

**“Epiphany and the Pattern of True Faith”**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**  
**January 5, 2020**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pr. Nicoletti*

This morning we come to the end of our holiday series. We will return to the Gospel of John next Lord’s Day morning.

We have considered the advents of Christ, we have considered Christmas and the Nativity of Christ, and now we come to the Sunday before Epiphany.

Epiphany, celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup>, focuses on the revelation of who Christ is. In the Eastern Church the emphasis has historically been on the baptism of the Lord. In the Western Church the emphasis has historically been on the coming of the wise men from the East. Sometimes there is also a focus on Jesus’s first miracle at the wedding feast at Cana.

This morning we will be looking at the coming of the wise men to the baby Jesus, in Matthew 2:1-12 – the passage that comes right before the text we looked at last Lord’s Day.

With that said, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

<sup>2:1</sup> Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, <sup>2</sup> saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” <sup>3</sup> When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; <sup>4</sup> and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

<sup>6</sup> “And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

<sup>7</sup> Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.” <sup>9</sup> After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. <sup>11</sup> And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

This is the Word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

Most Merciful God,  
we thank you, now at the time of Epiphany, that you are a God who reveals himself to his people.

Christ, you revealed yourself to Israel at your birth.  
You revealed yourself to the nations with the coming of the Wise Men.  
You revealed yourself in the context of the Trinity at your baptism.  
And you revealed yourself to your disciples in the miracle at Cana.  
And we could go on and on.  
As you have revealed yourself again and again to your people,  
so now, we ask you to reveal yourself to us afresh as we come to your Word.  
Grant this all, we ask, for your mercy's sake.  
Amen.

There is a lot going on in our text this morning, and a lot we could say about it – so much so that I'm already looking forward to coming back to it at future Epiphany Sundays.

But this morning we will focus on what our text, and the events around the coming of the Wise Men – the Magi – have to say about the pattern of true faith for God's people – an aspect of this text pointed out in a fourth century sermon by Augustine. [Augustine, Sermon 199 (p.254-256)]

As we look at our text this morning, we will see three things: We will see a pattern, a warning, and a call. A pattern, a warning, and a call.

Let's dive in and consider those three things.

The first thing we will note together is that in this text we see a pattern. Our text sets before us the pattern of true faith.

And it draws our attention to this pattern by presenting us with a bit of a puzzle.

There are a lot of amazing or supernatural things going on in this passage – but I'm not actually talking about those things. I'm talking about an aspect of how things unfold that is just kind of puzzling ... an aspect that I hadn't noticed before – not until I was preparing for this sermon.

And the puzzle is this: In verses nine through eleven, we get the impression that the star could (and did) point to the precise location – maybe even the exact house – that Jesus was in. But in verse two we get the impression that the star only got the Magi to Judea, at which point they had to stop and ask for further directions.

So what is going on there?

Now, many theories have been raised about the nature of the star itself. A list of natural phenomena that God may have used providentially has been considered by many commentators. [e.g.: Green, 69; Wright, 10] Others have suggested that the object was a star-like manifestation of the glory cloud of God – resting first over Judea, and then more precisely over the house Jesus was in [Leithart, 70].

I'm not going to speculate about what means God may have used to draw the Magi – we're not really told, I don't think that's really the point. He could have used natural means providentially, or he could have placed a supernatural sign first in the sky and then over a house.

Either way, God used the star. But what I want to point out is the *peculiar way* he used it. It seems that the star was *capable* of leading the wise men straight to Jesus's house. But that's not

what God did. At first, God only led them to Judea, and they had to go to Jerusalem to seek further guidance.

So, why was that?

Augustine points out that God did things this way for our instruction – though I would add that it was likely for the instruction of the Magi as well.

Augustine points out that God did what he did to show that he desired that those who come to know Jesus must come to know him through the Scriptures. [Augustine, Sermon 199.2 (p.255)]

The wise men travel from a distant land led by a star. But when they get to Judea, the star is not enough. They must seek guidance from another source. They come to Jerusalem and they inquire of God's people where to find the Messiah – the King of the Jews.

