

Following Stars

Matthew 2:1-12 Rev. Tim Blodgett, General Presbytery, Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery
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What would motivate you to cross the desert? What would cause you to leave your life for a dangerous journey of hundreds of miles through unknown and unforgiving lands? What would be that important for you? What would be that worthwhile? Think about that response for a second.

A few years ago, a Pennsylvania mom was vacationing in the Arizona wilderness near the Grand Canyon with her husband and 10 year old son. Heavy snow stranded the family in a remote area of the park. As the snow fell, the family's SUV got stuck in a ditch. With snow falling, Karen Klein, who is a triathlete with survival training, hiked 20 miles to try to get help for her family while her husband and son waited the storm out in the car. So again, what would motivate you to cross a desert, even a frozen one?

Or consider the recent refugee crises across Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and elsewhere. Millions have been displaced. Thousands died. This is perhaps the largest and most sustained refugee crisis since the second world war. War, political unrest, terrorism, failing economies, starvation, and more are driving people to travel thousands of miles on foot and in overcrowded boats. At what point, would you uproot your family and walk from one corner of the globe to the next? What would motivate you to do that?

Now let me lower the bar: What would motivate you to stand in line for a few hours or more? Would you stand in line for movie tickets, maybe with your kids or grandchildren? When Harry Potter or Star Wars movies or whatever the case may be were coming out, did you value that experience enough to wait then?

And we do this for sports too, don't we? When we were living in Oklahoma City and the Thunder were at their height, they would release an extra 100 or so tickets. People wait for those. For the playoffs, people were down the street waiting in line for tickets all day.

Back in the days when the Oklahoma State Cowboy's basketball team was good, my wife, Kati and her friends slept outside for days in tents not to get tickets, they already had those, but to get the best seats closest to the floor for home games. They camped out in temperatures below freezing and with feet of snow on the ground. And I am sure the excitement over OU or OSU football has caused more than one person in this room to do crazy things. What motivates us that much to do those things? Why is it worth that much to us?

And it is not just movies and sports, we do this for concerts, museum, and restaurant openings and black Friday sales and all the rest. We value these things and the experience of these things, so we get excited and stand in line, get up before dawn, whatever it takes. What motivates us?

I would ask the same question of our passage from this morning. What motivated these wise men from the east? It had to be something more than, "Hey, look at that star! Let's go follow it." [Pause] What were they looking for? What were they seeking? Why was worth a desert crossing to them?

A light in the western sky was the perfect sign for these wise men, these magi. Scholars believe that they were more than likely Zoroastrians. Very basically, Zoroastrians believe in a fight between good and evil and light and darkness often are used as the metaphor for good and evil in their theology. The appearing of a new light in the west would have been a particularly important sign for these wise men. So off they went.

But I would also point to something deeper than light in the sky. Consider for minute that they undoubtedly were not the only ones who saw this new light. A new star pops up in a culture, in a civilization that cares very much about astronomy and people are going to notice, especially with the absence of TVs, iPhones, and iPads and everything we have to distract us. So a lot of people probably saw this new star, but these three were the only ones who ended up in Israel, hundreds of miles away, seeking out the new King of Jews. That takes something more than curiosity about a new star. They were searching for something.

I asked you at the beginning to think about what would motivate you to cross a desert? No doubt you have thought of something. My guess is that it is probably not the reason the Magi crossed the desert. They crossed the desert, risked their lives, put their worlds on hold, I believe, because they were looking for something more. More than other magi. More than other wise men of their time. They sensed there was more out there. They were not necessarily unhappy with their Zoroastrian faith. They were just filled with a deep and abiding sense that what they believed was not all there was to believe. And this star in the east was an invitation to discover more. Would you cross a desert for that?

I do not want to seem overly harsh, but that is not how faith usually works. Let's face it, contemporary Christianity is often about catering to people's needs, boiling it down to the lowest common denominator, and offering a smorgasbord of options simply hoping that people take it up. We make it approachable and easy and scheduled. We do not even want you to be inconvenienced by coming to church for one hour, on your day off, when the only thing better you have to do is watch the NFL Playoffs. We do everything we can do to make Jesus and faith and the church easily palatable for people. What we do not do, is ask Christians today to cross the desert, and most often they do not offer either.

What I see in this passage, and what I see as one of the greatest needs of the church, even our church today, is the very opposite of this. We need a deep passion for faith, motivated by an unquenchable curiosity. This stuff matters, it already matters. It matters because God did it and God is doing it. Christ is real and active in our world, gracefully loving and healing us. And everything is held together by the power of the Holy Spirit. It matters, but it does not matter for you unless you discover it and discover the layers of it and the depth of it and the meaning of it. It does not matter for you, unless you cross the desert yourself to find it.

And let me also say, this is not going to be like standing in line for tickets or signing up for a bible study. That is to say, you do not know what you are going to get. The star in the west that the magi saw did not also have some sort of accompanying sign that said "This star symbolizes that Jesus, the messiah, the Son of God has been born. He has

come to redeem the world and save you from your sins. Come see." It didn't say that. They followed an unknown, new star, assuming that it would be worth the trip. They assumed that they were trekking out to see a new king, but what they found was so much more than that. They found a new born infant. A king, sure, but also a messiah, miracle worker, healer, teacher, prophet, friend, leader, the Son of God.

It is the beginning of 2022 and the appropriate time for New Year's resolutions. What if we resolved to be as curious as these magi and see where God led us? What if we flipped the script and instead of practicing a faith marked by consumption, we practiced a faith marked by discovery and desire to do more and learn more and find more? What if we resolved to cross the desert? I wonder what we would find. Maybe even Jesus Christ.