

WORDS FROM THE WISE

Matthew 2:1-12

*The story of the Magi
informs our journey.*

A sermon preached by
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Garrison Keillor was the host of the live radio show “A Prairie Home Companion” for over 40 years. Part of each week’s broadcast was Keillor’s update of the week’s events in the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota. One week he told about an elderly resident of the town who was driving his ancient car down the street. The man hit a big pothole with such force that it knocked 100,000 miles off the odometer on his car. According to Keillor, the elderly gentleman said that after the bump, not only did the car seem suddenly newer, but that he himself felt somehow rejuvenated and born again.

Maybe after a hectic and exhausting holiday season, you find yourself in need of renewal and rejuvenation. Wouldn’t it be nice to knock 100,000 miles off your odometer!

What a good pothole can do for an old car, Christ can do for our lives. We can be rejuvenated. We can be revived. I believe that’s the kind of encounter the Wise Men had when they finally found the child Jesus. They had put many miles on their odometer (if camels had odometers); they had come a long way. Yet when they encountered Christ, when they saw the baby King, God’s own Messiah, they were renewed, rejuvenated, transformed. It changed the direction of their lives. As we begin this New Year, what can we see in their encounter with Jesus that will help us be transformed and renewed?

The coming of the Wise Men to Bethlehem marks the beginning of the season of Epiphany. If you’re not really familiar with Epiphany, it comes from the Greek word *epiphania*, which means “revelation” or “manifestation.” After the twelve days of Christmas, the coming of the Wise Men is commemorated on January 6, or the Day of Epiphany. This year it happens to fall on a Sunday. In the early Church, Epiphany was actually a bigger deal than Christmas, and it is still a major celebration in Orthodox churches and Hispanic culture. Historically, it may have been up to two years after the birth of Christ before the Wise Men arrived, because Herod later ordered the murder of all the male children up to two years old in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph were

apparently settled into a house by this point. So don't take your nativity scenes with shepherds and Wise Men too literally.

Matthew calls the Wise Men *magi*, which most scholars think means astrologers. They came from the East somewhere, maybe Persia, but they were most likely Gentiles, not Jews at all, pagans who were attracted by the portent in the sky. The importance of all this for us is to see that the birth of Jesus had wider implications than just the salvation of the Jews. Jesus was meant from the very beginning to be the Messiah for all people, the Savior of the world.

So the manifestation of the Christ comes to the *Magi*. What does this revelation mean for us today? What is it about these strange visitors from the East that can revive and transform us for this New Year?

First, the Wise Men **NOTICED THE SIGNS**. They were in the business of watching for signs. They watched the heavens for signs of important events. Sometime earlier they had seen a star unlike any other they had ever seen. The brilliance of it led them on a journey to find out the cause of this heavenly sign. They thought the universe was trying to tell them something. They noticed the sign, and they were on their way.

God, the Creator of the universe, is still giving signs to those who pay attention. To paraphrase the Psalmist, the heavens still tell of the glory of God, and the earth proclaims his handiwork.

Country music star George Strait has a song called, "I Saw God Today." In a flower growing through the sidewalk, in a young couple in love, in a sunset, in a newborn baby, he sees God in the world. The words of the chorus go,

I've been to church, I've read the book,
I know He's there, But I don't look
Near as often as I should.
His fingerprints are everywhere;
I just look down and stop and stare,
open my eyes and then I swear,
I Saw God Today.¹

We can still see God in the world today. His grace is evident in the love we share, the forgiveness we feel, the peace we know even when the world around us is in turmoil. Every life that is changed, every disease that is healed, every broken heart that finds strength to carry on is a sign that God is still at work in the world.

Are you paying attention? Notice the signs.

When the Wise Men noticed the sign from God, they **FOLLOWED THE STAR**. In today's terms, that means grasp your vision; dream your dream; pursue your goal; and don't ever give up. The *Magi* followed the star for as long as two years before finding the Christ Child. How many cloudy nights had there been in two years? How many times did they long for the comforts of home and family? How many times did they doubt their quest?

The Wise Men had no highway, no map, no GPS leading to the house in Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph were staying. But they had seen a sign. They had a vision. They had a goal they were determined to achieve. And they pursued it with single-minded passion. They followed the star.

One autumn day in 1900, a young man saw a star in his mind's eye. His name was Robert Goddard, and while he was pruning a cherry tree, he had a vision, an epiphany of a new type of transportation. Goddard dreamed he could build rocket ships that could soar through the atmosphere and beyond to take people where they had never gone before. Standing under the tree that day, Robert Goddard became a "one-dream man." As he followed his star, he endured health problems and ridicule. But he persisted. He earned his doctorate in physics from Princeton and received government grants for his research.

