



Sermon, January 5, 2020
Rev. Dr. Craig S. Pesti-Strobel
Cottage Grove and Junction City
United Methodist Churches

Sermon Series: Reboot! JP21

“Our Journey into Light and Wisdom”

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] 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,^[b] 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^[c] 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^[d] my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] 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,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] 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.

Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker

One of the big events this past Holiday Season has been the release of the final movie of the Star Wars Skywalker saga: “The Rise of Skywalker.” How many of you have seen it? Zsuzsa and I (Craig and Susan) have seen it twice with various members of our (their) progeny. Perhaps you wonder what all the hype has been about for the last 40 years with Star Wars.

The reason for the appeal of Star Wars was not simply a happy coincidence. Lucas very deliberately constructed the plotline of Star Wars to depict a modern telling of the Hero's Journey as described definitively by Joseph Campbell in his book, *Hero of a Thousand Faces*. In that book, Campbell surveys a story plotline found throughout the world in a wide-ranging variety of myths, legends, epics and folk stories. Campbell referred to this plotline as “The Hero's Journey.”

The Hero's Journey

Campbell describes the basic outline of this recurring plot this way: “The hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.”¹ In laying out what he calls the monomyth, Campbell describes a number of stages or steps along this journey:

- The hero starts in the ordinary world, and receives a call to enter an unusual world of strange powers and events (a *call to adventure*).
- If the hero accepts the call to enter this strange world, the hero must face tasks and trials (a *road of trials*), and may have to face these trials alone, or may have assistance. At its most intense, the hero must survive a severe challenge, often with help earned along the journey.
- If the hero survives, the hero may achieve a great gift (the *goal* or “*boon*”), which often results in the discovery of important self-knowledge.
- The hero must then decide whether to return with this boon (the *return to the ordinary world*), often facing challenges on the return journey.

¹ Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968, p. 30 / Novato, California: New World Library, 2008, p. 23.

“Our Journey into Light and Wisdom”

- If the hero is successful in returning, the boon or gift may be used to improve the world (the *application of the boon*).²

The Spiritual Journey at the Heart of the Gospels is similar to the Hero's Journey described by Campbell.

Journeys associated with the birth of Jesus

The two Gospels that have stories about the birth of Jesus place them in the context of journeys: the journey of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the flight of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus to Egypt, and the journey of the magi to find the newborn King of the Jews. Even the shepherds travel from the hills into Bethlehem in search of the infant Jesus.

These flash a sign that says: “Spiritual Journey ahead!” On this Epiphany Sunday, let's look for a moment at the journey of the magi.

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>).

I recently 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 explains, “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.

² This basic outline is derived from the article on Wikipedia, “The Hero with a Thousand Faces,” found online at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Hero_with_a_Thousand_Faces.

in “What Was the Star that Guided the Magi?”, Bible Review, December 1993, found in *The First Christmas*, © 2009 Biblical Archaeology Society.)

Just recently another scholar, Brent Landau, published a translation of an ancient Syriac text called *The Revelation of the Magi*. This text, while most certainly not the work of the actual magi, was probably written by an early Christian community, and “is a complex, rich, and strange narrative that purports to be the Wise Men's personal testimony about the birth of Jesus. According to this writing, the Wise Men (or better, Magi) are mystical sages living at the eastern edge of the world, guarding an ancient prophecy about a coming star that will signify the birth of God in human form.” What is interesting is that in this story, “when their star finally appears, it descends from heaven and transforms into a small, luminous human being... (and) tells them that his epiphany to them is only one small part of his revelation to the people of the world: ‘And I am everywhere, because I am a ray of light whose light has shown in this world from the majesty of the Father....’” (Brent Landau, “**Who Were The Three Wise Men Of Christmas?**” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/brent-landau/on-revelation-of-the-magi_b_788238.html)

These two nearly lost traditions about the nature of the star that guided the magi shift our view of their quest as being one of following a physical phenomenon in the sky to a deeper, more spiritual quest.

Jesus Invites Us to a Spiritual Journey

At the start of his ministry in all four Gospels, Jesus puts out the call: “Come and see, check this out. Follow me.” We think the Gospels are some sort of biography of Jesus that are supposed to inspire us to love Jesus and worship him. They aren’t. They are the outline of a path of spiritual transformation that Jesus lived and taught to all who followed him then, and anyone who chooses to follow him these days.

This Path, or Way, of Jesus has been ignored for the most part for the last 17-18 centuries, with the exception of pockets of disciples over the centuries who took seriously the invitation to take the yoke of Jesus upon

“Our Journey into Light and Wisdom”

themselves, to pursue the course of love and compassion, and who lived in service to those on the margins of society.

The Spiritual Life Path that Jesus lived and taught his disciples has been replaced over the centuries with a religion about Jesus, in which devotion to the figure of Jesus and agreement to a set of doctrines about Jesus have become the focus, and serve as a replacement for the Path of Life Transformation that Jesus actually taught.

As I have continued to study and reflect upon the Gospels in particular over the course of my 36 years of ministry, I have become convinced that Jesus did not come to found an institution called the Church. Rather, he came to show a path in life that led to the deep spiritual transformation of those who followed it. The early followers of Jesus knew about this Path, and identified themselves with that Path so closely that they were first known as Followers of the Way.

Before I retire in a year and half, I would like to explore in depth how to translate this Path of Jesus in terms that apply to the 21st Century. I strongly believe that people these days are hungry for just such a spiritual path, but haven't found it in conventional churches. I also believe that people in those conventional churches are also hungry to learn about this path. I believe that this path of Jesus is a great gift to the world, better than all the gold, myrrh and frankincense that the world has to offer.

Godfrey Rust has written the following poem entitled **The Magi**:

Will you study these signs
as carefully
as you study the prices
in the Christmas catalogues?
Will you seek out the manger
as diligently
as you search for the right scarf
or this year's toy?

“Our Journey into Light and Wisdom”

Will you examine
your heart’s pilgrimage
and be sure towards what stable
it carries its precious gifts?

Will you be a wise fool
to find and follow
the strange star of truth
in a sky full of glittering lies? ³

Come, let us be “wise fools” together and journey out along the Path of Jesus.

*O– star of wonder,
star of light
star with royal beauty bright,
westward leading,
still proceeding,
guide us to thy perfect light.*

³ Written to introduce the bible reading *Matthew 2 2-12* in the carol service sequence [The last straw](#). © Godfrey Rust, godfrey@wordsout.co.uk.