

**“Epiphany and the Pattern of True Faith”**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**  
**January 4, 2026**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

This morning, we recognize the Christian festival of 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 Jesus. In the Western Church the emphasis has historically been on the coming of the wise men from the East. Sometimes there’s also a focus on Jesus’s first miracle at the wedding feast at Cana.

This morning we’ll be looking at the coming of the wise men or the “Magi” to the baby Jesus, in Matthew 2:1-12.

And as we hear from this passage, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s Word for us this morning.

Matthew writes:

<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 ...

### **Prayer of Illumination**

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.  
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.

### **Introduction**

The coming of the Magi, or the Wise Men, is a well-known story around Christmas. But it's something we often treat more like scenery around the birth of Jesus, rather than a story in itself, from which we are to learn important lessons about our faith.

But the fourth-century pastor and theologian Augustine encouraged his congregation not to see the Wise Men as merely decorative to the Christmas story... but to see in them the pattern of true faith that God calls all his people to. [Augustine, Sermon 199 (p.254-256)]

And the pattern itself is something we often miss. We remember the star. But it's striking that God actually didn't just use the star to bring them to Jesus... even though he could have.

In verses nine through eleven, we get the impression that the star could (and eventually did) point the Magi to the precise location – maybe even the exact house – that Jesus was in. But in verse two we get the impression that at first, the star only led the Magi to Judea, at which point the men had to stop and ask for further directions in Jerusalem.

The star itself is an interesting thing. We're not told whether it was a natural phenomenon that God used providentially [Green, 69; Wright, 10], or whether it was a miraculous sign God placed in the sky, or even, in some way, a star-like manifestation of the glory cloud of God. [Leithart, 70]

Either way, God used the star. But my point right now is that while God could have just led them straight to the house with the star alone: Why did he instead lead them first to Jerusalem to seek further guidance?

And Augustine's answer, in part, is that God did it this way for our instruction – and, I would add, probably for the instruction of the Magi as well.

Augustine points out that God did what he did to show that, ordinarily, it was not just through signs in creation, but through the Scriptures that God would reveal Jesus to us. [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 three we read that Herod and all Jerusalem were informed about the star and its meaning. Then, in verse four, the chief priests and the scribes were assembled, and 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.

And then, after that: After first having God call them through creation, and next hearing God speak to them through the Scriptures, then the Magi had to make a decision about how they would respond.

They could either trust the Hebrew Scriptures by faith and go on to Bethlehem ... or they could turn back home.

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 after they had done that, we're told in verses nine through eleven that God then used the star to show the Magi the precise location of the house where they would find Jesus.

God brought them to Jesus. And they saw him and worshipped him.

What Matthew lays out here then, in this text, for our instruction, is the pattern of true faith: in these extraordinary events, he shows us the pattern of how he ordinarily brings people to himself.

And what we see is that God calls us through creation, and he speaks to us through the Scriptures, so that we would respond with risk-taking faith, in order to know and serve him.

Let me say that again: God calls us through creation, and he speaks to us through the Scriptures, so that we would respond with risk-taking faith, in order to know and serve him.

Let's consider that one piece at a time.

### **God Calls Us Through Creation**

First, we see that God calls us through creation.

That part is clear with the Magi.

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

Now, 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 exactly they were looking for, or what they believed or didn't believe when this all started. 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 sky – 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 the features of creation.

And while he may not send us a supernatural star to do that, the Bible tells us that God continues to testify to us through the things he has made – he continues to call us through creation.

The Apostle Paul, in Romans chapter one, tells us that God has testified plainly about himself throughout all of creation, so that something about who he is has been made plain to all human beings since the creation of the world. The question, Paul says, is not whether the testimony about God is there in the things that have been made. The question is whether we will acknowledge it or suppress it.

After all, in the days of the Magi, many people must have seen that unusual star in the sky. But it seems that it was only this small group of wise men who responded to it for what it was. Others – many others – ignored the star ... or suppressed in their hearts their sense of what it might mean.

And in the same way, we can suppress the call of God through creation. But God urges us here to truly hear it.

So ... what is the testimony of God in the world around you – what is the call of God in creation – that most strikes or resonates with you?

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 the mountains, or the trees of the forest, or a sunset – that moment where the beauty of this world just takes your breath away. Because in that moment ... you find it hard to 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. In that moment, the universe seems 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, you find it hard to believe that such things formed as a result of just time and chance. Instead, the precision and majesty of this complex world, like the star, seems 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, it's hard to believe that your sense of justice is just social conditioning, or an evolutionary herd instinct. Instead, it seems like more than that – like the moral law that's hardwired into your heart points to a Divine Moral Law *Giver*.

