

**"Wise Men and Shepherds"
Sermon for Epiphany Sunday
Lectionary Year B
January 1, 2012
Text: Matthew 2:1-12
Dr. David T. Howeth**

"Wise men and shepherds can't stand together!" She repeated her strong convictions on the matter again. "Wise men and shepherds can't stand together!!!" That's what Rachel believed, and that is what she yelled to her third grade teacher, Mrs. Thompson, as her teacher attempted to put the living nativity scene together for the school's Christmas program. Rachel Williams was playing one of the wise men, along with two of her friends, Mary Jean Vickery and Billy Samuels.

Rachel liked being placed next to them so that they could talk during the pageant, although what she really would have preferred was to get to play Mary, the mother of Jesus. Then she could have stood next to Matthew Jones, the boy on whom she had had a gigantic crush since the first grade. But the part of Mary went to Virginia Avery, the prettiest girl in the class and Rachel's arch-enemy. That isn't what had Rachel upset, though.

What Rachel didn't like at all and was complaining about loudly was that Mrs. Thompson had made the monumental mistake of placing the shepherds next to the wise men. That meant that Nathan Davenport and Marvin Spangler were going to be situated next to her and her friends during the play. That simply would not do! It would be just too horrible to endure!

Nathan was a new kid at school and a real dorkasaurus, while Marvin was from the neighborhood on the other side of the railroad tracks. He was nasty—never really clean or dressed neatly. And he was so stupid. He didn't know anything. He never even had heard of an American Girl Doll. Imagine that! Having Nathan and Marvin next to Rachel and her friends would ruin everything. It would spoil all her fun. It just wasn't right! So Rachel yelled out to Mrs. Thompson again, with all the righteous indignation she could muster up. "Shepherds and wise men can't stand together!"

And you know what? There's a sense in which Rachel is right. There's a sense in which Rachel is biblically correct. If we take the infancy narratives literally, the shepherds and the wise men don't stand together, that is to say, they don't visit the baby Jesus at the same time. The shepherds came first, paying homage to the Christ child on the night of his birth. They visited him while he was in the manger.

However look closely at the narrative from Matthew's Gospel that was read a few moments ago. The wise men visited Jesus "in the house."

By the time the three kings arrived in Bethlehem, after following the star to the place of Jesus' birth, the infant and his family had moved inside into more comfortable surroundings. Thus the shepherds and the wise men don't exactly stand together.

There is another sense in which Rachel is right about wise men and shepherds. They don't stand together in terms of social standing. They are on opposite ends of the spectrum. Wise men, magi, or kings were at the height of society's hierarchy. They were wealthy, sophisticated intellectuals. They were privileged. They were honored.

They were respected. They had position and influence and power. They dressed in the finest clothes and wore expensive perfume. They feasted on the best food and partook of the best wine and were waited on by servants as they did. They lived in palaces. The wise men were popular and often invited to engagements on the lecture circuit and at exclusive clubs. They enjoyed the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

Shepherds, on the other hand, were on the bottom rung of society's ladder. They were uneducated, working class people. They lived in the fields with their flocks. They smelled like sheep. They ate whatever they could find. They were looked down on by practically everyone. No, shepherds and wise men don't have much reason to stand together, not then, and, sad to say, not today.

I am reminded of a story about the first black professor hired by SMU. It wasn't all that long ago. He had impressive credentials—a Ph.D. from an Ivy League school, a long list of publications, a distinguished teaching record, and memberships in the most important academic guilds in his field. But he was black nonetheless.

He was accepted immediately and graciously by his academic and administrative peers at the university, but he ran into one not so small problem. He had more than a little trouble getting to work each day. You see this was the sixties, and the Highland Park Police Department wasn't used to seeing a well-dressed black man driving a nice car onto the SMU campus. They were suspicious. So the new professor, despite his position, was stopped by the police and interrogated nearly every day on his way to teaching his classes.

After weeks of such harassment, the professor came up with a way

to end it, a way that worked quite well as a matter of fact. He bought an old pickup truck, the kind with as much primer as paint on it. The professor picked up a well-worn lawnmower and an edger for next to nothing at a garage sale, along with a shovel, a hoe, a rake, and a garden hose. He tossed the whole bunch of equipment in the back of that truck and drove the old clunker each school-day morning through the streets of Highland Park, waiting to put on his coat and tie until he got to his office on campus. He never got stopped again after that. It seems that black yardmen were much more commonplace in that part of town than black professors.

It appears that even after 2,000 years wise men and shepherds can't stand together. It's still hard for such diversity to find common ground. It's still difficult to find a place where both ends of the social spectrum can find a home. It's still almost impossible to bring wise men and shepherds to where they can stand together.

But here is the scandalous good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. From the very beginning of the story, shepherds and wise men *do* stand together. Not just one group or the other, but both groups are invited to see the Christ child and are welcomed when they arrive. The angels and all the heavenly hosts announce this good news to the shepherds out in their fields. The shepherds receive a magnificent choral invitation to make their way to the manger. The wise men are beckoned to the baby by the sight of a star, a celestial sign.

Whether the shepherds and the wise men stood before the infant Lord at the same time or not is really not the point. The point is that both were invited and both were welcomed in the presence of Jesus.

There was and is room at his side for all, for *all*, no matter who and no matter what. Before our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, wise men and shepherds can stand together.

In the presence of Christ, even as a baby in a manger or in a bed in a house, all people are accepted, affirmed, and received graciously. All people—every social class, all ethnic groups, both genders, both sexual orientations, each nationality, young and old alike—all people find that they are welcome in the presence of Jesus. It may be the one place on earth where wise men and shepherds can stand together.

In front of me is the table of our Lord Jesus Christ. On that table rests the elements—the bread and the wine—which represent his presence with us. And so it is that here, like it was at the manger and at the bed of the baby Jesus, at the table of the risen Lord all are invited and all are welcomed. All are able to stand together at this table, to kneel as one to receive the free gift of God's grace made available to all of us in the one sacrificial death on the cross of God's only begotten Son. Grace is the great equalizer, making us all the same, because when it comes to grace *we are* all the same, all in need of it.

You are invited and welcomed to this table by God, the same God who invited and welcomed both shepherds and wise men so long ago to see his Son. You are invited and welcomed to this table by that same God to visit and pay homage to his Son as you partake of his body and blood. No matter who you are, where you are from, what you have or haven't done, whether you are a wise man or a shepherd or a little of both, you are asked to come and see what is waiting here for you. Come and be received with open arms by the scandalous grace of God.