And the people of God answer with the Scriptures. In verse four we read that the chief priests and the scribes were assembled. Being in Jerusalem, they had presumably already heard about the appearance of the star and its meaning, as we can gather from verse three. Then, they were asked *where* the Christ was to be born. And they answer by pointing to the Scriptures. They quote from the prophet Micah – Micah 5:2.

God would not let the wise men – the Magi – come to Christ through their study of the stars alone. He would not let them come to know Christ through the means, the authority, the source of knowledge of *their* choosing alone. He would *use* the sources of knowledge that they already respected – *that* we see clearly in his use of the star. But he would not use that alone. God *could* have used the star alone to lead the Magi to Christ, but he chose not to. Instead he chose to bring them to Judea, and to confront them with his Word – with the Hebrew Scriptures.

And once that was done, the Magi had a choice. They could either trust the Hebrew Scriptures by faith ... or they could turn back.

And in verse eight and nine we read that they went on to Bethlehem, placing their trust in the words of the Hebrew Scriptures.

And once they had done that, we read in verses nine through eleven that by whatever means God may have used, the star then showed the Magi the precise location of the house where they would find Jesus.

And the Magi follow the Word of God, and they follow the star before them, and with the guidance of both they pursue Christ by faith until they find him. And when they find him, they worship him and offer him their costly gifts.

What Matthew lays out here then in this text, for our instruction, is the pattern of true faith – the pattern God ordinarily uses to bring people to himself.

It is the pattern that moves from God's testimony in the world; to God's testimony in his Word; to the active pursuit of God's king, Jesus Christ; and finally to worship and devotion towards Christ as king.

We see that pattern lived out as an example in this text by the wise men – by the Magi.

They begin with the testimony in the world.

In the ancient world many people believed in connections between events in the heavens and events on the earth – between the stars and the lives of people. This connection would have seemed very natural for many people in the ancient world. [Green, 68-69]

We're not given a full picture of what the beliefs of the Magi were as they looked to the stars. We're not told what they were looking for, or what they believed or didn't believe. We're not told how much knowledge they had beforehand regarding Israel, or Yahweh, Israel's God.

But regardless of what led them to study the stars, as they looked at the world – as they looked at creation – they encountered the testimony of God. In the appearance of the star, God bore witness to the Magi about what he was doing in the world. We might not understand the form those connections took, but the Magi did. And so first, God testified as to who he was and what he was doing through the world he had made – through creation.

But as we have said, that was not enough.

It is striking here that the testimony of the world did not lead them directly to God's Messiah. It led them instead to the people of God and the Word of God.

From their encounter there in Jerusalem, both with God's covenant people, and God's revelatory Word, the Magi were then pointed to Christ himself.

And it's important to note that their journey did not end with the people of God, or even the Word of God, but it went on from there to the Messiah of God – the Son of God – the King God had appointed for this world. And so the Magi are led on, by the Word, to Christ.

And when they come to the Messiah – when they come to God's King for the universe, their response is one of worship and devotion. They fall down before Jesus. They worship Jesus. They bring him costly gifts. And in all this they pledge themselves to Jesus as their king.

That is the pattern we see: from the testimony of God in the world, to the testimony of God in his Word, to the pursuit of Christ, and then to devotion to Christ.

And every one of you here this morning who knows Christ has followed that pattern. And you've followed it not only once, but again and again.

It has been the starting point of your faith. *Something* in the world around you focused your attention on the Word of God. If you grew up in a Christian home it may have simply been those around you – your family, your friends, your church, your Christian school – who were living lives that pointed you to Christ, and speaking words directing you to Christ. If you came to faith later in life, it may have been something else – maybe something you encountered that blew a hole in your old worldview, maybe some form of sin or brokenness that forced you to give up your old way of life, maybe an encounter with creation, or a Christian, or some other blessing that pushed you to ask if there was something more out there than you had thought.

