

# *The Journey of the Magi*

*Matthew 2: 1-12*

**First Presbyterian Church  
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I have good memories of childhood Christmas caroling in our neighborhood. We loved banging on doors and singing away: whether the neighbors wanted it or not! We especially loved “We Three Kings.” On the chorus, Tim Sheehan and I could put our arms on each other’s shoulders and sing out like sailors on shore leave, “Whoa---Ohhhhhh, Star of wonder...” And I always loved the three kings figures in our nativity set, with their brightly colored robes and tantalizing gifts. But who were these guys really?

Matthew calls them *magi*. We translate that as wise men. They came from the east. Probably Babylon or Persia. Magi can be taken a lot of ways. It could refer to magicians or scholars, to sorcerers or astronomers. They were not Jews, but pagan Gentiles who had seen a sign in the stars. This sign could have been in their charts or in the sky itself. It could have been the unique location of a known planet in the zodiac. Or an unexpected brightness like a supernova or planetary conjunction. We don’t know exactly what they saw. But whatever it was, the magi believed it was of life-changing, world-changing importance. They interpreted the star as portending the birth of a great king in the land of Israel. Perhaps these learned men had heard the words of another pagan wise man named Balaam. He spoke beyond what he knew 1500 years before. Numbers 24 records his prophecy, “I see him, but not now. I behold him, but not near. A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a scepter shall rise out of Israel” (24: 17). A unique star over Israel would mark the rising of the world’s king.

The magi saw this star and set out on a great journey. If they were coming from Babylon, it was 800 miles, a minimum of forty days’ hard travel. This trip would be expensive. Their families and colleagues thought they were crazy. Can’t you hear it? “What’s so important that you have to go to the land of Jacob? Don’t we have gods enough here for you?” But these men had quest in their hearts. They were willing to give everything to go.

T.S. Eliot was a Nobel prize winning author who wrote a very famous poem about this passage. He actually begins by quoting from a sermon by Lancelot Andrewes, a famous scholar on the team that translated the King James Bible.

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.

They saw the star and they came to see the child. No matter the cost. No matter the distance. Andrewes' sermon says, "And these difficulties they overcame, of a wearisome, irksome, troublesome, dangerous, unseasonable journey. And for all this, they came." The magi did not hesitate to give their lives to this revelation.

The scholarly learning of these wise men got them to the capital of Israel. But that's all they knew. They were six miles from Bethlehem. After 800 miles they were so close to the infant Jesus. But the extent of their knowledge could not get them all the way there. In Herod's palace, Scripture scholars were summoned. The Word of God was consulted to tell the wise men what they did not know: God's Word puts the birth of the Christ in Bethlehem.

So again they set out. They had the natural revelation of the distant star. They had the Scriptural revelation of Bethlehem. But they needed a third revelation to find the Savior. They needed personal guidance. That is why we always pray before we read Scripture. The Bible is God's Word. But to hear this Scripture as a Word from God to us, we need the work of the Holy Spirit. We can look straight at the truth and not see it unless God lights it up for us. The magi got the answer to their prayer. The star had been an astronomical phenomenon: high in the heavens. Now the star was a local light. It came and stood right over the house where Jesus was. God's light lit their personal way to the savior. This revelation turned their questing into rejoicing. I can think of no greater description of joy in all the Bible. Matthew tells us that when they saw the star over the house where Jesus was, they *rejoiced exceedingly with great joy*. Did you catch the note of exultation? Exceedingly with mega-watt joy. Such joy can only come after long search. With great relief. With overwhelming fulfillment. With vindication that they weren't crazy. This was real. They weren't wrong. God had made himself known to them in this child.

I love the paintings in which the baby Jesus, who could have been up to two years old at the time, reaches out to touch one of the magi. The wise man is on his knees. The child places his tiny hand on his ancient head. And blesses the one who worships him. This is the moment of a lifetime. It would change them forever.

Eliot's famous poem goes on to consider what it was like for this same wise to return home once he had seen the Christ. The magi reflects years later:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,  
And I would do it again, but set down  
This: were we led all that way for  
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly  
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,  
But had thought they were different; this Birth was  
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.  
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.  
I should be glad of another death.<sup>1</sup>

The wise men found what they were looking for. They saw the newborn king. But that sight was the death of them. It was the death of their old life. The death of ever again worshipping the little gods of their upbringing. They would no longer fit at home. They could no longer be content with what their neighbors lived for. They could no longer follow the Babylonian dreams of the good life. All that was dead to them now they had seen the birth in the world of the true God himself. The Word made flesh would take every thought captive. They could never be content with normal life again.

This story of the magi following the star to find the Christ child still resonates with us today. For each person in this room is called to journey toward him. To undertake both a birth and a death. For to encounter this divine King means we can never be the same. Let's round the corner toward home by considering three journeys to truth that we are each invited to undertake.

**1) Apart from me, you can do nothing** (John 15: 5). This is indeed a hard journey! For all around us we are taught the myth of self-sufficiency. We are fed story after story about being autonomous human choice makers. *We* create our own lives. *We* make our own story. *We* work it out for ourselves. The journey of your life is to go wherever you think it is best to go and don't let anyone tell you the way. Don't ever ask for directions.

