you down, made you suspicious, leery. But it's never too late to go sit outside beneath the stars and dream again. Inside the worship guide this morning, you read a small portion of a Jan Richardson poem. I'd like to read the full poem to you now:

If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it;
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go
and by our going
take the vows

the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;

to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions
beyond fatigue
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel

to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.

Journey on, my friends. May the light of God guide you always. Amen.