What was it for you?

Whatever it may have been, from there, you came to God's Word. Maybe it was directly, in reading or studying the Christian Scriptures yourself. Maybe it was by hearing it preached. Maybe it was in a summary form, as a Christian described and explained God's truth to you. In any case you heard some form of the Word of God.

From there, you needed to take the next step and actually seek Christ himself. You needed to trust that God's Word was true, and pursue Jesus in response. You had to believe he was who the Bible said he was. You needed to trust him. You needed to pray to him. You needed to seek to know him more and more.

And finally, in doing all that, you devoted yourself to him. You didn't just know him, but you worshipped him. You served him. You made sacrifices for him. You devoted your worldly goods to him. You acknowledged that he was king, and you pledged yourself to him.

Every true Christian in this room came to know Christ along that pattern. And every one of us follows that pattern again and again in our Christian lives. We again and again have our attention drawn to God's truth, are called to respond to it in faith, and to then devote ourselves to him in lives of worship and service. Every worship service calls us to that pattern. Every sermon calls us to that pattern.

From the testimony of God in the world around us, to the testimony of God in his Word, to the pursuit of Christ, and then to devotion to Christ.

This is the pattern of true faith. This is the pattern that Matthew gives us in the Magi. This is the first thing for us to consider from our text this morning.

But right alongside that positive pattern in the Magi, we also see a warning – given to us in the scribes and the chief priests in particular, but also the Jews in Jerusalem in general.

And how do we see a warning in them?

Well ... the scribes and chief priests have all the same information as the Magi – more actually! The Magi come and tell them, and all in Jerusalem, how the star appeared, and they presumably explain how they know that this star is meant to indicate the birth of the Messiah – the birth of the Christ.

And then the scribes and the chief priests respond by adding to that information – by laying out what they know from the Hebrew Scriptures about the birth of the Messiah of their God.

The scribes and priests already knew about the location where the Messiah would be born, and now the Magi come and explain to them that *they* know the timing of it – *and it has happened*. The Messiah is here. And based on the responses of the Jews in verses three, along with Herod's violent response later on, we get the impression that the Jews in Jerusalem believed the Magi.

And so what is shocking about the scribes and the chief priests and the Jews of Jerusalem in this passage ... is that none of them joined the Magi on their journey. None of them went with the Magi to Bethlehem. Despite all their knowledge, despite all the information they had, none of them pursued Christ.

Augustine puts it like this – he says: In order to see and worship Jesus, the Magi “were under the necessity of interrogating the leading Jews; so that these would have to answer them from holy scripture, which [the Jewish leaders] had at their fingertips but not in their hearts; unbelievers answering believers about the grace of faith, liars in themselves, truthful against themselves. What, after all, would it have cost them to become [the Magi’s] companions in their quest for the Christ, when they heard from them that they had seen his star and had come eagerly to do him homage; to guide them to Bethlehem of Judah, which they had pointed out from the divine books, together with them to see, together to understand, together to do homage?

“Now, however,” Augustine continues, “having pointed out to others the fountain of life, they themselves died of thirst. They became for the Magi just so many milestones; they pointed the way to travelers walking along the road, but themselves remained inert and unmoving. [...] They pointed to Bethlehem, but did not then seek Christ who was born there.” [Augustine, Sermon 199.2 (p.255)]

The scribes and the chief priests know the Word of God ... but they *choose* not to know God’s king, Jesus Christ.

It should seem sort of astounding to us that that is even an option – that people can do that – can know about the most important thing in the universe, but still choose not to pursue it. But the scribes and the chief priests did just that.

And their example then hangs there before us as a warning. Because if it is possible for them, then it is possible for us as well. It is possible to know God’s Word without knowing God. It is possible, as Augustine put it, to have the Holy Scriptures at our fingertips but not in our hearts.

