

*Question: Can the Beautiful and Comfortable People
Live Faithful Lives? (Hint: the answer is yes!)
January 1, 2010- Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2: 1-12*

Great jazz pop song from the early 1960's... 1965 to be exact... written and performed by the Ramsey Lewis Trio... The song is called *The In Crowd*; and here is a sampling of the lyrics...

"I'm in with the in crowd... I go where the in crowd goes... I'm in with the in crowd... and I know what the in crowd knows."

It's good to be in with the in crowd. It's good to be invited to go where the in crowd goes. It's good to be in the know, to know what the in crowd knows.

And it doesn't really matter whether it's **the "in" crowd** or if it's just some group of our own - some club, some gathering of people where we have been let in - because as every high school student or even and maybe even especially some middle school student will tell you, there is only one thing worse than not being in... **in anywhere**... and that is to be out... **to be left out**. We hate to be left out.

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And so we gather and cluster and huddle in groups. We create our own in crowd, no matter how geeky or lame our little "in" crowd really and truly is...

And within our own "in crowd" we create our own world with its own world views. We mark the boundaries of our little worlds with our likes and dislikes: what to wear and what not to wear; who we root for and cheer for and who we boo and hiss at; what to watch on TV and what to avoid; what we eat and don't eat... what doctor or dentist or veterinarian is the "good one;" and what we think of the new neighbor or the new pastor or the most recent visitor at church.

We define the shape our own "in crowd" by deciding as a group - as a crowd, as a herd - how we should act and what we should do... We even make our moral choices by conferring and consulting with each other.

Should we go to church today? Should we support this - or that - mission - or not? Should we speak up for what we know is right or speak out against what we know is wrong? Or should we just lay low?

We like to think of ourselves as a collection of American individuals, but the fact of the matter is that we often interpret events and make decisions - not on our own, but as part of our comfortable crowd.

We're in with the in crowd... We go where the in crowd goes... We're in with the in crowd... and we know what the in crowd knows..

We don't merely want to be in - to belong; to be in the know - we need to be in **somewhere** - to belong **somewhere**... to not be left out. And keep in mind that I am not just talking about kids and cliques... I'm speaking about us - about how we quickly join the herd, how one of our deepest fears, both as children and as adults, is to be left out.

And that fear - that need to be in the know, that deep desire to belong - is the source and embryo of all advertising and is precisely how all the talking heads on morning TV make their big salaries.

Turn on the television tomorrow morning, starting at 7 AM. Go to any network on any given day, and you will be told what's hot and what's not... what's smart and what's not so smart... what's safe or healthy or unsafe and unhealthy... what's in and what's out... what the beautiful people, the "in crowd" is doing and eating and watching and wearing,

And if you have nothing better to do - and God, I hope you have something better to do, you can sit from 7 AM right up to the 6 PM news and be told by one expert after another what you must eat and drink and do and say... if you want to belong... if you want to be in and are worried about being left out.

And in between the experts and their advice, the advertising agencies will tell you what product you must buy to clean your face, to wash your hair, to stop smoking, to get some sleep, to relieve your depression, and, at the end of the day, to have some fun.

If you pay attention; and I hope to God you do not, you can discover in the course of a day how you can avoid the bad breath that you fear you might have... how you can drink the beer that's not too harsh and not too light... how you can wear the perfume that will drive him crazy and that will make him think you are just like Charlize Theron... and how, when you eat out or eat on the run, you can have it your way and that you will be lovin' it.

We buy these lines. We embrace these ideas. We do these things because we are told that these are the things that everyone is doing; and we don't want to be left out.

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On Tuesday, November 24 this past year Tareq and Michaela Salahi, two would-be socialites from northern Virginia, crashed the first major White House state dinner of the Obama administration. And while there was much worried talk about White House security, I found my worries focusing elsewhere - on the Salahis themselves and how they perfectly fit the bill as poster children of this the age of celebrity.

They want desperately to be in the know and part of the "in crowd," even it means disrespecting the need for national security. They desire obsessively that they are identified and included as one of the beautiful people, even if it means throwing lavish parties that they cannot afford and indulging in luxuries for which they cannot pay.

Somehow, even in their lunacy, they understood that with the beautiful people - the rich, the powerful, the in crowd, the in the know crowd, the opinion makers and opinion shapers - that membership in this club indeed has its privileges... that the rules don't apply if you don't want them to apply.

For the beautiful people - the in crowd - of any society - is really like the in-crowds that we fashion for ourselves. They - and we - make the rules to suit ourselves - and then convince each other that we are making good choices. The Salahis simply wanted to be a part of all that. They wanted to live without conscience or rules or boundaries - and so they did.

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In the opening hymn that we sang this morning, we call them the “Three Kings of Orient Tar” – but they weren’t kings at all; and we’re not really sure if there were three of them or more than three - it doesn’t say one way or the other in the Bible.