Jesus invites us to journey away from the illusion that on my own I can be all right. He invites me to journey toward the truth that apart from him I can do

nothing. Psalm 16 tells, “Apart from you, I have no good.” And it also tells us, “In your presence is fullness of joy. At your right hand are pleasures forevermore.” We are invited into the birth of connection with God. But the journey requires a death. I must die to the idea that I can solve my own life. I must fall on my face before the Christ-child and declare, “Apart from you I can do nothing.” So take me, Lord, into your care. Join me to yourself. Flow through me with life like sap through the branches.

**2) There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1).** We are invited to journey from the endless cycle of condemnation into the freedom of Christ’s grace. We are invited to be born into a total and complete acceptance by our savior. Perhaps this sounds too good to be true. But make no mistake. This birth is also a death. It is death to my resume. It is death to a story of my credentials. It is death to my arguments with the inner voice of accusation. The Scripture does not say, “There is no condemnation for those who don’t get caught.” Nor does it say, “There is no condemnation for those who cleverly cover their tracks.” Nor does it say, “There is no condemnation for those who get to the top and stave off all competition.” Nor does it say, “There is no condemnation for those who say ‘Of course there’s no condemnation because if God’s not nice, if he doesn’t make me safe, if he doesn’t help me be me, then I don’t want him anyway.’” No, the Scripture throws freezing cold water on all our resumes and declares, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God . . . . And the wages of sin is death.” God’s Word just slays my self-justification.

And then his Word invites me into a birth. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Be joined to Jesus and enter freedom. Die to condemnation. Die even to the part of you that says, “But I like condemning myself. I can keep away the pain of others condemning me by being my own worst critic.” You’ve got to die to self-condemnation as well as self-justification. There is NO condemnation. For those who have laid face down before the Lord Jesus, offering their gifts to the infant King, and discovering his mercy.

**3) Because I live, you also will live (John 14: 19).** This is an invitation to journey from the hopelessness that this life is all there is. To journey into the hope of everlasting life that begins now. We have a strange paradox in our culture. We are so buffered from consequence that we seek riskier and riskier behavior just to feel alive. We are so protected and so numbed by our technology that we have grown fascinated with death. Weirdly, it appears to give us life. We no longer believe in an afterlife. On the one hand, this takes away the fear of the life to come. It keeps us autonomous. For life is mine, and when it ends, it’s over: I never belong to

anyone else. On the other hand, this creates despair. There is nothing more. My loved ones are lost to the void and so will I soon be. Under this spell, we feel there is no accountability in life or death, but neither is there any point.

The Christmas star of hope leads us to Jesus who declared so boldly, “Because I live, you also will live.” Jesus passed through death and returned in resurrection glory. He opened the way to eternal life. He gives us that life as we are joined to him by the Holy Spirit through faith. He invites us back from the despair of death. And the arrogance of thinking there is nothing more than this. He calls us to die to death as the last word. And to come alive to eternal life in himself. To come alive to accountability before the God who made us and claims us. To come alive to his victory.

The journey of the magi belongs to all of us. It is a journey that costs not less than everything. And returns exceeding great joy. We give up being settled with life the way everyone else lives for themselves, just trying to cope and get through until it’s over. We die to a life of isolation and enter a life of communion. We give up autonomy we never had anyway. Instead we worship. We fall on our faces. We offer ourselves in service. We adore the God who came to us as Jesus. And we feel his hand of blessing on our heads. We discover the joy that apart from him we can do nothing. But in him, there is fullness of joy. In him there is no condemnation. Because he lives, we will live also.

Are you on the journey of the magi? Is the Spirit lighting the way in your mind and heart right now? Are you saying, “I will arise and go to Jesus. I will follow the star of his shining. Whatever the cost. I release it. I go to him. Lord Jesus, join me to yourself. You are journey’s end. You are life. And you alone are joy.” If so, keep following that star!

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, “The Journey of the Magi.” See also Lancelot Andrewes’ great advent sermon in which he says, “It is not commanded, to stand gazing into Heaven too long, not on Christ Himself ascending, much less on His star. For, they sat not still gazing on the star. Their seeing made them come; come a great journey. Lo, here we are come. Come, and at our journeys’ end. To look a little on it. In this their coming, we consider (1) First, the distance of the place they came from. It was not hard by, as the shepherds (but a step to Bethlehem over the fields). This was riding many hundred miles, and cost them many a day’s journey. (2) Secondly, we consider the way that they came, if it be pleasant, or plain and easy. For, if it be, it is so much the better. This was nothing pleasant, for through deserts, all the way waste and desolate (3) Yet if safe: but it was not; but exceeding dangerous, as lying through the midst of the *Black Tents of Kedar*, a nation of thieves and cutthroats, to pass over the hills of robbers. Infamous then, and infamous to this day. No passing without great troops of convoy. (4) Last we consider the time of their coming, the season of the year. It was no summer progress. A cold coming they had of it, at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year, to take a journey, and specially a long journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off in *solstitio brumali*, the very dead of winter