In the Magi, Matthew gives us the pattern of true faith – of true belief. In the scribes and chief priests Matthew gives us the pattern of knowledgeable unbelief.

And with those two patterns before us, we now need to step back and consider our third point: the call or the exhortation that this text gives us.

Put in the simplest terms, the call of this text is to go to Jesus and serve him in worshipful devotion. *That* is the goal that Matthew is urging us towards.

But it’s also more complex than that.

So let’s begin by considering what this text means for the non-Christian, and then what it means for the Christian.

If you’re a non-Christian and you’re here this morning, then the first thing our text challenges you to do is to ask where God may be testifying to you about who he is in the world around you – the world you live in.

Now, of course the Magi received an extraordinary testimony in the star that appeared. But the Apostle Paul, in Romans chapter one, tells us that God has testified plainly about himself throughout all of creation, so that something of who he is has been plain to all human beings since the creation of the world. The question, Paul says, is not whether the testimony is there. The question is whether we will acknowledge it or suppress it.

What is the testimony that most strikes you? What is the thing in the world around you that, like the star for the Magi, should lead you to rethink how you view the world and how you live your life?

Maybe for you it's the beauty of this world ... the sense of awe that comes over you as you look at nature – as you see the ocean or Puget Sound or Mt. Rainer, or the Cascades – that moment where the beauty of this world just takes your breath away. Because in that moment ... can you really believe that this world – that the beauty you see – is just an accident of time and matter and chance – just a random assembly of atoms with no meaning beyond itself? Or in that moment, does it seem a lot more like the work of an Artist – a work that, like the star, is meant to point to something greater, beyond itself?

Or maybe for you it's the complexity of the world. The complexity of every ecosystem, the complexity of every living thing, of every cell, of every strand of DNA in the world. And as you consider those things, can you really believe that they formed as a result of time, chance, and physical constants that just happen to allow for such life? Or does the precision and majesty of this complex world, like the star, seem to point to something beyond itself?

Or maybe for you it's your own inner world that testifies most to you. You are, after all, a part of creation yourself.

When you consider your moral nature – the outrage you feel when evil is done, when the strong prey upon the weak, when injustice is done to the powerless – when you consider the indignation you feel ... in that moment, can you really believe that your sense of justice is just a conditioned response, or just a biological drive for the good of the herd? Or does it seem like it's more than that? Is the moral law wired into your heart, itself an indication of a Moral Law *Giver*?

Or when you consider the depths of your mind itself ... the complexity of your thoughts ... the shocking mystery that is consciousness, that it is to be a person ... when you consider how deep are the movements of your own heart, deeper than your own understanding ... when you consider what a mysterious thing you are – what a glorious thing you are – can you really believe that your whole inner life is nothing more than chemical reactions and electrical impulses? Or is it more than that? Is it not a mysterious depth that points beyond itself, like the star, to the One whose image you bear?

We could go on and on.

The Bible tells us that God has placed many such signs – many testimonies to himself – many “stars” – in your life and in your heart.

The question is whether you will allow yourself to see them. The question is whether you will allow that star that changes everything to capture your attention, and then begin to reorient your thoughts and even your life, in response ... or whether you will quickly rush past it ... scared as to what it might mean to let yourself see – to let yourself ponder.

What stars – what signs – what testimonies – has God placed before you? Look at them, and consider what they mean.

And once you have, you must then not only look to them, but look beyond them.

Because as we see in our text this morning, God will use his testimony in the world to get your attention, and he will use it to bring you some of the way to himself, but to know him fully, to find him fully, you must hear and put your faith in his Word.

And this part can be hard. Because we each have our preferred ways of knowing. For some of us it is our emotions. For others it is our experience. For others it is our logic. For others it's something else. We all have our preferences – even our strong preferences for what evidence we will trust.

But we all also know ... on some level ... that any real relationship requires at some point that we trust the words of the other person. Emotions are always a part of knowing another person – of trusting who they are. But emotions can't *prove* the love of someone else. In the end we must trust their word.

