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What Do Wise Men and Women and Children Do, Anyway?

Isaiah 9:6 Adapted from the King James and New Revised Standard version
For unto us a child is born, a son is given to us; authority rests upon his
shoulders; and he shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Romans 12:1-2 New Revised Standard I appeal to you therefore, brothers
and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be
conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so
that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable
and perfect.

I had a very funny story with which to begin this sermon. But I threw it away
yesterday; today is not the day for funny stories. Today is a day for coming together in
worship to proclaim our faith that God is in the midst of even the most horrible of
events. Today is a day for taking strength from our worship but also for taking counsel
from Christ, for it would be too, too easy to let the world shape our responses to the
events of Friday, too easy to take our cue from extremist responses to things and miss
the wisdom of Christ. No, what we need this morning, I think, as the lovely scripture
from Isaiah puts it, is a “Wonderful Counselor” to help us know what wisdom is, to
remind us that not everything that is spoken or written is true, and not even everything
that is true necessarily needs to be spoken! We don’t much focus on that line from
Isaiah’s words during Advent; we tend to linger more on the a “Son is born” and the
“Prince of Peace” parts. But it is good on this day to remind ourselves that the coming
of Christ was also the coming of the One whom we should look to for what it means to
be truly wise, to take our “counsel” indeed from Christ. Our Advent sermon series has

focused on those lines from Christina Rossetti's poem which became the hymn "In the Bleak Midwinter," and our focus today is on the third line of the verse: *"If I were a wise man, I would do my part."* And so that leads me to the question for this morning: what in fact do wise men (and women and children) DO in the face of a world with so many clamoring cacophonous claimants to wisdom, so many conspiracy theories, so many folks eager to tell you what is "really the case," so suspicious of so many things. What is wisdom and what do you and I do if we want to be wise, if we want to follow Christ as our "Wonderful Counselor"?

In our other scripture for this morning, the Apostle Paul says this: *"present your bodies as a living sacrifice... [and] Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."* I think that this gives us our key about what it is that counts as seeking after wisdom by those who would follow Christ. For when Paul says "present your bodies," he is not making an utter distinction between body and mind, or body and spirit. No, it would be more accurate, really, to say that Paul is counseling us to "present **yourself** as a living sacrifice." Now, that can sound a little creepy; "sacrifice" may cause us to have images of martyrs and mayhem, images of saintly ones who are so much better than we are whose lives took them to some momentous occasion on which their deaths were demanded. But "sacrifice" is oh-so-much more than this and oh-so-much more applicable to us all. For the root meaning of "sacrifice" is simply this: *"to make sacred."* To make sacred. With that in mind, we could paraphrase Paul by saying *"remember that as a Christian, everything you do needs to be done with an eye towards whether it is something that adds to God's holy purposes, whether it honors God, whether it reflects a God of hope and justice and*

grace for all people.” To attempt to be wise is to attempt to have your mind always oriented to, transformed by, what would honor God. To attempt to be wise is to have your words always be sacred, not necessarily in that “big and momentous” sense, but simply in the sense that they further the purposes of God.

Which therefore leads me to four things in particular that I think constitute what it means for Christians who would seek to be wise, for Christians, who as with that shepherd boy in the hymn, would seek to do their part.

The first is this: folks who would be wise Christians value nuance and disdain extremes. **Nuance.** I have come to think that it is one of the most important Christian values in our day and time. So much in our culture, under the pressures of eight gazillion cable channels and billions of internet users, pushes to extremes. People, situations, words that were said get painted and interpreted in absolute terms, extreme terms. But most of the time, you and I in our better moments know that most people, most events, most situations are mixtures of motivations, mixtures of this and that. I truly believe that one of the virtues of Christian wisdom is to almost always seek after nuance, to repudiate absolutist thinking, to avoid sweeping generalizations that are neither helpful nor true. My mother once used to say, *“Just remember that for every complex question, there is an easy, simple, obvious answer – that is **wrong**.”* That’s very true, isn’t it? And too often things in life aren’t simple and aren’t absolute, and acting as if they are only makes us less able to actually deal with life well and honorably.