Or when you consider the depths of your mind itself ... the complexity of your thoughts ... the mystery that is consciousness ... when you consider what a mysterious thing you are – what a glorious thing you are – you find it hard to believe that your whole inner life is nothing more than chemical reactions and electrical impulses. Instead, it seems like it must be more than that – that your own mysterious inner depth, like the star, points beyond itself, to the One whose image you bear.

Or maybe for you it's about other people. You look at a person you love ... maybe it's your child, or your spouse, or your partner, or your friend, or your sibling, or parent, and you see them ... and you're amazed by them. There is depth to them, and wonder to them, and glory to them, and you love them so much, and you know, deep down, you find it impossible to believe that they are nothing more than a sack of chemical reactions and electrical impulses. You know there's something beyond the mere material world in them. They're not just the result of randomly reproducing proteins, but they are designed to be glorious. And if you let yourself think about it ... if they are designed to be so glorious, then how much more glorious must the One who designed them be?

We could go on.

The Bible tells us that God has filled the world with such signs – with testimonies, with “stars” – with things that point to him. And through each one he calls you to look to him.

But you need to recognize them for what they are ... like the Magi did ... and not ignore them, like so many around the Magi did in their day. You need to look ... and let the signs, the “stars,” the calls of God all around you capture your attention.

So, what “stars” – what signs – what testimonies – has God placed before you, as a way of calling you to himself? Look at them, and consider what they mean.

God calls us through creation.

### **God Speaks to Us Through the Scriptures**

But he doesn't stop there. Because next, in the story of the Wise Men, we see that God then speaks to us through the Scriptures.

As we saw, God was not content to use the star alone to guide the wise men to Jesus. He wanted them also to hear his special word to them.

And even in our text, with all the miracles that abound, it's through the Bible that God chooses to speak to them.

And the same is true for us. The Bible is the place where God has spoken to his people in a special way. And he calls us to hear him

Because God is a real person. And people ordinarily connect through words.

If you want to know a person: who they are, what they're like, what they want – then you need to attend to their words, and respond to their words.

And God is similar. He hasn't just filled the world with signs that point to him. He's also spoken words – real words – to us. He has not been silent. But he's told us who he is, what he's like, how he will relate to us, and how we should relate to him. He's told us all about himself. That's what we find in the Bible.

And that's how the Magi encounter him in verse 6. There they hear from the book of Micah, and God tells them how they can know him more truly and more deeply.

And that might have been hard for them to accept. After all, these men were quite clever – charting the stars, making plans, setting out. While they were following a star, they may have very much felt like they were in charge of their journey. They were responsible for their course.

But now they have to take directions from someone else. And that direction comes not through some other respected worldly expert like themselves ... but from a book, written centuries earlier, shared with them by a group of people they may not have had an especially high regard for.

But in that moment, it wasn't about human expertise or prestige. In that moment, God calls them to trust him – by trust his Word, spoken to them through his chosen prophet, centuries earlier. God reserves the right to communicate with us as he chooses to. The Magi's calling was to receive it by faith.

And we face a similar calling.

We all have our preferred ways of knowing things. Some of us tend to trust first our own personal experiences. Some trust our own logic and reasoning. Some of us trust our gut above all else – our emotional read of things. Some of us trust the experts of the world, while others trust the naysayers of the world. We each have a way that we are most comfortable receiving and trusting information.

But God calls us out of our most comfortable ways of knowing, and he calls us instead to hear from him. He calls us to this book where he has spoken to us.

How do you view the Bible ... if you're honest with yourself?

How do you regard Bible reading ... or Bible lessons? Maybe you'd say up front that you don't have a particularly high regard for it. Or maybe you'd say you value it ... but then, if you're honest, you have a lot of trouble opening this book up and focusing on it. Or maybe you'd presume that

you already know the Bible ... which has the effect of leading you to zone out when you hear it or read it or it's preached, because you're sure there's nothing more for you to learn here. Whichever of those may sound more like you, each of those responses is a way of closing ourselves off to God's Word spoken to us.

But as the Magi learned ... whether we like it or not, God, in his wisdom (which is higher than our wisdom), has chosen to speak to us through the Scriptures. And we need to listen to what he has said there if we want to truly know him.

How do you need to more seriously attend to what God has said in this book? Whether it's reading the Bible yourself, or wrestling with the Scriptures more honestly when they're taught and preached, or pondering what the Bible says more and treasuring it in your heart – how do you need to better attend to what God has spoken in the Scriptures, like the Magi did here?

God calls us through creation, and he speaks to us through the Scriptures.

### **We Must Respond with Risk-Taking Faith**

That's what God does.

We are then called to respond.

Because that's what the Magi do. They don't just hear the Word of God, but they respond to it. And they respond with risk-taking faith.

