

THE WAY OF THE WISE

Listening for God in the Information Age

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

I

In his book, *A Timetable of Inventions & Discoveries*, cultural anthropologist, Kevin Desmond tries to help us appreciate the wonder of the times in which you and I are living. Desmond explains that between the year 1 and the year 1750, the technological and academic knowledge base of humanity doubled in volume. Amazingly, it took only 150 more years – from 1750 to 1900 – for the human knowledge base to double again. And then, in just the next 50 years -- between 1900 and 1950 -- it doubled once more.

As if this acceleration were not mind-boggling enough, during each of the last three decades, the knowledge base of humanity has doubled every 5-7 years. In the field of medical science, our intelligence now doubles every 3 years. In the world of computers, it is every 18 months. In genetic research, our grasp of the intricacies of the human genome is doubling every 12 months. In the last decade alone, our race has amassed more new insight across almost every academic and technological field than in all of human history before that combined.

You are living through THE BIG BANG OF INFORMATION and the waves of innovation spurred by its almost instantaneous and universal availability. A 12-year old with an iPad can now access libraries of information that the world's top academics could only dream of getting their hands twenty years ago. While waiting in the dentist's office, you can pull out your smartphone and read an up-to-the-minute personalized briefing (on any range of topics you select) that not even the President of the United States would have had access to a few decades ago.

Even those without computers have watched the information revolution re-shaping television. How many of you have gotten used to seeing continuously updated stock, weather, and news bulletins stream across the bottom of your screen? This is life in the Information Age. And brace yourself, because THE ERA OF BIG DATA is now upon us. Google and Amazon are collecting and crunching every datapoint about you, in order to push even more customized information your way in coming months. It'll be on your watch and in your glasses before the next New Year.

II

So much of this information explosion is nothing short of wonderful. But we

are fools if we believe that information alone will usher in a brighter future. This past century has been the high watermark for the acquisition of knowledge of a certain kind, but historians and anthropologists will also tell us that it set new records for violence, loneliness, and sectarianism too. If the advance in data is not accompanied by an advance in learning of the deepest kind, we will not truly advance.

The great educator, Mortimer Adler, often encouraged us to think in terms of a PYRAMID OF LEARNING. Learning, says Adler, simply begins with data. As we learn to see relationships between various data-bits, coherent patterns and conclusions emerge, enabling us to move on to the level of information. There too, we may be able to make connections between various fields of information that generate a broader conceptual framework that moves us up to the level of knowledge, and then perhaps eventually to the apex of learning -- wisdom. The end GOAL is the gaining of a sense of perspective and priorities that enables us to live worthily and well.

One of the great dangers confronting us in the Information Age is that these distinctions within the hierarchy and that final goal for learning will somehow get lost. In a world where someone who wants to be a millionaire can do so by playing what is essentially a game of Trivial Pursuits, mere information can come to seem more valuable than it truly is. We may come to care for learning only to the extent that it enables us to win some game, get into some school, cash in on some glitch in the system. We may know more and more about how to extend the life of the body, while knowing less and less about how to expand the life of the soul.

But is this living worthily and well? C.H. Spurgeon, once observed: "To know is not be wise. Many men know a great deal, and are all the greater fools for it. There is no fool so great as the knowing fool." For "Wisdom," said Spurgeon, "is the right use of knowledge." It seems to me that if we are to help this century become truly more enlightened and peaceful than the past one, then it will be partly because more of us have dedicated ourselves to the right use of knowledge in the way that the story we read in Matthew chapter 2 so beautifully suggests.

III

The FIRST thing that is striking about the Magi is that as knowledgeable as they were, they still yearned to learn more. That they are even called Magi – which means wise men – suggests that they had more than the usual amount of learning to begin with. These guys were the intelligentsia of their day. They clearly already had some specific knowledge of the prophecy concerning a Shepherd King who was to come out of Bethlehem. Yet, they were still willing to journey a great distance to gain even greater understanding. They were still willing to go to other people – Herod for sure and probably many others along

the way – and humbly ask for directions. Are you and I?