Second, and relatedly, some of you will recall that a generation ago one of the ubiquitous cultural slogans was *“WWJD” - What Would Jesus Do?*” These days, in the

era of Facebook I would counsel changing that to “WWJL” - What Would Jesus **Like**? Facebook and social media have been a wonderful tool for community, they have allowed folks to stay in touch in ways that were not previously possible, they have allowed folks over many miles and years to re-connect. But the utter immediacy of the experience also can tempt you and me not to think, not to be wise, not to ask whether “Liking” this or that post is way of “making sacred,” a way of honoring God. Back in the olden days, when confronted with a story, a situation, a statement, there was more time to reflect. And that virtue of deliberate reflection is precisely what is needed by wise Christians these days in an era that pushes us to decide instantly about something, that makes it too easy to be swayed by the one who is the most manipulative. Bottom line? Wise Christians use social media responsibly and always with an eye towards whether what is said or “liked” or forwarded on to your five hundred closest friends is something that would make God proud.

But you may be asking, well, how do we do that? How do we as ones who would be wise in Christ, as ones who would have our minds transformed, how do we do that? Well, in response to this and for our third point, I can do no better than once again cite St. Ignatius’ rule which I have shared with you before but it is so very apt on this day when we are seeking after Christ’s wise counsel. Ignatius said: *“Always exhaust every possible positive interpretation or every person, situation, or statement before assuming a negative one.”* I don’t know about you, but I need to be reminded of that virtually every morning. It is so easy in this fractious era in which we live, when folks seem to be rewarded for their facileness in presuming the worst, when truth sometimes seems to matter less than whether you are part of the “right” group, watch the right shows, have

the “right” politics – it is so easy to assume the worst, assume the nastiest. But the wisdom of Christ, the one who is our Mighty Counselor, would tell us, I think, that when we do so we make it harder to live together in community and we coarsen and narrow ourselves.

And speaking of truth, and, really, as an extension of St. Ignatius’ rule, let me offer a fourth and final idea about “wisdom” might mean for us. I call it the “Triple filter test.” That is, before you believe something, before you pass something along, apply this triple filter to any purported proposition: Is it true? Is it good? Is it useful? I truly believe that if each of us – starting with me, as the first among sinners! – were to apply this test we would indeed, as Paul says, transform our minds. For after all, is that triple filter really that different from what Paul said in another of his most famous lines? *“[B]eloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”* Now, there are times in our lives when we are anxious. And those are precisely the times that may indeed be tempted to take rumor as truth, worry as reality, what **might** happen as what **will** happen. But Paul, in the spirit of the One who is our Mighty Counselor, is calling us to a different sort of response to our anxiety and to our temptation to use our words to befuddle rather than to illumine.

So, as we seek after Wisdom on this third Sunday of Advent, let us sum up what our quest means to be wise ones, ones who live our lives as a sacred trust, ones who follow the counsel of Christ: First, disdain extremes and value nuance. Life IS ambiguous and uncertain, pretending that that isn’t the case through overstated

extreme views will not help you in your Christian walk. Second, if you use “social media,” do so responsibly always aware of how Christ would see those things that you like, forward, or subscribe to. Third, always exhaust all the positive interpretations of someone or some statement before assuming a negative one. Some say that’s a Pollyanish approach to life; I say that it focuses us on truly being reflections of the Christ who comes that all might have life and have it abundantly. And fourth and finally, always ask yourselves: Is it true, is it good, is it useful? If you can answer yes to all three then it’s probably an up-building thing to say or do.

What do wise men and women and children do? They celebrate the coming of our Wonderful Counselor, they seek to make their lives sacred offerings before God, they seek, indeed, to be transformed not by the ways of the world that too often do not give life, but by the Gospel of Lord Jesus Christ who came, as the hymn says, with healing and hope in his wings. May it be so. Amen.