

The Epic Journey of Faith
A Sermon on Matthew 2:1-12
Sunday, January 1, 2017
[Lansdowne UMC](#)

We're about to set off on a journey of epic proportions together. Do you feel ready? I just want to warn you, it's very likely that we'll experience fierce cold and oppressive heat. At points we'll be in pain. We'll be hungry. We'll be thirsty. We won't be able to get as much sleep as we want. Fasten your seatbelts, because together we'll travel some 584 million miles, moving nearly 67,000 mph. The journey will take just over 365 days. But the worst part? At the end of all of that, we'll be back in the same place that we started. Just like we did in the past year of earth traveling around the sun. Seems like a waste of motion doesn't it? But it is an epic journey.

I love a good epic. You know, stories with a grand adventure. A virtuous hero on a quest. I'm thinking of stories like Tolkien's the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings. In the Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins is our unlikely hero. He hasn't really gotten out much in life. In fact, he's literally lived in the same hole in the ground for his whole life. There are lots of nerdy sermons that I could preach about the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings, but for our purposes today, I just want to highlight one particular feature of the story: a wizard named Gandalf. You see the hobbit Bilbo Baggins grew up in the same place. He never had to go on a grand journey because, as far as he could tell, he didn't really need to go anywhere. And so when the opportunity presents itself to have adventure, there is really only one way that it is possible, and that's with the help of Gandalf the Gray, a wise wizard who has been everywhere and seen

everything. Although Gandalf will do some spectacular magic to save the day every once in awhile, the most important thing that he provides is wisdom and guidance.

So as we embark on our own epic journey around the sun, I think it would be a good idea to have the guidance of some well-traveled wise men. The scripture tells us that after Jesus was born, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem. That word Magi is where we get the word Magician. And you thought there weren't wizards in the bible.

Such people generally don't get good treatment in the bible. In Acts 13, the Apostle Paul encounters a magician named Bar-Jesus who is a false prophet. It's actually pretty amazing that Magi are good guys in the story at all. Just think about it: if you're Matthew, and you're assembling your set of stories about Jesus, you have, like the gospel of John says, more stories about Jesus than a world full of books could hold. You can afford to be very selective. So why in the world would you include a potentially embarrassing story about some magicians that might make Christians squirm? Perhaps this goes without saying for some of us, but I'm inclined to believe that the first reason we have this story is because it happened.

I imagine that the second reason this story was selected was because it showed the fulfillment of scripture. These magi are not portrayed as sorcerers but as astrologers. And they're usually referred to as "wise men" because they would have been the most educated people the society produced. So in this story we literally have the great wisdom of the nations bowing down before the wisdom of God, as scripture always said it would happen.

But the third reason that I believe we have this story is because I believe that Matthew wanted it to serve as an example and as a cautionary tale for people on their own journey seeking Jesus.

Have you ever thought about Christian faith as a journey? I hope so. For some flavors of Christians, faith is essentially a destination. All of the work is done to convict you of your sinfulness so that you will come to a saving faith in Jesus. Destination reached. But the reality is that God desires so much more for us than a confession of faith. This isn't at all to diminish the importance of turning from ways of living that don't give life and making a decision to follow Christ. But it is to say that this is but one stop on the journey of living out the abundant life that Jesus offers. So I think it's helpful at the beginning of this year to consider our journey of faith and to learn some lessons from these well-traveled wise men.

Along this journey of faith, there are a variety of ways that God comes to meet us. There are a variety of means by which we can come to gain knowledge and experience of God. There is a word for that, by the way: revelation. It's not just a book of the bible, but it's a time and a place in which an infinite and eternal God is *revealed* to finite and perishable humanity.

The Magi experience God's revelation in a number of ways. I count four.

The first: They came to Jerusalem, [and asked], “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.”

Now, I doubt that they actually read “king of the Jews” from a star, and I don’t think the scripture demands that we believe that. I think it’s more likely that they had heard rumors that a great king would come and when they saw the star, they saw evidence that this had in fact taken place. But for our purposes the point is that the wise men get there start with what is called, “General Revelation.” They see and experience some aspect of God’s creation that reveals some truth about the nature of God to them. Their learning doesn’t keep them from Christ but draws them to Christ. Scripture talks about this type of revelation. For example in Psalm 19, we hear “the heavens are telling the glory of God; and the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.” For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, God’s creation is speaking about the glory of God. Perhaps you’ve experienced by witnessing a beautiful sunset or a majestic mountain. The goodness of creation points toward a Good Creator.

But there is a problem with this General Revelation. The wise men see the star and they go to Jerusalem, where reason would lead one to find the king. But Jesus is not in Jerusalem, he’s in Bethlehem. The signs from creation get the wise men to the same country as Jesus, but they don’t get them to Bethlehem. To go farther, they do something that probably caused their wives to call them wise men: they stopped to ask for directions.