In 1926, using a 60-foot windmill frame he had purchased from Sears and Roebuck, Goddard launched a liquid-propelled rocket that soared 184 feet in the air. The next day the local paper read, "Moon Rocket Misses Target By 238,799 ½ Miles."

Nevertheless, Robert Goddard persevered, and today he is considered the father of all rocket science. Every jet aircraft, every missile, every

space capsule ever launched owes its development to the original vision of this man who followed his star.²

What's your passion? What's your single-minded dream? What do you want to accomplish more than anything else in the world? It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that you ought to follow that star!

The third thing the Wise Men did was to **OFFER THEIR GIFTS**. The whole point of the journey was to bring gifts to honor the new King of Israel. The text doesn't actually say how many Wise Men there were, but it does mention three gifts. The gifts were symbolic of the identity of the Messiah. Gold was the sign of royalty. Only kings were able to have gold in abundance. Frankincense was a natural resin burned for fragrance in worship. It was a symbol of divinity. And myrrh was the strangest gift of all, at least for a child. It was a spice used to anoint dead bodies for burial. It was a symbol of the sacrificial gift of his life that the King would one day give his people. Isaiah had predicted the gold and frankincense. Nobody saw the sacrifice coming. But as we sing in the hymn, Jesus was "King and God and Sacrifice."³ The gifts give witness to the gospel.

We also have an opportunity to give our gifts as a witness to the life-saving gospel of Jesus. Each of us has a gift to share, and sharing our gift keeps the spirit of Christmas alive all year long.

The late Howard Thurman wrote a beautiful and powerful Christmas poem called "The Work of Christmas." It has been set to music, and we have used it in our "Carols and Lessons" service. If you read your Advent devotional booklet from the church this year, Nancy Vernon quoted it in her devotional:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nation,
To bring peace among the people,
To make music in the heart.⁴

The wonder of Christmas must produce the work of Christmas if the spirit of Christmas is to stay alive. What gifts can you give in the coming year that will make the good news a reality in your home, in your church, and in your community? Offer those gifts.

Finally, the Wise Men **WENT HOME DIFFERENT**. After they had made the journey, inquired of Herod, and seen the Child, the *Magi* were warned in a dream not to go back to Jerusalem, so they returned to their country by another route. They went home a different way, but they also went home different people. The meeting with the Messiah changed their hearts forever. How could you stay the same after you've seen the Savior?

There is no backtracking on the way to the Kingdom. If the Wise Men had backtracked, they would have run into the sword of Herod! I suppose there is always a part of us that would like to go back to some imagined time when things were better or simpler or happier. But when we think about it, we realize that we can't backtrack our lives. We can't go back—as individuals, as a church, as a community, as a society. We have to move forward. But if we are moving forward with God, then we're going the right direction! There are changes all around us and even in us, but if God is leading the changes, they are changes for the better.

Thomas Merton, the American mystic, once wrote, “A true encounter with Christ liberates something in us, a power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life, a resilience, an ability to bounce back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change, a power of creative transformation.”

The Wise Men encountered Christ in the baby (or maybe toddler) Jesus, and they went home a different way. If we have a personal

encounter with the risen and living Christ, our journey will be different from this point forward. We will have power, hope, a capacity for life, resilience in our struggles. We will grow and change. We will be “creatively transformed” by the Spirit within us.

There are many ways to encounter Christ and be creatively transformed. Maybe you make a New Year’s resolution. More power to you. Maybe you were here last week and renewed your covenant with God using Wesley’s words. That’s powerful, too. Today you can be renewed as we come to the Lord’s Table. The sacrament of the Lord’s Supper has power to renew, revive, and transform your life. Come to this Table as the Wise Men came to the house in Bethlehem long ago: full of wonder, full of anticipation, full of relief that now at long last you have found what you are seeking.

Notice the signs of bread and cup and community today. Follow the star of the Savior who gave his life for you. Receive his gifts, and give your gifts to him. And your life, your heart, your soul, your journey will be different from this moment forward.

¹ Rodney Clawson, Monty Criswell, Wade Kirby, “I Saw God Today,” 2008.

² Barbara Nichols, “One-Dream Man,” *Out of the Blue* (N. Y.: Harper-Collins, 1996), 72f.

³ “We Three Kings,” *United Methodist Hymnal*, #254.

⁴ www.workersforjesus.com/workofchristmas.htm