

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor  
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### Matthew 2:1-12 (NRSV)

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.

## NEEDFUL THINGS

Horror novelist Stephen King in 1991 wrote a book entitled *Needful Things*. The story is set in a small fictional New England town, Castle Rock, Maine.

In the town a new gift shop is opened by a seemingly kind older gentleman named Leland Gaunt. The allure of the shop is that for each of the townspeople the shop's inventory includes an item thought to be the thing most wanted in life. However, none of the people can afford to buy the item.

And so the shop owner offers each of them a trade. A favor done for him will secure the most wanted item. Each is to play what appears to be a simple prank on another of the townspeople. Gradually the residents of Castle Rock begin to turn on one another until at end of the story the whole town is in chaos.

Leland Gaunt turns out to be none other than the devil himself. Traveling throughout the countries of the world, he has been selling junk to people who thought they were purchasing the item they most wanted. What the shoppers failed to notice were the words inscribed above the shop's entrance...*Caveat Emptor*... "Let the buyer beware."

## OUR GUIDING LIGHT

King's story has a good moral. What is the guiding light in our life? What do we buy into? And where will that purchase lead us? Will the things we "need" the most lead us closer to God or farther away?

I've been watching the presidential candidates this past week, and that's how I've been trying to evaluate them. What do they really believe? What do they buy into?

Are they constantly changing their positions on key issues? Do they have heartfelt convictions or do they just believe in political polls and perfect hair? Sometimes it's hard to tell isn't it?

But, I think that we shouldn't be too critical of these candidates. Sometimes the same thing could be said of us. Sometimes our life is guided more by expediency than by principle.

Sometimes we have trouble in life because we buy into things that are not all that important. We lead an unreflective life. We have no star to lead us, and this makes our way very dark indeed.

The story of the Magi can help us with this. Their story can remind us of the importance of keeping first things first. The Magi can help us remember what we really need most in life.

Today we hear a lot about trying to develop a ministry for people who have never been involved with the church. Many do not understand the traditions and language of the church. How can we help these seekers as they are sometimes called?

I think that this story can help us in that quest as well. The Magi were true seekers. They were after more than personal comfort or happiness. They were trying to do more than solve a scientific problem. They were sincerely seeking the truth with a capital T. They wanted more than anything else to understand the One who created heaven and earth.

I think this should be the underlying goal of every church. We must be dedicated to truth, God's truth as revealed in Jesus Christ.

So, this morning let us join these Wise Men on their journey as they point us toward that truth.

## THE FAITH JOURNEY

To begin with, the Magi remind us that God's presence is often found at the end of a long journey. The Magi had the courage to leave home in search of something greater. I think this might be the hardest part of the story for us to emulate.

Many of us have a strong desire to keep things as they are. We may be unhappy with our life, but at least it's safe. We want to stay right where we are because change of any kind can be very threatening.

But, God in one way or another always seems to be prodding us to move on. To follow God is to leave home, to go on a journey. To follow God is to be a part of an adventure.

Some of you may be familiar with the "Outward Bound" wilderness program. It offers everyone an opportunity to explore wilderness areas of our country. At the same time these adventures develop personal survival skills. Through the wilderness experience many people find a new sense of courage, and self-confidence.

The program was originally started in the stormy waters of the North Sea during World War II. It was a way to give experience and practical skills to sailors and prepare them for the battles that were sure to come.

The name "Outward Bound" is actually a nautical term used when ships leave the certainty of the harbor. It is said that these journeys take people to places they've only dreamed of and leaves them with things that last a lifetime. One might say they were outward bound to become inwardly free. The search for the principle thing begins with a star and also involves a journey.

The same is true when it comes to the life of faith. Almost all faith stories begin with a person who is called by God to leave home.

Think about Abraham, the Bible's poster boy for what it means to be faithful. Abraham left home to go where God would lead him. He was guided by the promise of a new life in a new land. At an age when most people are retiring from life, Abraham was willing to make the journey of a lifetime.