And logic and experience all play into our decision to trust another person, but they can never be sufficient in themselves – they can never give us certainty in a relationship. At the end of the day, we must *trust* the word of others if we are to be in true relationship with them.

And the same is true for God. Our emotions, our logic, our experiences will all come into play, and all can draw us towards God. But at the end of the day, as with everyone else, if we are to know him, if we are to love him, if we are to enter into a real relationship with him, then we must trust his Word. And he has given us his Word in the Scriptures. Our call is to trust what he has said to us.

That's what the Magi had to do. And that's what you have to do.

You need to seek God's word, and consider it, and put your faith in it.

You've already taken such steps to some extent if you are here this morning – you have heard God's word throughout this service and this sermon. That's good. But make sure you come back to hear it again. And again. And again.

And in addition to that, speak to other Christians who will speak God's word to you as well – who can summarize it and explain it and help you wrestle with it.

Ask other Christians where you yourself should start to read God's Word, and then take it up and read it. Put the words of God before you, and consider them.

And as you hear God's word in the liturgy of the Church, and in the words of the Christians you know, and in the Bible itself, hear it, and believe it. Step out in faith, and believe that it is true.

And once you do, seek Jesus himself. Seek him, that you may know him. Seek him in prayer. Seek him with your life. Tell him that you will be his, that you acknowledge him as king, that you trust him for salvation – that all you have is his.

Fall down before him, and worship him, and offer yourself to him, just as the Magi did.

And as you consider that exhortation, let me say one other thing for non-Christians here.

As you consider this path, and as you consider maybe your own path, don't let the hypocrisy of some who call themselves Christians hold you back.

After all, the wise men didn't let that stop them.

I can only imagine what the wise men must have thought after they met with the people of Jerusalem, and told them what they knew, and then heard them explain the promises of the Scriptures regarding the Messiah, and then, after all that, as the Magi left for their journey to find the Messiah – to find the king of the Jews ... none of the scribes or the chief priests ... none of the Jews of Jerusalem joined them.

What do you think the Magi's conversation about that was like on the road as they left Jerusalem?

"What hypocrites they are!" they must have thought. "How hollow their faith must be!" they must have said. "They have the Word of God at their fingertips but not in their hearts!" they must have exclaimed. And when they saw the hypocrisy of those who were supposed to be the leaders of Israel – the leaders of God's people ... maybe they had second thoughts about continuing to seek Israel's God. Maybe they doubted how good this God could be if those who claimed to be his people acted like that.

They might have thought that. But if they did, they didn't let that stop them. They didn't turn back. They didn't let the faithlessness of religious hypocrites turn them away.

And what would it have accomplished if they had? What would it have proven if they did walk away?

Nothing.

And the same is true for you. Maybe you have experienced hypocritical faith, or words, or actions among those who claim to be God's people – who claim to bear the name Christ by calling themselves Christians ... but you know they do not act like it. You know they resemble the chief priests of our text.

If that is part of your story, I'm sorry that it is. But don't let it hold you back. Don't let it turn you around. It is disappointing that they acted the way they did. It is a tragedy when those who should be God's people don't know God themselves. But don't let it keep *you* from knowing God. Don't let it *make you like them*.

Instead, like the Magi, press on to know Christ. Press on to Bethlehem.

The call of our text – the exhortation of our text – for non-Christians, is to go to Jesus. See his testimony in this world. Listen to and believe his Word in the Christian Scriptures. Pursue him in prayer and worship. And devote yourself to him. Follow the star, and find the One it points to.

That is what our text has to say to non-Christians.

For Christians, our text has several things to say as well.

First, it calls you to *know* the Word of God.

Before we get to anything else, let us say that. The fault of the scribes and the chief priests is that they knew the Scriptures – the Word of God – but failed to act on them. Our calling as God’s people is to surpass them, which starts with making sure that we are not behind them. They *knew* the Word of God, and so must we.

