

## **MATTHEW 12:1-12**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Astrologers from the East came to Jerusalem asking, Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage. When King Herod heard this, he was frightened and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet: *And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.*

Then Herod secretly called for the travelers and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Go and search diligently for the child and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage. When they had heard the king, they set out and there ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising until it stopped over the place where the child was.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

## **THE JOURNEY**

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

From the blotters of recent police records in London comes this true story. A man who turned out to be an illegal drug dealer was traveling in a late model Jaguar speeding along a suburban thoroughfare when he was spotted by a city gendarme. When the officer began trailing him with siren blaring and blue lights flashing, in James Bond fashion, the pursuant

released a smoke bomb from his tailpipe to obscure the vision of the policeman. And it worked! The officer was blinded by the cloud and was forced to abandon the chase. However, the suspect was apprehended a short time later because the smoke failed to disperse and the police simply followed the plume and nabbed their prey.

Today is Epiphany Sunday when we commemorate the arrival of the three Magi in Bethlehem to worship the baby Jesus and to offer him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It is a story rich in symbolism. It is also overlaid with intrigue because of Herod's murderous interest in their journey, hoping to locate the rumored messiah who could pose a threat to his power and rule.

Biblical scholars cannot verify Matthew's narrative. I would say it is more poetic in nature than anything else. Astronomers could never document a rogue star that suddenly appeared to lead the Magi. And remember that what follows in subsequent verses is Herod's fury at being tricked and his order to slaughter all baby boys in Bethlehem and surrounding villages. Roman historians in those days kept excellent records of important events and this would certainly not have escaped their notice. Nevertheless, because of its symbolic importance we shall accept it at face value and reach closure on our Christmas season by discovering what it offers us on our own spiritual Journeys.

Epiphanies are at the heart of every spiritual Journey. They are characterized by an insight, a sudden understanding that can potentially alter your entire outlook on life. While they seem to come out of nowhere, they are probably the product of work you have done beforehand on a subterranean level which abruptly breaks into consciousness. Paul's conversion on the Road to Damascus is the perfect example. But epiphanies are not often so dramatic. More frequently they will arrive as an answer to a problem or a dilemma we have been struggling to find a solution for. The clouds of our frustration suddenly break, the sun shines through and we have perfect clarity.

It is fascinating that Matthew identifies the three travelers as astrologers who would

clearly not have been Jews. Traveling from the east, they were likely Zoroastrians who followed the Iranian prophet, Zoroaster, whose followers interpreted the spiritual meaning of earthly and future events by reading the stars. In other words, they were mystics who opened themselves to the unseen and universal realities that surround and empower us. They viewed reality from an alternate perspective.

True to their ideology it makes perfect sense that they would follow a star to the manger in their search for truth. Which raises the question for us: do we follow plumes of smoke billowing from tailpipes in our search for truth or the light of the star? And what is the truth that is revealed to them at the manger—the truth we all seek on our own spiritual Journeys?

Like the Magi, our feet straddle both the secular and spiritual dimensions. The physical and the spiritual worlds are inextricably entwined. And doesn't the incarnation represent that from the divine perspective? God knew that to reveal God's self to humanity meant that God would need to assume human form. In this way, God who is perfect Spirit, puts on the mantel of flesh.

And we see this too in the gifts the Magi carried with them to present at the foot of the Christ child's cradle. With the difficulty we have in figuring out what gifts to give each other, you may imagine that a great deal of thought went into what presents should be offered to the infant messiah. And Matthew intended that these gifts would hold high symbolic value.

First, consider gold. It is the very symbol of material wealth and the source of human power. But it is also the symbol of purity. Frankincense and myrrh are both costly fragrances, requiring a good deal of that gold to purchase! Not only was frankincense used as the base of high-quality perfumes, but also in formulas for incense used in worship. And myrrh too served dual purposes in both the spiritual and physical worlds. On the one hand, it had erotic qualities and was sprinkled on the bed sheets of the king as an aphrodisiac. And on the other hand, it was an ingredient in embalming fluids to assist in the transport of souls to the next world. As such, it symbolized a bridge between the physical and the spiritual.

Like the Magi, we too are on spiritual Journeys in search truth. And it is so easy to lose sight of the star in our quest for the manger as it becomes obscured by smoke from the tailpipes of the world. Sometimes we just cannot figure out which voices to listens to—the voices of social media, the bellowing and pandering of those aspiring to power who try to push our buttons and activate our fears and prejudices...or the still, small voice inside of us which gently nudges us to keep our eyes on the star, to push on toward our vision of a world that is united in love, absent of artificial divisions among people. Because is not that the symbolic meaning of the manger? Did not the Christ come to the world to unite, not to divide? And this is not just in the outside world, it is in our internal, spiritual worlds as well. How do we act out the Truth of the Christ within us as we go about our daily lives?

We already know where the star leads. It leads to peace. It leads to understanding. It leads to acceptance of all God's people no matter the color of their skin, the articles of their faith, the flag they carry, the name they call their God, or the cultural richness of their diverse worldviews. But there is often a conflict inside of us that continuously urges us to ignore the spiritual instruments that point us in the direction of the manger, to take the road back to Herod and betray the whereabouts of the Christ child. It is a battle with ourselves that we must engage in daily. The Journey is over mountains, through deserts and dangerous rivers which require us to find crossing points to reach the other side. We need to keep checking our compasses of faith so that we may continue on our Journey in 2025 which will present enormous challenges to our faith and to Trinity Presbyterian Church. We know it's coming. So let us move ever forward with diligent, sure-footed steps knowing who we are and where we are called.

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