

Matthew 2:1-12
Embry Hills UMC
January 3, 2010

If you look at the hand-painted ceramic crèche that my kids made, you'll see them there. Three Wise Men and the camels they rode in on. Of course, they've become such a part of our Christmas story that we think that everyone belongs in the manger scene together—Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, the shepherds and angels, and the Wise Men. Three, of course.

But, the Wise Men are not a part of Luke's story of Jesus' birth. Matthew gives us no shepherds and angels, and Luke gives us no Wise Men. So, had it not been for the author of Matthew's Gospel, we would never have known the story of these mysterious men from the East.

Personally, I'm grateful for their story. Now, before we even rehearse their story, let's remind ourselves that we do not know their names or how many of them there were. Three Wise Men with names is a part of much later Christian tradition. What Matthew tells us is that some astrologers from the Orient hear about the birth of Jesus and desire to find him and to pay homage to him.

Sounds easy enough, right? So, these star-gazers head to Jerusalem and start asking around as to where they can find the child whose birth had been signaled to them by the stars. But, there's a fly in the ointment. A guy named Herod, who wants to use the Wise Men as a tool to reinforce his own sense of threat.

So, let's look at the story of these mysterious men and see what it has for us on this first Sunday of a brand new year.

First, they were following their star. The Wise Men had a vision of where they wanted to be, what they wanted to do, who they wanted to see, how they wanted to proceed. And, their arrival in Jerusalem is not a visit by tourists just hanging around and checking out the sights. They're on a mission. And, I can think of no better example for us on the cusp of this new year than that.

Where do you want to go? What do you see for yourself? What do you want in this new year? What stars are you wishing to follow? What vision do you have for your life? So often, we act as if we're imprisoned to the way things are or to the way things have always been. And, this hopeful story of these Wise Men reminds us that, if we're watching and noticing and paying attention, there is always a star shining somewhere. Even in the times of our lives that are darkest and most bleak, there's a shining star. It's the star of our best dreams, our highest hopes, our greatest wishes, our deepest vision—for ourselves and for the world around us. What are those dreams for you? What are your hopes for this year? What are your wishes for your life? What vision do you have for yourself? It is never too late to catch a glimpse of that star and to follow it. That's what keeps us alive. There's a word for that star. That word is hope. And, hope is not just for the young.

Where do you find your highest hopes and greatest dreams? Follow them.

Of course, any time we strike out in response to a guiding star, we will encounter obstacles. For the Wise Men, it was a man named Herod. For us, it can be anything. Anything that keeps us from following our guiding star and from fulfilling our greatest dreams. And, the Wise Men offer an example for us of those who are aware of the obstacles they face and who refuse to be overcome by them. What are those obstacles for you? Excuses? Expectations? Past failures? Fear? Doubts about your own ability? Whatever they are, be stubborn in the face of them. The Wise Men provide an example for us of setting out and following our guiding star with patience and perseverance and persistence. Following stars is not easy. Because, for every star you see up in the sky, there's a ditch or a detour in the road. Keep on trucking. And, always remember that you're following the star and not the obstacles. How many times in my life have I lost my way because I had a stronger relationship with the detours than I did with the star?

And, perhaps the greatest part of this story is what the Wise Men experience when they finally arrive at their destination. They were overwhelmed with joy. On the other end of whatever star we are following is the joy of having faithfully followed. When we set out in response to God's calling, when we bravely go where we know God wants us to be, when we persist in the face of whatever obstacles we encounter, and when we arrive at what we know has been our God-given vision, we know the fullness of joy.

By the way, whatever we star we are following doesn't have to be something heroic. It may just be the little thing that we've always wanted to do. It may just be the little thing that we've always known that we were called to carry out. We're not talking about climbing mountains or about doing the impossible. We're just talking about doing what we know we have been called to do. And, we're talking about the joy that comes from that kind of faithful fulfillment.

On this first Sunday of a brand new year, we receive the gifts that the Wise Men have to give. Oh, I know about gold and frankincense and myrrh. But, I'm talking about the two gifts they bring us today that can make all the difference in the world. They bring to us the gifts of hope and joy.

The road lies ahead of you. And, there is a star for you to follow. And, here in this room are people who are willing to hold your hand as you journey. And, I wish for each and all of us the joy of arriving very soon at the place where God most hopes we will be.