They are called “wise men from the East;” but how were they wise and where in the East were they from and what were they wise about?

Some scholars place them in the town of Partha, near the modern city of Teheran in what is now Iran. And that makes some sense because when the people of Israel were exiled there, the prophet Micah predicted that the Savior would be born in Bethlehem.

Still other scholars have each wise men – or magi – coming from a different part of the world, as a way explain the entire world coming to acknowledge the lordship of Jesus Christ.

The word “magi” is a Persian or Kurdish word that means priest or wise man - someone who is able to interpret dreams, predict the future, dabble in rudimentary medicine, and rid people of demons. They were the intellectual elite class of Babylon - the first astrologers, actually - and were highly regarded in their country of origin, for they were the ones who advised the rulers on all major national decisions. You could call them the king’s cabinet or the king’s trusted advisors.

One thing is for certain is that they were members of the “in crowd” of that day and time. They were the beautiful people who (a.), had the time and the money to follow a star and (b.), were justifiably confident that wherever they would travel they would be received as honored guests.

What they found in Jerusalem was King Herod, a paranoid psychotic serial killer who had already murdered his wife, his wife’s mother, and three of his sons. The emperor Augustus would say of Herod that it was safer to be Herod’s pig than his son.

So, when the honored visitors from the East start asking about this child who is to be King of the Jews, Herod’s paranoia takes hold. And that was the moment when no one was safe. We read about this situation in this Gospel passage, “Herod was frightened and all Jerusalem was frightened with him.”

Herod takes these wise men as dupes and fools and sends them off to find the child in Bethlehem, so as Herod claims, he can honor and worship him. But all that Herod wants to do is kill the baby Jesus; and all he wants from the three wise men is for them to lead the way.

The Bible states in Matthew 2, verse 10, “When they saw that the star had stopped, the wise men were overwhelmed with joy.” And they knelt down before him and honored him and worshipped him and offered him their gifts – gold fit for a king... frankincense to be used for prayers... and myrrh – a balm used at death.

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Now... here is where the story takes a critical turn.

The wise men, highly regarded members of the elite class of that time and place - the beautiful people of that time and place; very much part of the “in crowd” - could have just as easily dropped off their gifts, finished

their errand, returned to Herod, reported what they had found and then gone on their merry way - and no one would be the wiser, no pun intended.

But something happened. They had a dream; and in that dream they were warned to not return to Herod.

But even that need not to have convinced them. They were, after all, powerful people - beautiful people; people where membership had its privileges and where they assumed, rightly so, that they could come and go anywhere as they pleased without consequence to them.

And, besides, they could have assumed, again rightly so, that crazy King Herod would be grateful for whatever intel they could provide. And so after lunch with Herod, they would return to Babylon to let the internal politics of Jerusalem sort itself out.

What concern, really, was it of them?

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The Bible reports that the wise men – three, or more than three - went back home to the East by a different way.

That statement tells us few things.

It tells us that they knew Herod was dangerous and that by not returning to Jerusalem with the results of their errand, they had created for themselves a murderous enemy in Herod.

It tells us that these wise men, who had much to lose by not playing the game had been led somehow to step out in faith... which answers the question in the title of this message:

Can beautiful and comfortable people live faithful lives? **And yes, the answer is yes.**

Now... imagine the consequences if the wise men decided to play it safe and be willingly played by Herod. Would they have survived? Probably yes, as long as they were useful to Herod.

But would Jesus and Mary and Joseph have survived? Probably yes, as well; for they too were warned in a dream.

But we need to remember the extent of Herod's murderous rage. Matthew 2, verse 16, states this: "When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated; and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under."

The wise men most certainly could never have imagined that level of horror. All that they knew was that Herod wanted to kill this baby Jesus and they refused to be in any way a part of that. They had nothing to gain and everything to lose by heading back home another way. They would always have a bulls-eye on their backs and would never be able to travel near Jerusalem again. They could have easily convinced themselves that the dream that they had was just that – just a dream.

But instead they listened not to what was easy or in vogue, but rather to what was right. To borrow a verse from Robert Frost, they took the road less traveled and that made all the difference.

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We're in with the in crowd. We go where the in crowd goes. We're in with the in crowd; And we know what the in crowd goes.

So...what about us? We who sometimes make our moral and ethical choices on where our in crowd goes...we who have long ago may have made a risk / loss analysis about our lives and have decided that we have far too much to lose in taking any other road but the middle of the road...

What about us? Are we ready to step out of our own comfortable lives and hear and heed and respond to God's words to us, whether we are asleep or awake? Are we still able to make the right choice... the courageous choice... the faithful choice... to respond to Christ's call with a yes, no matter the cost?

Or will we simply run with the herd? Will we hide within the comfortable, cloying cocoon of our little group, unwilling - even unable to stand and act as faithful men and women of God?

Or asked another way... Can beautiful and comfortable people live faithful lives? The answer is yes, yes, with God's help we can. **Amen.**