This brings us to the second way that the wise men experience God’s revelation: Scripture. The wise men go to Jerusalem and ask where they

can find the child born king of the Jews. Understandably, this scares King Herod, because, you know, he thought *he* was king. And so he calls together “all the chief priests and scribes of the people” and asks them where the Messiah was to be born. They do what good religious folks do: they searched the scriptures. They recalled to King Herod the words of the prophets that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Scripture gets the wise men closer to Jesus than the General Revelation of the Star. Using General Revelation to guide your journey of faith is a little bit like hopping onto route 70 and seeing the sign that says “Denver: 1700 miles.” Sure, you’re on the right road, but you’ve got a long ways till Denver. Scripture is different. Scripture can guide you to place where Jesus is.

But there is a potential problem with scripture as a revelation of God: the problem is not scripture itself but human sinfulness. The wise men hear the word of scripture about where the Messiah is to be born and they set out on their way. Conspicuously absent from the entourage, however, are the chief priests and scribes. These are the people who *know what the Scriptures says*. These are the people who are supposedly awaiting the Messiah. They should be on the lookout for God working in their time. They should be rushing to bow down to the Messiah, their God-appointed King. Where are they?

These religious folks had grown up in the faith their whole lives. They likely had the scriptures memorized. They did their best to live up to the standards of God’s law. But at the end of the day, they don’t have faith like these new believers do. They needed to be more like Bilbo Baggins, who takes up the opportunity for adventure when Gandalf comes by with some fresh energy and wisdom. When the priests and other religious

folks saw the faith of the wise men, they should have taken the opportunity to find encouragement and refreshment for their own faith. Instead they stay stuck in their Hobbit holes, and they're no closer to Jesus than before.

Scripture is an absolutely essential revelation from God. But it's not simply a textbook about God that we learn from. It's meant to draw us into a relationship with God. The last verses of John's Gospel say, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Scripture shows us that Jesus is the Messiah, but it's goal is not primarily informational, but transformational. Scripture's goal is to point people directly to a life-giving relationship with God in Christ. Scripture has good and interesting stories, beautiful poetry, and sound wisdom. But if you don't use it to encounter Christ, it isn't doing what it's intended to do in you.

But the wise men do go to Bethlehem. And they come to the house where Jesus is, the scripture says they were overwhelmed with joy. They enter and see Jesus, and they bow down before him, as subjects before a king. And the word that is translated "bow down" also simply means worship.

This brings me to the third way that God is revealed to us and to the wise men: by the actual presence of Jesus in worship. We see this most vividly in Holy Communion. One of our core understandings of a sacrament is that it is a sign that does what it symbolizes. It is an outward visible sign that shows an inward, invisible grace. Jesus tells us

“this is my body,” and “this is my blood.” And so we trust that if Jesus says he is present with us in the meal, we take him at his word. And so Jesus is *revealed* to us in worship. This is why I encourage everyone to come forward, not simply with a penitent heart seeking forgiveness, but with the hope and expectation that Jesus himself is present at the meal. Scripture does not teach us that the Word became book but that the Word became flesh. Coming to communion is an opportunity to encounter Christ, who is God’s revelation to us.

The wise men leave Jesus’ presence changed. A star pointed the way to Jesus, but they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, so they leave for their own country by another road. This brings me to the fourth way that God is revealed to us-- through signs and gifts of the Spirit of God. These are times of an intense, personal, and unforgettable experience of the presence of God. These experiences has immense power, and therefore they need the other types of revelation to guide and direct them. Scripture contains immense numbers of stories of people’s powerful personal experiences of God, but they have been tested and interpreted by centuries of believers. But God’s Spirit is active in the world, and so as people of faith, we should hope for and can expect dramatic experiences of God on our journey of faith.

It would appear that the magi had such an experience. God’s Spirit transformed the Magi at their meeting the Christ child so that it’s not a star that warns them not to return to Herod, but a dream.

But here is the thing about spiritual gifts-- they’re never simply for our own benefit, but for the good of other believers. And so although it’s possible that all the wise men all had the same dream, it seems more

likely that just one of them had the dream and told the others. Just as God used the particular spiritual experience of a dream to speak of the wise men, God, from time to time, gives each of us particularly revealing experiences we offer for the benefit of one another. This is one reason that we share our joys. We hope to encourage one another and to be encouraged to continue on our journey of faith.

The wise men are on a journey of faith and they show us four ways that God speaks to us-- (1) through General Revelation (which is our reason applied to the beauty of nature), (2) through Scripture, and through our experience of God, both (3) in the sacraments and (4) at other times by the Holy Spirit.

So we've arrived here in 2017. Do you have expectations? Hopes? Fears? Have you made resolutions? Do still see yourself as on a journey, or are you just coasting along at 67,000 mph to end up in the same place you started?

If you recognize that you are on an journey, where are you, and how is God revealed to you on the journey? The story of the Magi can help us who have been around the church for a while to see God in the new ways. We need to be Psalm 19 people, who see God's glory displayed in creation. We need to more broadly be people who hear God's voice in scripture and let it lead us to a real encounter with Jesus, the Messiah that it testifies to. We need to seek God more in worship-- through private prayer, but also through public worship, specifically in the sacrament of Holy Communion. And we need to seek and to be open to fresh workings of the Spirit of God in our lives so that we might build one another up in faith.

Where are you on the journey and where do you want to be in one year?
What would it look like for you to take your next faithful step?