It seems to me that two of the most besetting sins of the Information Age are intellectual arrogance and educational impatience. I don't know whether it is because we feel that all the input and education we already have should automatically make us the sum of all wisdom. I just know that in our workplace and our social relationships, in our marriages and our parenting, in our piety and our politics, many of us insist upon appearing all-wise from the get-go or require our leaders to be. We deny ourselves and others the time that the journey toward greater wisdom naturally takes.

A mentor of mine once gave me a piece of very sound advice: "Dan," she said, "God never intended for you to have it all figured out now. Make it your ambition to be wise by the end of your life. In the meantime, ask plenty of questions; stay open to fresh fruit – new truth; let your mistakes be your teacher; say I'm sorry often; and keep on walking." God had taught that woman what Magi in every generation seem to know: wisdom is not what anyone starts out with in life. Wisdom is what one gains or is given through the long journey of humble seeking. Will you hold that in mind this year?

Then, SECONDLY, will you choose to keep some things OUT of your mind, so that there will be room for the right stuff? William James once said: "The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook." It seems to me that one of the great challenges of life in the Information Age is simply figuring out what ideas and information ought to be purposefully ignored and what input to allow into our minds. Amidst the storm of data streaming our way, what should we overlook and what should we percolate on until it becomes information, and then knowledge, and then wisdom itself?

Here again, God teaches us something through the example of the Magi. What strikes me about these wise men is that what they sought above all else was not information but an individual. Their question reveals their passion: **"Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?"** (Matt 2:2). You see, this question reveals another aspect of the nature of wisdom: Wisdom is insight aimed at establishing or deepening relationships of love.

Do you look at life that way? Do you filter the vast supply of information that comes your way with relationships in mind? What if you started to ask: Is reading this article or watching this program or visiting this website or engaging in this social media exchange expressing or deepening my capacity to relate to other people in a loving way? Is there some idea being shared by this commentator that I can apply to improving the quality of my relationship with my spouse, children, neighbors, friends, or co-workers? Is there input here that is helping me to become a better servant, and encourager, and leader of people? If my answer is "NOT LIKELY," then maybe this information I can choose to overlook.

Sandra Carey says: "Never mistake knowledge for wisdom. One helps you make a living; the other helps you make a life." What if you and I discovered that we only had this next year to live? Would we really spend our time and energy dallying with all the trivia and trash we do? Maybe that's why the Psalmist's prayer was: **"O Lord, teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom"** (Psalm 90:12). Wisdom lies in pursuing love's priorities now. Are you pursuing them?

It must be said in closing that there is one more insight into the nature of wisdom that the story of the Magi gives us. The wise men undertook a long journey of humble seeking. They went on the journey in order to establish and deepen a personal relationship. But it was God himself that they sought above all else. **"We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him... On coming to the house, they saw the child... and they bowed down and worshiped him"** (Matt 2:2, 11).

In the FINAL analysis, the highest measure of humanity's wisdom will not be our ability to link the world in a single digital conversation or our capacity to map the intricacies of the human genome. The highest indicator of our wisdom will be our capacity to recognize the Truth who towers above the summit of human knowledge, and yet who has deigned to descend into the valley of our confusion that we might have better Light for our way. The greatest wisdom leads to the worship of God.

As Michael Card puts it: "Our journey begins where the wise men's ended. Like them, we have found a Wisdom not to ponder but to worship, a Wisdom that is not a matter of words but who is the Word. This Wisdom has everything to do with life because He is the Life. He gives us wisdom because He gives us Himself. The Magi journeyed to Jesus, but our journey is with Jesus." He is the Truth who can transform our lives for the good more than any deluge of data can. Ask him into your life afresh today, as we begin this New Year.

Please pray with me...

Lord of Life, as we come now to this Table, renew our passion to continue the journey of humble seeking after greater wisdom. In this world of distractions, remind us that true wisdom is not that which makes us look better, but which enables us to love better. And with each lesson we learn, may we more fully worship YOU, who has so loved this world that you came as a child and died on a cross to be our Savior. Amen.

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Kevin Desmond, A Timetable of Inventions and Discoveries: From Pre-History To The Present Day. (M. Evans & Company, NY, 1996).

Article by Davis & Botkin, Harvard Business Review, Fall 1994.

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Michael Card, Immanuel, pp.50-51