And that's where our faith begins. Like the Magi we must be willing to not only be star gazers but also star followers. We need to do more than just talk about faith or read about faith. We need to take the risk of actually going somewhere.

We need to believe in God's call enough to actually make our way into the wilderness in search of something greater.

The wilderness experience is an important theme in the Bible. In order to discover the sacred, we often have to take that frightening trip into the wilderness. The discovery of that which is most sacred often comes through and comes out of some of the darkest times and events of our lives.

## OUR STAR

How can we know that God is calling us to move on? In ancient times a change in the night sky was a sign that something important was going to happen. Comets and falling stars were thought by some to be signs that one king would be deposed and a new monarch would be born.

What sign might God be giving us? What grabs our attention and makes us wonder what God is doing in our life?

Stars of wonder come in many forms. Sometimes they come in the form of an opportunity. Sometimes they come in the form of a tragedy. Sometimes they come in the form of a friend who points us in a new direction.

But, like the wise men we need to be alert for the new star that appears in the night sky. It just might be pointing to what God is doing in our world today. It just might just be leading us to the holy place, the place that we need to visit above all others.

The Magi, the wise men didn't believe in accidents. They believed in Providence. They believed that God was doing something in their lives and in the world, and they believed that their journey had a purpose.

This should be our conviction as well. We are not here by accident. God loves us, and God has a plan for our life.

God has a journey for us to take, and God gives each of us a star to guide us on our way. Our star is not just a light in the night sky. It is a principle that overlooks all that we say and do. The star points to the goal of our journey.

## THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

So what should be the goal of our journey? Many of us act as if the goal of journey should be to preserve what we have and protect our way of life.

Certainly that was Herod's goal. Herod's every action was based upon the politics of control. Everything Herod did was done toward the end of making sure that he was the one who stayed in power.

But, control is an illusion, even for kings. The more we seek to control our lives, the more it seems like things get out of control.

If you are trying to preserve what you have and stay where you are, watch out! The Magi will soon appear on your doorstep with some startling news. The world is not like you imagined it to be or wished it to be.

That's how it was when the Magi came to the king with the news. There was one born king of the Jews. That was about the worst news anyone could have given Herod.

That news represented his deepest fear. You would think that the person in charge would have no reason to fear. But, sometimes people rise to positions of power because they are driven by fear. Their own personal insecurities can lead them to covet power and control.

The Bible tells us that the Magi's message was not only bad news for Herod; it was bad news for all of Jerusalem as well.

Apparently, the Magi came with quite an entourage, and the wise men openly inquired about the "one who was born king of the Jews".

Regime change can be very painful if you're trying to preserve your way of life. And so everyone, all of Jerusalem was deeply troubled by the message of the Magi.

## WORSHIP

But, the Magi seem oblivious to the trouble that they are causing. They simply came to worship the newborn king. They are single minded in their approach. They have their star, and they are following it no matter what.

The Magi believed more than anything else that God was doing something above them and beyond them in this child that was born in Bethlehem. And they just wanted to worship.

The word translated worship means literally "to kiss the hand." It can also mean to "prostrate oneself in recognition of and submission to a higher authority." These wise men just wanted to be a part of what God was doing in the world. Nothing else was important to them.

But, Herod and the people of Jerusalem, like so many people today were incapable of worship.

They didn't believe in a higher authority. If you can't see beyond what you want and what you need, worship is impossible.

You see, worship is at its heart a selfless act. Worship is an act of humility. Worship is trusting not in ourselves but in the power of another. Herod and his cronies in Jerusalem didn't have a humble bone in their bodies. They were self-absorbed and power hungry.

When it came to Herod, you were either with him or against him.

You see, Herod didn't really believe in God. Herod believed in Herod. Herod didn't seek God. Herod sought political advantage by his clever manipulation of religion.

