LESSONS IN LIVING

Christmas and the 7 Secrets of Life Series
Part VII: Everything Is Connected

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
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Scripture Reading: Matthew 2:1- 12 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

We human beings live in a very strange relationship to the rest of the universe. I don't know if you've noticed that or not. But some of the most important things that tie our lives together are things we can't see, we can't taste, we can't touch. Since the days of Einstein it makes a little more sense that there are constants undergirding - underneath things that tie things together, but even that can't touch the heart very easily. The idea that everything is interconnected is a wonderful and beautiful idea, but it is very hard for the heart to take that in. The story we are looking at today from scripture seeks to illustrate a timeless truth. Now I have my version of what that timeless truth is, but you may want to take it a different way. There isn't one correct interpretation of a symbol…which should give you great relief. I think the story today tells us that our lives are much larger than ordinary perception would make it seem.

Did you know that the light from the candle lit at the beginning of worship, thirty-five minutes ago, has already passed the planet Mars and is on its way to Jupiter? We have no idea of how our lives intertwine in this larger area. I was reading a book once about flowers. It talked about a streak in a rose. A white streak in a red rose sometimes means that it was hit by radiation probably by another star and it cancelled out the genetic materials so you are seeing this interaction. There is a planetarium in California which I went to one time that had this fluid where you could see the Gamma rays coming through. You just don't think of yourself as being woven to these cosmic events, but the story of Christmas rings true because it is remembering that - that when these astrologers look up in the sky and see a star and realize that somehow that fits in their story, somehow they are leaving their small story and they are entering this larger story. It has implications for all of us, but it has to be told as a story. The purpose of the story is to put in visual terms these invisible truths. What I want to do with the story is going to be a little different, but you are probably used to that: doing something a little bit different with a Biblical story.

My assumption from studying world religions is that most of the stories of the New Testament existed in earlier versions in other religions. I just find that beyond question. When you go and you see more ancient religions that have the same stories (you can say that Satan gave them the stories early or something like that as a way of throwing us off track), I think the implication is that the world is larger than any one religion, including our own. This story of three strangers following a star - you see it all over the world. One interpretation is that it is the three stars in the constellation, Orion, as they go following a new star, starting a new era of time and reassuring people that their life makes sense - that people are not orphans in the universe. But because the story already existed, what is added to the story is very important to get

across a new meaning. Also what is *not there* is very important, because what the church does is fill in the blanks - people, human beings fill in the blanks.

There are three things that most assume are true of the three wise people. One is that we know where they came from, which the story doesn't say. The second is that we even know how many of them they were or whether they were wise people or kings, none of that is really said. We don't know what their names are and we don't even know what the star is. When you think about it, try to follow a star sometime and see how accurate you can be. Follow a comet and stand right under it and see if it will lead you to a particular building. It may be a bit of a challenge. So why are those details left out?

Let's take this one - that we do not know the names of the three wise people, or kids, or whatever they were. I think if we knew the names we would start thinking of concrete people and want to be like that. In the stories of scripture we always assume that somebody else, somewhere else, has a better idea [than we do] of what truth is. We think we are in a world of hurt if somebody says, "Well you know you really need to trust your own judgment. You really need to make your own decisions and take responsibility for your life." That is scary, so we love religions that say there is a wizard some place else, and if you can just find the wizard you will be fine. They don't give us the names. What we do know is that they are outsiders. The first generation that heard this story were Jewish people and these were Gentiles who were going to get the story, and all the religious people are going to fight against this new birth. Now that is not putting Judaism down, it is putting religion down…if that makes you feel any better. Once religion gets old and predictable it gets really afraid of new discoveries. Have you ever noticed that before? So, in some ways religion can be the worst enemy of sacred insights if we don't get past it.

So we don't know who these people were or what they looked like which means you are as good as anybody to answer the call. This isn't the story of smarter, better, wiser people. Have you ever gone on vacation and saw beautiful flowers and realized they are the same flowers that are here in Texas? One of the most important things we can learn from traveling is how little we are observing what is [close] around us. I will never forget one time I was at an airport, a plane lands and all these people from Japan are coming out. I am thinking, "Why would you come from Japan to Texas?" Then I realized they probably think the same thing. We get on a plane and go to some other place we think is exotic, but for people who live there it is just *here*. Wherever you go, it is just going to be another *here.* That is a real shock isn't it? And with religion, if we are not careful, we will think of it as a journey which by definition is always *some place else*. You can be the donkey chasing that carrot the rest of your life.

I think this story intentionally leaves the name out and you put your name here. There is not a wizard some place else that is going to know more about your life than you are going to. If you are not an expert in your life, you are not going to find anybody on the planet that is going to know more, because they are not going to know it from the inside out. If you went to another planet and found somebody who was like eighty thousand years old and really wise, they would know about their planet, but they would not know anything about your life. How do I speak to my children? I don't know. So these stories are not about super people. The faces are blank so we can put our face in them.

The next thing is that it doesn't say where they came from, it doesn't have the name. Has anybody had the experience of getting a degree and thinking that when you got that degree you would be smart? By definition, when you get those letters behind your name you are there, you have arrived. Then there is that terrible day when you get up, look in the mirror and realize, "I am really as dumb as I was yesterday." Those letters don't really add anything, *the experience does*. I am not attacking education or knowledge, but we don't become more from [adding those letters.]

So the story does not tell us where they are from, nor does it tell us what their names are. There are no

credentials here. At the first service I asked, "What were the names that people usually say?" There is Casper, Balthazar but those names are made up. They are pretty names, but they are made up. (Again, so that your name can be filled in on that place) Because the names are not there, and you don't know how many people - there is guessing about how many people because of the gifts, but what really is important are the gifts that are being brought.

