

Follow the Light

Matthew 2:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Ah, the story of the beloved wise men! Three kings kneeling so reverently near the manger in the stable, alongside the shepherds, worshipping the newborn baby Jesus as the adoring parents look on, presenting their gifts as the star of Bethlehem hovers overhead. This, of course, is the visual scene that is portrayed on Christmas cards, in countless Christmas pageants, and in the typical Nativity scene we set up in our homes. We also picture this scene every time we sing the familiar carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," which we will be singing in a few moments. But guess what, **there's something not quite right with this picture.** For when we take a close look at the actual biblical account of this story we discover that the image most of us carry around in our mind is incorrect. The fact is, **our image has been clouded by centuries of church tradition.** If the Protestant Reformation that began in the early 1500s was about anything, it was about **separating what is actually written in the Scriptures from what church tradition has added on.** The story of the magi has a lot of add-ons that need to be stripped away.

Without going into all the details of the inconsistencies between the Bible and church tradition, I want to quickly mention what modern biblical scholars believe were the gospel writer's intentions for this story, which is found only in Matthew. First, it's clear that the author wanted to make the connection that Jesus' birth reflected a fulfillment of ancient Hebrew prophecies for the long-awaited Messiah.

Second, coming from "the East" (which probably indicated Persia), the magi would clearly have been considered pagan Gentiles. The fact that they bow down to worship the Christ child reveals that God's love, grace, and even redemption is extended to all people, regardless of race, religion, or any other characteristic. Biblical commentator Richard Donovan reflects on this particular point of the story this way:

Epiphany challenges us to abandon our tribalism (racially, nationally, denominationally, etc.) and to expand our tents [or as John Pavlovitz would say, build a bigger table] to welcome even those whom we would prefer not to love. It is a burning issue, because loving those outside our tribe is difficult – but Christ makes it possible. That is the Epiphany message.

In this story of radical inclusion, Matthew makes it clear that the **walls we build to separate people from each other do not separate them, or us, from God's love, or from experiencing God's Presence.**

Third, Matthew was comparing the magi's worshipful response to the birth of Jesus to the response of King Herod, who at that time was the king of the Jews. **The irony is that while these Gentiles, as outsiders, came to worship Jesus and joyously bring him gifts, the Jewish king, as an insider, tried to kill him. Historically, and to this very day, this has been, and is, a common response by those in power who fear their control, influence, and privilege are threatened. Frightened tyrants often become infuriated. Their insecurity fuels their fury. Seized by fear and anger, they often lash out.**

This is exactly the pattern followed by King Herod when later in this biblical story he has every male child in Bethlehem, two years old and younger, massacred. The gospel writer wants us to know that true royalty is not to be found in this king, but rather in and through the life lived, taught, and modeled by Jesus.

The overall purpose of the story of the magi, then, is to reveal that **God is made manifest to all of humanity through the person of Jesus, the Christ.** That is why this story is called an epiphany. The Greek word **epiphany** literally means “manifestation” – an appearance or revelation. In the broadest sense of the term, an epiphany is an occasion when something either appears or is revealed to you. **It is often described as an illuminating discovery, especially one that comes unexpectedly. We often call these “Aha” moments. And in a religious setting, an epiphany is often used to describe the revelation or an experience of the Divine in our midst.** The church season of Epiphany (which lasts until Ash Wednesday at the beginning of Lent) also recognizes the symbolic “light” that Jesus brought into the world. **This is a season to recognize and celebrate that light.** There are other epiphany stories throughout the gospels that we will look at as they come along in the lectionary readings throughout this season of Epiphany.

While this sounds like a good place to end this sermon, it is only just a primer for exploring what all this can mean spiritually in your own journey of faith. So, let me start by asking, **Have you had any good epiphany’s lately?** Have there been any moments when you have felt God’s Presence has been revealed or made manifest to you? After studying and practicing spirituality for many years now I have learned one very important thing. **People experience the Presence of God in their lives in many different ways, and often in different ways from other people.** Therefore, the way I experience the Sacred Presence may be different than the way you experience God. Likewise, the way you perceive God’s Presence may be different from mine. And that’s fine!

In saying that, let’s move on to the challenge that always presents itself in any biblical story. **How can we see ourselves as part of this story?** If the spiritual life is one of journey, not destination, what can we learn as we **journey with the magi, following the light that goes before each one of us, or before this community of faith?** Christine Valters Painter wrote a wonderful reflection, published on the website patheos.com, entitled, “Follow the Star: Spiritual Practices for the New Year.” In it, she invites us on the magi’s journey. She makes six points, which I will briefly describe. Explore how they can inform and guide your own spiritual journey.

1) Follow the star to where it leads.

As you cross this threshold into the New Year, what star beckons you in the night? As you stand under a black sky of unknowing, which star is shimmering? The star might be a particular practice, which when you commit to following it, will guide you in a holy direction.

2) Embark on the journey, however long or difficult.

While Herod seeks outside advice and sends others, the magi make the journey for themselves. Where are you tempted to trust others to make the journey for you, perhaps in reading books about the spiritual journey but never practicing yourself? How might you own your journey more deeply in the coming year?

3) Open yourself to wonder along the way.

The scriptures tell us the magi were "overjoyed at seeing the star." When we lose our sense of wonder our hearts become hardened and cynical, and we forget to believe in magical possibilities. As you enter into a new cycle of the earth's turning, how might you embrace the gift of wonder? What practices open your heart?

4) Bow down at the holy encounters in messy places.

When the magi enter the messy, earthy place of the manger, it says they bow down and prostrate themselves, an act of humility and honor. As you encounter the sacred in the most ordinary of places, how might you express this embodied appreciation and honor?

5) Carry your treasures and give them away freely.

The magi reveal the gifts they have brought of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. What are the treasures you carry with you into the New Year? How might you offer them even more generously to others in the months to come?

6) Go home by another way.

After receiving the gift of the dream to avoid Herod, the magi choose another way home. In truth, after any journey of significance, there is no going back the same way as before. We always return with new awareness if we have been paying attention. What is the usual path you have traveled which has become suffocating? How does this year call forth new directions in your own life? Is there something symbolic of the new way home that you could carry with you like a talisman or mantra?

Here's the list of these six spiritual practices of how you might own your journey more deeply in the coming year.

- 1) Follow the star to where it leads.**
- 2) Embark on the journey, however long or difficult.**
- 3) Open yourself to wonder along the way.**
- 4) Bow down at the holy encounters in messy places.**
- 5) Carry your treasures and give them away freely.**
- 6) Go home by another way.**

Perhaps, looking into the spiritual implications gleaned from the story of the magi will spark your own imagination, reflection, and even practices in your journey of faith, and in our journey of faith as a congregation.

Follow the light.

Amen.