I won’t spend much time on this now since Pastor Gutierrez and I both addressed it last Lord’s Day. But as we consider this text, let us not be a people who, if the Magi came to us and asked us where to find the Messiah, would not be able to give an answer. Let us be people who *know* God’s word – both for ourselves, and so that we can minister to those around us.

We must know the Word of God.

But then, of course, our text reminds us that just knowing the Word is not enough. We must know not only the Word, but we must also know and trust and pursue the one who is behind that Word.

When the scribes and the chief priests heard that the Messiah had been born, they should have been out the door *before* the Magi were able to saddle up and go themselves.

And *that* is the kind of people we should be. The Word tells us how to pursue the Messiah – to seek him in prayer, to put our faith in him, to gather with his people, to look for his work in us by his Spirit, to live in light of his presence.

Jesus, the Messiah, is always available, always accessible, for you to speak to him and pursue him by prayer.

But think how seldom we take up that opportunity. Think how seldom we pursue the Messiah who is always ready to hear us.

We may have true faith, we may be true believers, we may have hearts transformed by the gospel in many ways ... but even then, we can resemble the scribes and the chief priests far too often ... ignoring again and again the opportunity to be with Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews – the King of the Universe.

Instead, our text calls us to pursue him. Our text calls us to seek him. Our text calls us to desire to know him. That means pursuing him in prayer. It means coming to worship to encounter him among his people. It means living our life in pursuit of him, and his kingdom, above all else.

It means worshipping him, and submitting ourselves to him, and giving him our gifts, and pledging ourselves to him forever.

And then it also means being the kind of people who can accompany others who are on their way to him.

It means that we are eager helpers to others who, like the Magi, come to us asking (in one way or another) where they can find the Christ. It means being prepared to give them an answer from God’s Word – yes – but it also means being ready to accompany them on the way. It means being anxious to saddle up alongside them and travel with them to Bethlehem – to Christ – and doing it with joy because the way is familiar for us, and we cannot wait to see their face when they encounter him, and we cannot wait to encounter him again ourselves.

Christians, our text calls us to know God's Word. It calls us to follow the written Word to the incarnate Word – to pursue and to know Christ himself. And then it calls us to be a traveling guide to others, leading them to Christ as we travel to him again and again ourselves.

And as we do all of that – especially as we open ourselves up to leading others to the Lord, our text also calls us to also be open to being surprised.

One commentator on this passage puts it like this – he says: “Is it not perfectly astonishing that [the Magi –] men with so little to go on should venture so far, endure such hardships in travel, and face such uncertainties of finding the one the star betokened? What is more, they wanted to give him costly gifts and the worship of their hearts.” He goes on: “I find their faith, their insight, their wholehearted search and adoring worship, utterly amazing. It is one of the many surprises in the Gospel. But then God is the God of surprises. Those who think they can predict his actions need to think again.” [Green, 66]

When God the Son, the Messiah, the King, showed up in Bethlehem, he caught the scribes and the chief priests by surprise.

When God drew the Magi from the East to the Messiah, he caught everyone by surprise again – and I would imagine not least the Magi themselves.

And so maybe the final thing our text calls us to, is to be open to being surprised.

If you are not a Christian, to be open to the surprise that God may be at work in your life and you may find yourself suddenly kneeling before the King of the universe.

If you are a Christian, to be open to those God may draw to you, so that you can guide them to him – including those you never expected would seek him.

And whoever you are, our text calls you to be open to the shocking, surprising reality – which should be almost impossible to believe – that Jesus Christ, the king and creator of the universe, is calling *you* to himself – is testifying to *you* through his creation, is speaking to *you* in his Word.

The Magi must have marveled at why on earth the king of the universe had called them, of all people, to his house.

And every one of us here this morning, gathered in the house of the Lord, should marvel at the same thing.

So let us marvel, and worship, and offer ourselves to him.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

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