I think what needs to be understood is that this Christ-child, this God incarnate is not going to need any gifts. God does not need anything from us. Instead, this may be what they needed to give up in order to obtain the sacred. Think of the gifts: The first gift is gold, which often symbolizes security. It is what we think would make us happy and feel safe, but if you look at any gossip magazine, it does not necessarily happen that great wealth makes you happier. I mean, it is good to have food, medical help, a house, all of that, but beyond the necessities it is controversial how much happiness is added. Part of the calling here may be setting aside that idea that something is going to make us feel safe…because you [and I] are going to die. The reason I say that so often is because we don't believe it. We think something is going to make us safe. As a nation we are bombing everything with a shadow, and yet, we don't feel any safer. We have the most powerful weapons and army, yet we still are terrified. It should tell us that is not a good path.

The second gift there is incense. My impression is that babies don't like incense that much. They may not dislike it, but it is not that great of a gift at a baby shower. It symbolizes hope. Now there is nothing wrong with security and hope but if we want to follow the sacred sometimes we have to move outside our comfort zone or what we are using to give us hope. If I am going to die then there really isn't security in this universe. If time erases everything I build, then my hope has to be in something more lasting, something deeper.

The last of the gifts, myrrh, is often used as a funereal unction, which again is a great gift for baby showers. *(laughter)* In our day it would be like formaldehyde. Symbolically, that is very touching that this child is going to give itself for the world. The fact that it is born in a cattle trough means that it is a gift for the world, but that is not easy for the heart to take; that you are not going to be able to hunker down and protect your life, that someday it is going to need to be given back. Really everyday needs to be that day because you don't know what is going to happen. So that this kind of emptying, giving, living out is the way we experience that interconnectedness. What can kill us sometimes is not what we don't have, we think that is what's killing us, but what is killing us is what we are holding on to, what we won't let go of. It keeps us from living and going on.

Well, the star is the only thing left. What is the star? We don't know if it is a comet or a planet. It is kind of interesting that the Bible both condemns astrology and also shows these people having it work. They find Jesus because they are following astrology. It is important to realize that not only does it not say what the star is, but that they go to the *wrong place*. There is the charming image of following the comet to the manger, but they didn't go to the manger, they went to Jerusalem. They went to Herod which is the worst place they could have gone. They go to Herod and say "A new king of the Jews has been born. Let's all go worship him." Not real smart. Maybe “wisemen” is too charitable a term. But it is a symbol.

The star stands for any anomaly in your life, any aspect of life that doesn't fit in your system. Any surprise or disappointment that doesn't fit in your view of who you are and what life is can be the star that opens up this larger world view. Don't think it is a comfortable thing necessarily. I hope it is for you, but it is highly possible that disappointment and heartbreak will be a quicker path. Whatever gets you to see past your ideas of the world. The worst thing the church does is teach you that *belief* is truth. Belief is a cataract. What was true yesterday can become a lie today that keeps you from staying close to the mystery. All of religion brings us to the threshold of the mystery, but all religion has to fall away when we get there. You cannot carry the boat on to shore. That may be what you think made you happy and gave

you wisdom, but there comes a time to let go of that and address the mystery of life as it is - not easy. When a human being wants to understand the universe we cast a web across it to get our coordinates and whether it is astrology or theology in some ways it does not matter. We are getting our coordinates. Any approach can be a good beginning, because every one of us starts off immature. There is no shame there. You start off as a baby - that is not your fault.

What the story is telling us is that there comes a time to let go of that first vessel, whatever it is, including Christianity. It says it in the text. You have got to let go of the old wine skins to take in the new wine. The old wine skins are theological, they are liturgical and they may be as comfortable as they can be, but if you are going to stay close to the sacred, at some point, you and I both have to let go of them. These people started off with astrology. When it guides them to the wrong place, something else takes over and they discover the sacred where they are. If they didn't let go of astrology when they got there and looked in the manger they would just see another Capricorn. It would just be another example of their system having worked. When they get to the manger they drop the system that lead them there, had it been Christianity, Judaism, science, whatever; when you are in the present all that is there is mystery. You go back to your bearings but everything is a little bit different.

Here is what I am trying to say in a nutshell: What is not in the story in some ways is as important as what is in the story. They don't tell you where the people are from because if they did you would go there to try to get smart. If you thought it was Egypt, India, or Persia you would go there. But how can the truth be in one place more than it is in another place? Even if you have to go on a journey, ultimately where it is going to take you is *here*, to *this* place, *this* time and you wake up, saying, "Oh yeah, the sacred is here, too." They do not give you the name because then you will think only certain types of people can do this. It gives you a blank name tag and you fill in your name - no credentials, no formulas, *just us*. Finally, it doesn't tell us what the star is because it probably won't be a star for you. It may be a flower, a rock, or a person, but something will come to you from outside your system and if you say yes, that is the first step on a new journey.

Realize that where ever you are, who ever you are, this is the perfect starting place for your journey to the sacred.

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We are Christ-centered,
yet we respect and learn from all religions of love.

We affirm the ancient symbols of our faith,
yet we strive to speak a new language that includes all people
and affirms the scientific discoveries of our day.

We hope to teach children the stories of the Bible
without sectarian dogma.

We strive to be a close nurturing community,
yet we welcome all people into our midst.

We wish to live in inner peace,
yet hear God's call to work for peace, and for universal
human rights.

We take faith seriously,
yet believe the journey should be fun.
We celebrate life in many artistic forms.