Watch out when a politician talks piously about wanting to worship. It could be a smokescreen to hide a desire for power and personal gain.

Such was the case for Herod. Herod learned from his theologians that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem.

So the king decided to use these strangers for his own purposes. He told the Magi to go and find the newborn king in that little town outside of Jerusalem and then report back to him at the palace.

Herod "said" that he wanted to worship this new king as well.

## EXCEEDING GREAT JOY

I wonder if the Magi really needed another dream to know that this was a trick. What kind of king wants to willingly give up his crown and worship another? But, without a word the Magi go on their way and find Jesus.

To say that the Magi found what they wanted most is an understatement. Their guiding light takes them the very spot where they need to be. And it is an event that transforms their lives.

They worship. They experience the power and presence of God.

As we sang at our Christmas program several years ago, they rejoiced with “exceeding great joy ... great joy, great joy.”

It wasn't ordinary joy that the Magi experienced. It was “exceeding great joy”. It was super joy. It was a level of fulfillment and hope that was beyond their wildest dreams and expectations.

They worshipped, and their worship led to giving. The Magi opened up their treasure chests and presented the Christ child with precious gifts, gifts fit for a king ... gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The most expensive things that this world has to offer pales in comparison to the one thing that is necessary, the presence and power of God as revealed in Jesus.

The Magi point us in the right direction. They gave up everything in order to find meaning and truth. They gave up everything in order to witness the presence of God as revealed in His Son, Jesus.

## THE CHOICE

The contrast and the choice couldn't be clearer.

Like Herod it is easy for us to live a self-absorbed life. We too can be motivated by self-preservation and unrestricted ambition.

And we too often give our political allegiance to those who feed that motivation. We give our vote to those who cynically feed our desire for self-gratification and self-preservation at any cost.

But, there is another way. The Magi and their star point us in the right direction. We can worship Jesus. We can give up our treasures and give ourselves to him. We can give up everything in order to get the one thing that we really need.

Jesus once said that the kingdom of heaven is like a pearl of great price, a pearl so rare that you are willing to give up everything and sell everything in order to obtain it. The main thing in life, the thing most needed said Jesus is not what everyone else is seeking. The main thing in life is this pearl of great price, the kingdom of heaven as revealed in Jesus.

I wonder. Are we seeking the pearl of great price? Is our life oriented toward this treasure that is greater than any other? Does our life have a guiding light that keeps us moving toward Bethlehem, the place of God's salvation?

Or do we use religion as a way to get what we want rather than seeking what God wants?

Don't be too quick to criticize Herod. There's more than a little Herod in each of us. We don't want anyone to dethrone our wishes and desires. We might not want to be king, but we do want to be king of our own lives. We want to do what we want to do.

And that kind of self-centered journey can lead us to ruin. It can lead us to kill off that part of our lives that we most need to cultivate.

## PRICELESS

Joy and salvation cannot be found if we seek them too directly. But, when we relinquish the throne, when we deny ourselves, then we are truly free to find Jesus and true joy.

That empty spot in our heart is filled with something that we can't buy ... even with MasterCard. It is the priceless presence of God as revealed in Jesus.

Like the Magi we are filled with "exceeding great joy." We are filled with a hope that cannot be extinguished by political tyrants or people who disappoint us or the sands of time or even death.

That kind of hope is priceless.

According to the Lord's Supper, that kind of hope can only be purchased by body broken and blood shed.

That is a price too high for us. But, God in Christ paid the price. What we could not do for ourselves, God in Christ did for us.

Hitch your hope to that star. Hitch your hope to the salvation and forgiveness that comes to us only in Jesus. That's the one needful thing in your life. That's the one thing you need to hold on to above all others.

And when, in your journey you find the king of creation and Lord of your life, you too will rejoice. Like the Magi you will rejoice with exceeding great joy.

I think one of our church members puts it well. The last line on her answering machine is this: "May joy come to your house."

Amen.