

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on January 2, 2022

STAR WORDS

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the day of Herod the King, Behold Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem saying, "Where is he who has been born King of the Jews. Matthew 2:1-2

During the seasons of Advent and Christmas, we have been focusing on the core stories that surround the coming of Jesus into the world. Today we look at the story from the book of Matthew that tells of the visit of the magi. It might surprise you that during most of the first 1000 years of Christian history, Epiphany was the second most celebrated event in the life of Jesus.

Of course, the resurrection of Jesus was the central event in Jesus' life. Easter was the most important festival for Christians. But the second most important celebration during the first half of Christian history was Epiphany. It was more important even than Christmas. Epiphany is the Greek word for manifestation. During the season of Epiphany, we are reminded of Jesus making himself known to the world. The Gospel Lessons during Epiphany are stories of Jesus revealing his nature to those around him.

The first reading for Epiphany from the Gospels is the story of the visit of the Magi. The story of the wise men is not to be read at Christmas, which tells the story of Jesus' birth as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, but rather at Epiphany as Jesus is revealed to the wider world represented by the visitors from the east.

The Scriptures do not tell us very much about the Magi. Many of the things we grew up believing about the wise men are not found in the Bible. They were not kings, we do not know how many there were and we do not know their names. Tradition teaches that since there were three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh this may indicate that there were three magi. There well may have been three, but there could have been more. The Bible does not tell us their names or exactly where they came from.

Who are these Magi and what can we learn from them today? Pope Benedict tells us:

The men of whom Matthew speaks were not just astronomers. They were "wise." They represent the inner dynamic of religion towards self-transcendence, which involves a search for truth, a search for the true God and hence "philosophy" in the original sense of the word. Wisdom, then, serves to purify the message of "science": the rationality of that message does not remain at the level of the intellectual knowledge, but seeks understanding in its fullness, and so raises reason to its loftiest

possibilities.

Benedict is reminding us that many in the first century looked to the heavens for truth about human life. Wise Men at the time of Jesus were those who gazed at the heavens seeking truth. They were not looking for practical uses for truth, but rather truth for its own sake. When they came to the stall in Bethlehem they paid tribute to Jesus and went home. They believed truth was its own reward.

We also learn from this passage that the Wise Men were willing to sacrifice for the truth. They had seen a new star in the sky. They knew that this indicated something significant was happening. Some new truth was being revealed. They did not just sit back and hope that the meaning of the star would be reported in the local media.

They packed up supplies and set out to follow the star. They followed the star to see where it would lead. They left home and family behind to follow. They began to travel, which in those days meant danger from robbers, disease and other risks. These Magi risked all to learn what truth the star had to teach them.

We also learn that their search for truth leads to Jesus. The Wise Men followed the star until they came to Jerusalem. They told of the star and asked where the new king might be found. They were told of the Old Testament prophecy concerning Bethlehem. It was in Bethlehem that their long and difficult journey came to an end in a shelter for animals. In Bethlehem they found the infant Jesus in a manger.

The honest search for truth led the Wise Men to Jesus.

What does this story have to teach you and me? I believe that this incident in the life of Jesus teaches us about our search for truth.

First, it teaches us that the journey towards truth begins with believing in the reality of truth. You and I live in a time when even the concept of truth is under attack. Movements such as deconstructionism undermine the belief that truth even exists. There have been many movements in our culture that teach us truth is merely a personal construct. You have your truth and I have mine but there are no universal truths. Shortly before he was elected Pope Benedict said in a speech:

We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desire.

The Magi challenge this abandonment of truth. The Magi are considered wise because they sought ultimate truth.

The Wise Men ask us,

Do we believe in the reality of truth?

Do we hunger for fundamental answers to questions of meaning?

Are these questions important to us?

Socrates told us that an unexamined life is not worth living. The Magi challenge us in the same way to seek truth.

The Magi teach us that the search for truth demands sacrifice. The sacrifices demanded for truth are real. Are we willing to support an educational system that encourages people to seek truth? Are students willing to search for it? Are we willing to help teach Sunday school or support our Christian education program in some other way? Do we believe that truth is important enough to make material sacrifices for it?

But even more risky for us is our being willing to entertain new ideas and to give up old ways of looking at the world. A search for truth forces us to give up old misconceptions and cherished ideas that are comfortable to us.

One of the first plays I saw at Studio Arena was a musical on the life of Galileo. It told the story of Galileo's conflict with the religious and political authorities over his evidence that the sun is the center of the solar system. Think of the pain that men and women experienced when Copernicus and Galileo discovered that the earth was not the center of the solar system. Many people believed that the earth was at the center of all things. They were comfortable with this understanding. It was felt God had created the earth at the center of the natural world. To have this belief challenged seemed to isolate humankind in the universe. To give up this belief was painful, yet truth demanded it.

I want to be clear, again and again an honest search for truth will force us to rethink cherished ideas. This is not a painless process. When we think we have all the answers and then discover that some are wrong, it takes great courage to change. I believe that if you have not changed your mind about something in the last twenty years, it probably means you have given up the search for truth. A real hunger for truth will cause us to wrestle with some of our most cherished ideals.

The journey towards truth concludes at the manger. The Magi teach us that the search for truth leads us ever closer to Jesus.

May we remember that an honest seeker moves closer to our Lord. There are times in our spiritual journey that we experience doubt and questions. We each have had times when we question the reality of our faith. We have times when we wonder about the truth of the Gospel. We all have had days when we wonder, is God real.

My friends, these times of questioning and doubt are not always moving us away from God. They are an important part of the journey of faith. Tim Keller tells us:

A faith without some doubts is like a human body with no antibodies in it. People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask the hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic. A person's faith can collapse almost overnight if she failed over the years to listen patiently to her own doubts, which should only be discarded after long reflection.

The Magi had times when hills and mountains and clouds obscured their vision of the star. Yet they continued to journey on seeking the truth of that star.

So, our periods of shadows and questions are part of our Christian pilgrimage. We can be assured that a sincere seeker of the truth, a person with honest questions is moving ever closer to the manger in Bethlehem.

Today, when you come forward to receive communion, on the tables at the sides are baskets with stars. On each star is a word that indicates a gift or trait or a characteristic or an activity. Please pick up one star.

This is your star word for the coming year. Put it on a mirror or refrigerator or in your desk or maybe where you sit and pray.

During this year ponder what truth this star-word might be prompting you to do or think.

On this first Sunday of the New Year ask yourself some questions.

What new thing does God want you to do?

What new adventure does God want you to undertake this year?

What new truth will you learn this year?

And are you willing to follow your star?