

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Sunday, January 3, 2021**

**“Wise Men from the East”  
Matthew 2:1-12**

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It can be disorienting to hear the story of the magi, because it feels like certain pieces are missing. Matthew introduces the magi like this: “In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem” (v. 1). That’s it! Familiar details aren’t there. There’s nothing about their number. There’s no mention of them being kings. There’s no explanation of their origin, other than that they travelled “from the East” (which, as geography goes, is rather vague). The assumption that they’re all male (“wise men”) is not supported by the text (Copeland): the language could describe a group of men and women. All we learn is that they’re “magi,” which are sort of astrologer-magicians.

Faced with such a bareboned introduction to the magi, Christian interpreters have, over the centuries, reimagined the story with additional details: that the magi were kings (in connection with our Lesson from Isaiah 60), that there were three (since they brought three gifts), and that they were Melchior (from Persia), Gaspar (from India) and Balthasar (from Arabia)... I appreciate these later interpretive layers (and I also recognize the irony that ministers correct their congregations: “There aren’t three and they’re not kings: where do you get these ideas? And our hymn is: ‘We three Kings’”). I appreciate these layers of the story, especially as they’ve inspired art and music: as one writer puts it, “Matthew’s sublime story of the adoration of the Magi has often been better understood by poets and artists than by scholars, whose microscopic analysis has missed its essence” (Hare).

Yet I think there’s also value in setting aside these reimagined details—the three kings with names and specific origins—and instead, attending to what Matthew teaches us about the magi...because it’s surprising how much we can discern about these “nameless strangers” (Hare). And to explore this, I want to ask a question: are the magi really wise? Our translation calls them the “wise men,” yet the word ‘wise’ is not in the text: Matthew simply calls them “magi.” So, the question: is “wise” the best way to describe the magi?

Did they set off on their journey *wisely*? We learn that they began their journey upon seeing a new star: “For we observed his star at its rising,” they explain, “and have come to pay him homage” (v. 2). Astrologers were more mainstream at the time, but even then: it’s one thing to observe the stars, and it’s quite another *to chase after them*. Is that really *wise* behaviour”? I’ve heard of people who’ve driven for hours, chasing a mysterious object in the sky...only to learn later that they’d chased the planet Venus: I wouldn’t call that wise. I sometimes wonder what sorts of conversations the magi may have had with friends or family before their journey: “What’s new with you?” “Well, I think I spotted a new star, so I’m going to run after it—and hey, maybe find a king.” Would friends or family have responded, “Oh, very good: that sounds like a judicious, well-considered, and wise plan”?

As they begin their wild journey to chase a star, the magi are—if not reckless—then certainly *bold*. The magi have the *boldness* to set off on this journey: they’re so convinced the star will lead them to

something important—to someone important—that they *boldly* start the journey. Wise magi—wise to chase a star? Maybe... But it was certainly bold: these are the *bold magi*.

After this bold beginning, the magi continue on their long journey. (Later in Matthew chapter 2, it seems that the magi had been travelling for maybe as long as two years.) But when you boldly start some exciting venture, reality can sink it pretty hard: if you've ever gone on a long-distance run or hike, the first step can be exhilarating—but the ten-thousandth step is usually rather less exhilarating. T. S. Eliot, in his poem "Journey of the Magi," imagines—from the perspective of one of the magi—how regret and self-doubt could creep into this long journey. Here's part of that poem:

'A cold coming we had of it  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.' [...]  
There were times we regretted  
the summer palaces on slopes [...].  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters [...].  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

Was it *wise* to continue, for upwards of two years, on a journey that was farfetched to start? To set off after a star was already a rash decision, but to continue for years—is that wise? Maybe not—but to keep chasing that star, refusing to give up...the magi are wonderfully *persistent*. The magi who start boldly also persevere *persistently*: these are the *persistent magi*.

Something unexpected then happens: the magi—who set off boldly and journeyed persistently—they reach Jerusalem...but there's no child king to be found. Eliot imagines those "voices singing in our ears, saying / That this was all folly"—and, as the magi find no young king in Jerusalem, I wonder if those nagging doubts rose to a shout: "this was all folly"! The magi reach their destination, but the one they seek just isn't there...so, with doubts and regrets seemingly confirmed, perhaps now—more than ever—the *wise* course of action would be to cut their losses—to say, "Well, we tried"—and head for home. That would probably be *wise*.

Matthew writes: "calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [Herod] 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'" (vv. 4-6).

There's no reason to think the magi were familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, but that's the only rationale for changing directions from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. And when Herod, scheming, tells the magi to go to Bethlehem, "they set out" (v. 9), without delay.

The wise move would probably be to turn back...and yet the magi are instead *open* to be redirected on their journey, *open* to follow these strange instructions. Is it wise to look for a king in small-town Bethlehem? It's not particularly wise, but it shows a remarkable *openness*—an openness to listen and be redirected. Without the openness of the magi, that openness to change directions, the story would end in disappointment—but instead, because of their openness to follow a new direction, the magi leave behind the impressive streets of Jerusalem to scour the back alleys of backwater Bethlehem.

If they hadn't been open to this change, then their journey would have ended...but because they were *open* to be led in new ways, this happens:

“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” (vv. 9-11). As they follow a new direction, we see the remarkable *openness of the magi*.

So far, really none of this has been very wise: chasing a star all this time and going from a powerful city to an obscure town—none of this seems particularly wise. But the most reckless decision comes next! The magi received very specific orders from Herod, a notoriously violent ruler: “Then [Herod] sent [the magi] 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’” (v. 8). And yet, after meeting Christ—after kneeling in worship and presenting their gifts—the magi disobey: “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (v. 12).

The magi disobey a tyrant, risking their own lives to protect the child they've just met. Is “wise” the best word for that? When someone pulls a stranger off the tracks with a train barreling down, do we say: “Oh, how wise.” No, this isn't so much about wisdom as courage: as they defy a tyrant and endanger themselves for the Christ child, we see the *courageous magi*.

The problem with calling the magi “the wise men”—in addition to incorrectly assuming the total exclusion of women—is that their journey is not really shaped by wise decisions. I'm happy to call the magi wise—and I don't doubt that that in many ways they were very wise indeed—but the magi are *more than wise*: the magi are bold, persistent, open, and courageous.

And how do they become this way? What's the one constant element in this story—the one thing that guides and moves the whole story? The star! They're always watching, following, nearing the star that leads to Christ. The star inspires them to start a *bold* journey; the star drives them to *persist* in that journey; the star motivates them to be *open* to redirection; and then the child Christ—the one to whom the star led them all along—emboldens them to defy a tyrant *courageously*. All along, it is the star that leads them—and leads them to Christ.

And I think this story encourages us not to be like the magi, but to be led like the magi. We may reimagine the star as the Holy Spirit, who—like that star—leads always to Christ: may we be *bold* in following the leading of the Spirit of Christ; may we *persist* in following the leading of the Spirit of Christ; may we be *open* to be redirected by the leading of the Spirit of Christ; and may we have the *courage* to obey the leading of the Spirit of Christ, even when it means that we too must follow “another road.” Amen.