

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Epiphany of the Lord Sunday
Sunday, January 4, 2026**

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

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

Who were the magi? In one sense, Matthew tells us very little about them, saying only that “wise men from the East came to Jerusalem” (v. 1). With such a bareboned introduction, later tradition has imagined more details—that there were three, that they were kings, where they were from, what their names were. Those details aren’t from Scripture, though I do appreciate how the Christian tradition has engaged creatively and imaginatively with this story; 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).

I’m also very much aware of the irony that ministers often correct those later traditions while perpetuating those later traditions: “There weren’t three of them and they weren’t kings: where on earth do you get all these nonbiblical notions? And as our next hymn, let us sing: ‘We three Kings.’”

So in one sense, Matthew tells us very little about the magi; but in another sense, although Matthew doesn’t *tell* us much, he does *show* us a great deal about the magi—about their character, about who they really were. And this leads to a question: were the magi ‘wise’? In the original language, they are simply called ‘magi’ (μάγος)—which means something like an ancient astrologer. In our translation, they’re called “wise men”—but there are two issues with that.

One issue is that the Bible doesn’t say they’re men; grammatically, in the original language, they could be a group of men *and* women (Copeland)—so that’s uncertain. The other issue is, well, should we really call them ‘wise’? In this story, we learn a lot about their character—but is ‘wise’ really the best way to describe them? I mean, they were wise—yes, certainly—but as we explore the story, we find that they were not merely wise; they were *more than* wise.

To start, when they first set off on their journey, was that really a wise thing to do? Matthew tells us that they began their journey when they saw a new star: “For we observed his star at its rising,” they said, “and have come to pay him homage” (v. 2). Now, I get that astrologers were rather more mainstream in the ancient world, but even then: it was one thing to observe the stars—but it was quite another to chase after them. I mean, is that really wise behaviour?

Just imagine the sorts of conversations they would’ve had before setting off on their journey! They bump into an acquaintance: “So what’s new with you?” “Well, I think I spotted a new star, so I’m gonna go chase after it across the desert; I’m thinking I might find a new king.” Would their friends have responded, “How wise” or “That’s nuts”? So was it wise? Maybe. But was it gutsy; was it bold? Absolutely.

Then after that bold beginning, the magi faced a very long journey; from what we read later in the story, it seems they were travelling for about two years (2:16). And you know, when someone boldly starts a new adventure, sometimes that initial excitement can quickly fade—and reality sinks in pretty hard. If you’ve ever undertaken a long-distance run, those first few steps can feel exhilarating; but after enough miles, that exhilaration can give way to exhaustion.

The poet T. S. Eliot wrote the poem, ‘The Journey of the Magi,’ from the magi’s perspective—imagining how regret and doubt could’ve taken hold:

“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 then wise to continue? Was it wise to keep going, for years, on this journey that was far-fetched to start? Chasing after a star was rash to begin with; was it wise to stick with that rash decision? Maybe. But wow, was it ever perseverant, persistent, unyielding, tireless.

Yet then came that stark disappointment: the magi—who’d set off boldly and journeyed persistently—they arrive in Jerusalem, but there’s no child king to be found; they at last reach their destination, but the one they sought all along simply isn’t there. T. S. Eliot imagined their doubts, “the voices singing in [their] ears, saying That this was all folly”—and here their doubts appear confirmed. At this point, the wise thing to do would’ve been to cut their losses, and begin that long journey home.

Herod then summons Jewish leaders in Jerusalem, who say that the Messiah would be born:

“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. 5-6)

There’s no hint that the magi had any reason to trust Herod, or that they’d even heard of the Jewish Scriptures before; and yet, without delay, after the guidance from that prophecy, “they set out” (v. 9) for Bethlehem. Now was that wise? Was it wise to follow those strange instructions and search for a king in some small, backwater town? Or was the wiser conclusion that they’d been foolishly chasing a star—and it was time to stop?

And yet, even this late in their journey, the magi are surprisingly open to be redirected—open to follow the way that leads to Bethlehem. Was it wise to go scour a small town for a king? Maybe. But wow did it ever take a remarkable openness to listen to that ancient prophecy and follow the way it would lead; and without that openness, the journey of the magi would have ended in disappointment.

But instead, because of their openness to listen to that prophecy, they make their way to Bethlehem, where—because of their boldness, their persistence, their openness—they find the one they had sought all along: “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).

Yet after this joyous moment—for the magi, the most uncertain moment was yet to come. Herod, a notoriously violent and cruel tyrant, had given them clear orders. Matthew writes: “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 chose to disobey Herod: “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road” (v. 12).

Was that wise? Was it wise to disobey a powerful king and risk their lives out of loyalty for a child they had just met? I don’t think the best word to describe that is ‘wise’; it was, rather, astonishingly courageous—which has its own wisdom.

In the end, the magi were, in many ways, deeply wise. Yet as we explore this story, we discover that they were not merely wise—they were *more than wise*: bold, persistent, open, courageous.

And how did they do it? Think: what’s the one constant in this whole story—which guided the magi all along? The star! They were always watching, following, nearing the star that led to Christ. The star moved them to start a bold journey; the star drove them to persist in that journey; the star led them to this openness on that journey; and then the child Christ—the one to whom the star had led them all along—inspires them to show remarkable courage. It was always the star, leading them toward Christ.

I don’t know if any of us can be like the magi; but I do think we can be led like the magi. As the magi were led by a star, we may be led by the Holy Spirit, who leads us—all our life long—toward Christ: may we be bold to journey toward Christ; may we persevere in our journey of faith; may we be open to the Word of God to seek Christ more faithfully; and may we have the courage to obey the way of Christ, even when that means we too must follow “another road.” Amen.