

Follow That Star
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher
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Matthew 2:1–12

This year in our Advent season, we have focused our on following the star. We have directed our gaze away from the crowded manger scene to looking upward into the heavens to get our inspiration. Even Jupiter and Saturn cooperated when they came into a convergence being the closest together since March 1229. This time they came on December 21 having it dubbed as the “Christmas Star”. There has been lots of star talk and star looking in and out of our faith community.

Today is the day that we celebrate the strangers from the East worshipping the Christ child. They are led to the Christ child by the bright star. This coming Wednesday, January 6 is epiphany, the 12th day of Christmas. It is official end of our Christmas season even though so many of us have already moved on. Don’t pack up your holiday decorations quite yet, don’t take down those lights and snow globes in your front yard because the Maji have yet to come!

A reading from Matthew 2:1-12

Matthew 2:1–12

¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men 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, 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 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 my people Israel.”” ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men 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, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, 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.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thank be to God.

As we lit candles each week in Advent the wise men were on their journey. As we sang silent Night on Christmas Eve, the wisemen were continuing on. As we opened presents and wished each other a Merry Christmas and a better new year, wise men were plodding forward; one foot after the other. And so now the wise men are soon to arrive, coming when we have had our share of Christmas cookies and well wishes. When the needles of our once perky live tree are starting to make a mess, that wise men are about to arrive.

You’ve got to hand it to the Maji. They are curious enough to carry on even when the shepherds are back in their fields and Mary and Joseph have settled into some kind of sleep-deprived semblance of a normal life

for new parents. Like guests who come just as the party is winding down, the kings appear at the doorstep ready to celebrate and honor the new born king. Here come the kings, they have been following that star all that time. You have to admire their initiative that got them to leave their home and go on a cross-country journey. You have to give them their persistence and tenacity to use a star as their navigation system.

Following a star may not be all that it is cracked up to be. We see pictures of the wisemen on their camels quietly and intently heading in a single file on a direct route. There is no back tracking, no detours. All the scenes of the wisemen's journey is a calm and starry night in the desert slowly methodically moving forward. We see the camels peacefully stepping with no distractions. I have never been up close and personal with a camel but I hear that they are not the most congenial of beasts. But you would not know it from the Christmas cards depicting the wisemen coming from the East. All is calm and all is bright. I would love some artist rendition of the wisemen navigating a sand storm or a cloudy night; or the travelers huddled together wondering where the star is now.

As recorded in Matthew, the travelers did need some directional help, and that is where the story takes a dark turn. They end up asking the local leader, but little do they know that Herod is the villain to this adventure and not the helpful public servant. It is later that the Maji become aware of Herod's duplicity. The visitors persist and are led to the place where the Christ child is. Although the account in Matthew makes it seem like how unremarkable that these strangers end up at the modest home in an out of the way town. Matthew makes it seem quite ordinary that they would bring rare and expensive treasures to a baby of the carpenter of Nazareth and his young wife. Then as quickly as they came, they leave but this time defying Herod by leaving and going home another way. Maybe because it is so familiar that it seems so matter of

fact. We hear no more of the fate of the foreigner visitors and how this journey had affected them for the remainder of their lives. You have to wonder; did they really find what they expected when they began their quest?

Let's look at these mysterious foreigners as our own avatars of faith. Our own journey in faith may appear ordinary, but truly is as mysterious as these visitor's travels were. Like the Maji, our faith begins with outward signs. We see symbols of our faith all around. Each creche lovingly laid out, each church steeple points us to our faith. Our empty cross behind me is a continual reminder of our faith. Even our building is a sign of God's presence in the world through Jesus Christ. These are sign and symbols of God's presence here with us now. They are markers for our journey. But our signs of God are not only things made with human hands, we can also look at the intricate beauty of the world. As we look up in the heavens, we see God's magnificent work. All these outward signs can lead us in the path toward God's Son but like the Maji's navigation system, sometimes the way is not clear and sometimes we need to stop ask for directions. Coming to faith alone with these road markers along the way helps us but does not get us to the destination. As the Maji sought out Herod, Herod's advisors consulted the prophets who did get the visitors to their final destination. Our scripture help connect the dots of our moments of awe inspired wonder. The Bible is our directional guide but again sometimes the directions are scant or they seem to be obscure or contradict. As the Wisemen found, sometimes those who we seek to follow may not be as reliable as we hoped. One of the things about being a Presbyterian is that periodically we gather, and through scripture and each other's insights, speak to the challenges of the day. As a result, throughout our history, we have written and accepted Confessions of Faith.

These statements are by fallible humans mostly by a group and are edited and parsed by others. The Confessions seek to address the times in which they are written and helpfully to give help and insight for future generations as well. One of those confessions is the Barmen declaration written by a group of Christian theologians in 1934 in response to the German Christian Church which had been usurped by the Reich. Imagine being a Christian on our journey of faith and having the recognized church say, we believe in Jesus Christ but also, we will follow what Hitler says about matters at hand. In fact, we think Jesus was not a Jew but came from the Aryan race. A group of the faithful responded by writing this declaration. It begins: In view of the errors of the "German Christians" and of the present Reich Church Administration, which are ravaging the Church and at the same time also shattering the unity of the German Evangelical Church, we confess the following evangelical truth. We reject the false doctrine that the Church could have permission to hand over the form of its message and of its order to whatever it itself might wish or to the vicissitudes of the prevailing ideological and political convictions of the day.¹

The Confessing Church did not try to sugar coat it. They were calling the established Christian church out! Getting off the track happens throughout our history. Christians at one time supported slavery. Christians at one time thought it was ok to usurp native land. Followers of Christ still are sometimes unclear as to whom we can love. And so, the navigational system can be faulty at times. But we persist, because like the Maji, we have a directional compass that keeps us going. When we get turned around or follow in a direction that is not toward God we persist until we find the way.

¹ The Barmen Declaration 1934.

When we find what we are seeking, when we make a place within us where God can dwell, then we, like the wisemen, are overwhelmed by joy and we may find not what we expected. It may not be bright lights and glorious songs. It may be in the quiet warming of our hearts. Or in the midst of the turbulence and uncertainty of the world a calming voice within that says all is well, all will be well.

Our journey truly is a saga that does not necessarily follow a straight path. In our journey we sometimes go off course. We are fed by the outward signs that keep our intentions on track, and we are fed by the words of scripture and the acts of faith. In faith we are about to gather as one in our separate places. How crazy does that sound? It is in an act of faith that we participate in our hearts or in action in this meal before us. We are one body in Christ. This meal that Jesus gives us is a way station in our spiritual journey. It nourishes and support us to continue to follow our heart that tell us to love God and to love each other and to act how that takes shape in our lives.

We need our outward signs as well as our inward commitment to get us where we are going, the place of the Christ child. When we arrive at the place and we invite God to dwell in our hearts, things will never be the same. We are at the start of a new year. Just like we did not know what was in store for us in 2020 we are here in 2021. But as we take on this New Year journey. We take on this journey to follow and meet not a baby but the risen Christ and what that means in our lives today. Thank be to God! Amen and Amen.