



Sermon, January 8, 2017
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Coburg and Junction City United Methodist Churches

“Seeking What?”

Question before scripture reading: *Share a time you in which you devoted all your time and energy to finding something.*

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, **2** 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.” **3** When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; **4** and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘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.’”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. **8** Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “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.” **9** 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. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** 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. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Oregon Trail

Most of my life has been spent living along the Oregon Trail. Part of the Trail comes through this part of Idaho. As I’ve indicated before, some of my ancestors came to Oregon and Idaho along this trail. What took me three to four hours to travel this last week would have taken those ancestors over a month. The trip from St. Louis to Oregon took over a year, and those who traversed it faced death, privation, perilous river crossings, hunger, extreme physical stress, loss of family and loss of personal possessions. Many who survived the Trail started over

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completely. Everyone who traveled the Trail were marked and shaped by the Trail. A distinctive way of living and being emerged from this, that characterizes those of us who were raised in the Western United States.

Our journeys can shape and change us.

One of the characteristics of a journey is the fact that it has the power to shape and form us for the rest of our lives. That is one reason the growth of the spiritual life is depicted over and over again as a journey. Think of it. The Gospels are filled with journeys: Joseph and Mary journey to Bethlehem and then to Egypt and then to Nazareth. Shepherds journey from the hills to Bethlehem. Jesus journeys up and down from Galilee to Jerusalem several times. And today’s reading talks about the journey undertaken by several wise and learned persons, referred to as Magi (μαγοι) in the original Greek.

Magi following what and seeking what?

Much has been made of the magi being astrologers located perhaps in Persia, who saw some celestial phenomenon that inspired their journey. Various attempts have been made by modern day astronomers to determine what alignments of planets might have occurred, or comets might have passed close to the earth. My brother, Nick Strobel, has compiled just such a set of speculations of modern scientists on his website: (<http://www.astronomynotes.com/history/bethlehem-star.html>).

What was their star?

In researching this morning’s sermon I came across an alternate theory that the star was perhaps not a celestial phenomenon at all, but was rather an angelic guide. The Biblical scholar Dale C. Allison states, ““In antiquity, stars were widely thought to be living beings, and this is the clue to a correct understanding of Matthew’s text.... In short, I believe we should identify the star in Matthew 2 as an angel. To put the matter somewhat differently, the star that went before the magi in Matthew was akin to the angel that went before Israel in Exodus as he fled pharaoh’s armies.” (Dale C. Allison, Jr. in “What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?”, *Bible Review*, December 1993, found in *The First Christmas*, ©

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2009 Biblical Archaeology Society.) What is interesting about his proposal is the question of what is it that leads and guides us on our journeys? And related to this is the question, what is it in life that we are seeking?

The magi journeyed hundreds of miles to see one they called “king of the Jews.” They first encountered the human King of the Jews, Herod the Great, but it was obvious that he was not the object of their quest. It may be that they misunderstood the nature of their quest, that it was not a political journey, but rather a spiritual journey. If their star was indeed an angelic guide, it would suggest that as they journeyed, the nature of their journey changed, and as that changed, they were changed. Their journey became, instead, a journey to God. “And seeing the child, they prostrated themselves and worshipped.”

Questions for us to reflect upon:

1. How do we search diligently for God’s reality?
2. How do we bring back word of what we have found?
3. How do we pay true homage to the Lord?

Journeys and quests today

The supreme goal of human existence is not the accumulation of the most toys.

It is not to become the most rich and powerful person around. Nor is it to become the most rich and powerful nation around.

The supreme goal of human existence is to know God and become like God. Not to become God or to become little gods, but to have the divine life alive within us.

This means that God's “God-ness” is experienced and known not as something outside of us and separate from us, but as a part of our own being. It means knowing God as Jesus knew the Father.

And we do this through a daily encounter with Jesus Christ.

Paul calls it having the mind of Christ.

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The Second Letter of Peter puts it this way: “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature.”

I don't know about you, but I think its time we stopped playing at being Christian and actually get serious about being Christian, about being the heirs of Christ that the Bible says we are, to live according to the image of God the Bible says we are, to become the sons and daughters of God that Jesus says we are.

Invitation to the series: “Where Do We Go from Here?”

Just like the magi 2000 years ago, we are all of us on a journey. God's Spirit is being born again in new ways across the world. The turmoil, unrest and bizarreness of our time is like the birth pangs of this new birth of the Spirit. I believe that God is working to transform our world by transforming the religious and spiritual sensibilities and awareness of people everywhere. Like the magi, we are on a journey seeking how and where this new spiritual rebirthing is occurring.

During Epiphany and Lent, we are going to look at this journey we are on. We are going to become like the ancient Israelites escaping from Egypt in order to journey through the wilderness of transformation. I don't have the answers to what this journey will reveal. But I have faith that God will speak with us as a community of believers and followers of Jesus Christ if we earnestly seek God's inspiration and guidance. Together we will read and consider scripture, we will pray and reflect, and we will talk together and listen for the Spirit's prompting in worship and in short-term study groups.

O Star of wonder, star of night
Star with royal beauty bright
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to thy Perfect Light.