

Follow the Magi
Preached at Old First Presbyterian Church
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As a cradle Presbyterian, I appreciate our ability to do things decently and in good order. Witness our movement through the beginnings of the liturgical year. We come through 4 fairly predictable weeks of Advent, though we were thrown a little off our stride because Christmas Eve fell on a Sunday. The Sunday after Christmas has come and gone. Now here at the start of the new year - we're looking at that traditional text that rounds out our Nativity understandings - the journey of the Magi. And next week, the lectionary is off and running through the turbulent and urgent gospel of Mark.

But if we can pause for a moment, and remain open to looking more closely, listening more closely, we will begin to notice that the order, the tidiness of our understandings as reflected in the way we move through the Advent and Christmas seasons is thrown off more than a little as we consider what God is up to in this epiphanic moment. As Isaiah calls us to arise, to shine, reminding us that our light has come, we need to realize that for millennia, we have found our grounding in the cacophony, chaos and smell of sheep and angels, finding comfort in a star that moves. We have put our trust in foreign star-gazers who connected some ancient prophetic dots that called them to get on the road. And we've lodged all our hopes in a kid born to uncertain and unprepared parents in an animal shelter in an insignificant town. None of this is decent or orderly.

As we take up this text, we need to remember that Matthew is going to great lengths to help his audience overcome their anxiety about their commitment to follow a man who ended up dead. The resurrection notwithstanding, the "great commission," when put into actual practice wasn't feeling so great. The absence of Jesus from their community and the reality that he didn't seem to be coming back anytime soon did little to assuage their deep grief.

And with each passing day, with every passing year, frustration, fear, hopelessness threatened to overwhelm them as the distance between the actuality of Jesus' presence and the day-to-day realities of carrying his mission forward grew. As the revolutionary, risk-taking followers of the Way

found themselves ever more at risk, it became more and more difficult to stay on the journey, especially in an environment that was becoming increasingly hostile to them and the hope-filled message of radical justice, life-transforming mercy and unconditional love that was focused on “the least of these.”

Matthew begins by reminding his community of the lineage of Jesus - and he doesn't gloss it over. He includes the rough years when Ruth and her family were exiled by famine. He recalls the painful past of David's transgressions and even highlights Joseph and his entire family in their prominent place on the family tree. Once the lineage is affirmed, Matthew moves right into Joseph's story which is definitely not a clean-cut, trouble-free tale of prophetic, poetic, beauty. Joseph's understanding of the shattering of his once predictable world is, at best, limited. And the way forward is really not clear. Even so, he makes a commitment to go forward.

Enter The Magi - and the telling of this odd story - Matthew's third attempt to provide light for the darkness of doubt and fear in his community.

For 2000+ years, we've done a pretty good job of smoothing out all the rough edges of this story. Our nativities commemorate the heavenly peace where all present bask in the glow of the Christ child and kneel to offer gifts. To be honest, there's very little in our Christmas traditions that point to the reality of life under Herod and the injustice of his terrible acts, even though, it wouldn't be hard to make connections to today's reality, placing Herod in parallel with despotic leaders, and oppressive hegemonic forces.

We do need to give thanks for the commitment of the Magi, and their tenacious example, as they made it through not only an arduous journey but the conniving manipulations of Herod. As we turn to these wise Magi, these unexpected outsiders, we do so in the hopes that they will again point us to the glory of God's surprising and comforting presence in the world.

But here's the thing.

The Magi were mistaken.

They came looking for a king. They wanted to bring gifts, to pay homage to a powerful lord - equal in strength and purpose to those in their own land. When they stopped in Jerusalem, it wasn't an accident. Though the star seemed to lead them there, in reality, it was also the obvious place to find a king - Jerusalem: the headquarters of the Jewish people, the center of power for both the religious elite and the political heart of Israel. But as Walter Brueggemann, in his beautifully blunt way, put it so well: They were off by 9 miles, which, by the way, is the distance from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. It's ironic that it was Herod's own advisors who had to point them in the direction of Bethlehem."

Yet even the mistake of the Magi can be instructive for us. Their hope for a brilliantly just and wise king took them to the most logical place. But once they figured out who Herod was and what he was up to, they didn't hang around, hoping to change him, focusing on how to make adjustments to his way of ruling. They picked up their gear and got on the road again, following the star to Bethlehem and there they finally found just what they had been looking for.

I feel like this is the quintessential journey that all humans have in common. We look high and low for answers, for meaning, for salvation from the terrors of our time. We see something alluringly shiny and decide to follow, hoping that **this** (whatever the THIS is) will lead us to the **thing** (whatever the THING is). For Presbyterians, this often plays out in a quest that begins and ends with head knowledge. If we can just understand the problem, if we can just think long enough and hard enough, we can figure it all out. Make no mistake, the journey of the Magi

I have been serving on the All Agency Review Committee of the PCUSA. For the presbynerds among us - I don't need to tell you how much I have enjoyed doing a deep dive into the work of our denomination. We have celebrated our many gifts, but also have to given significant time to envisioning how the work of the Church might be better coordinated, better focused, more relevant, more connected to our fundamental theology and our understanding of who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do.

We struggled together to find a frame that fit our broad task which involved both intuitive discernment and logical analysis and we ultimately

turned to the 3rd book in our trinity of resources - the Book of Order. It's a beautiful thing, actually - these "foundations of the Polity" because there we find our historic and foundational understandings not just for the church and its mission in the world, but also for us as members of the body of Christ. And it's at the end of the first chapter that we learn that we, like the Magi are called to the wisdom of openness.

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As it participates in God's mission, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A) seeks:

- a new openness to the sovereign activity of God in the Church and in the world, to a more radical obedience to Christ, and to a more joyous celebration in worship and work;
- a new openness in its own membership, becoming in fact as well as in faith a community of women and men of all ages, races, ethnicities, and worldly conditions, made one in Christ by the power of the Spirit, as a visible sign of the new humanity;
- a new openness to see both the possibilities and perils of its institutional forms in order to ensure the faithfulness and usefulness of these forms to God's activity in the world; and
- a new openness to God's continuing reformation of the Church ecumenical, that it might be more effective in its mission.

What does it look like for us to live, like the Magi, into this new openness...
...To take note of where spirit of God is working and obediently join that work.

...To celebrate the beautiful diversity of the community and work to do whatever it takes to offer our best efforts to deepening and broadening the reach of our congregation?

As we live into 2018, We will want to make use of the absolute best of our collective strengths, to go where our heads and our skills and our experience tell us is the right direction. And it's possible that we might end up looking in the wrong places for our hope. It will be tempting to look for our salvation in a mighty warrior, a conqueror who will take on the oppressors and overturn injustice. We may turn our hopes toward a magnificent salvation that flows over us in a wave of power that brings about a glorious revolution.

But if we are truly going to follow the example of the Magi, we have to recognize that the connection these travelers made didn't come from head knowledge. It didn't come from their ability to use logic to predict. It didn't come from the skills and resources they had at their fingertips. It came from the wisdom of openness - openness to what God was doing and where God was calling them. When we follow the Magi's lead, we're more likely to find the work of the savior emerging from the humble confines of a stable, in a nothing of a town, from a mess of a family.

As we enter this new year, may each one of us lean into the new openness of the Magi, watching for God's transforming work to come from unexpected places.

Amen.