First, they get up and seek to know this new King. They're not content to just know about him. They want to know him. And for them, that means a journey – a journey that in the ancient world came with real costs and real risks: both physical risks and financial risks.

Then, after arriving in Jerusalem, they took on political risks. Because announcing that they were looking for the newborn king ... in the city where Herod claimed to be the king ... that was a politically risky thing to do.

And then, from Jerusalem, they took on social risks, as they stepped out and sought Jesus when so many around them did not.

The Magi embraced a risk-taking faith so that they might know this new heavenly King, who had been born into the world.

And one thing our text reminds us – though we can miss it – is that it's incredibly easy to know all about who God is and who Jesus is ... and then to not respond with true faith – to not respond by seeking to actually know him.

Because that's what we see here in the chief priests and the scribes, who advise the Wise Men in verses 4 through 6.

Think about it.

The scribes and priests already knew about the location where the Messiah would be born ... but they didn't know when – we see that in verse 5. But then, in verse 3, they, along with all in Jerusalem, are told by the Magi that it's happened – the Messiah has been born! 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. So, they knew everything that the Magi knew, and more.

What's shocking, then, about the scribes, and the chief priests, and the Jews of Jerusalem ... 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 sought to meet Jesus. [Augustine, Sermon 199.2 (p.255)]

Augustine notes that the Jews in Jerusalem had the Word of God “at their fingertips but not in their hearts.” [Augustine, Sermon 199.2 (p.255)]

How heartbreaking is that? To have God's Word at their fingertips ... but fail to take it into their hearts?

And yet ... the same can be true of us. We too can hear God's Word, we can know the Scriptures ... and yet we can fail to embrace them from the heart ... just like these scribes and priests.

The real distinction is in how we respond: In whether or not we respond in faith, whether or not we want to know God and not just know stuff about God. The distinction is in whether we will seek him with our hearts and our lives, as the Magi did ... or whether we'll keep ourselves far from him like the scribes and the priests did.

Because there's a real danger that we can be just like the scribes and priests and Jews of Jerusalem, who, Augustine notes, “having pointed out to others the fountain of life, they themselves died of thirst [...] 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)]

Friend ... if you are here this morning, then you've heard God's Word. Maybe it's only been for the last hour or so of your life, or maybe it's been for decades of your life, but we each have heard something of God's Word to us through the Scriptures.

But hearing is not enough. We need to respond with faith. We need to seek to truly know Jesus.

That may entail risks for us. Like the Magi, it may mean social risks or political risks. It may lead us to financial risks or other risks to our way of life. But if we don't take those risks – if we don't step out in faith – then we will not meet the Messiah. We will not come to know our Savior. We will not be made right with our Maker.

How do you need to respond to God with risk-taking faith?

Maybe for you it means taking seriously in the year ahead your study of God's word, and your actively speaking to God in prayer. Maybe it means addressing that area of sin in your life that

God has spoken about, but you've been ignoring it, because responding to God's Word in that area seems too risky or scary. Maybe it means committing, or recommitting, yourself to God's people in the Church. Maybe it means sharing your faith more with those around you. Maybe it means taking the step to seek baptism, to become a Christian, no matter what risks or costs it may bring.

God calls us through creation, he speaks to us through the Scriptures, but then we must respond to him with risk-taking faith – to follow him even if it means we risk losing other things we care about, in order to gain him.

We are not to stay back, comfortably and securely, like the scribes and priests in Jerusalem ... God calls us to step forward like the Magi, and to follow him.

### **Receiving the Gift of Knowing & Serving Him**

And when we do, what we receive is the gift of knowing and serving the Lord.

We read, starting in verse 9: “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. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 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.”

“They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.” Why? Because they were meeting their King. They were meeting their Maker. They were meeting the Lord of the universe. And compared to that – compared to knowing God himself – everything else pales. The risks they took, the gifts they gave, the sacrifices they made – these all were minor things when compared to the incredible gift of knowing the God of the universe.

Have you lost sight of that? Or have you failed to see it altogether? Have you been treasuring things like money, and power, and prestige, and comfort ... when you are offered the opportunity to deeply know the King of all creation?

There is no greater gift – no greater blessing than knowing the One who made us – the God of the universe.

And most shockingly, we need to remember, it's he who has sought us.

Because as far as the Magi may have traveled to know Jesus, it doesn't even compare to how far Jesus traveled to know them. They traveled from the East to Bethlehem. But Jesus traveled from the throne of the highest heavens to the tiny villages of earth. And he did all that to know them.

And he's done the same thing to know you. God the Son came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ so that he might know you. Yes, he calls you to take some risks. But it's nothing compared to what he's already done to know you. He came from heaven to earth. He made himself vulnerable to the trials and temptations of life. He died on the cross. All to know you. He's already done far more to know you than he will every ask you to do to know him – that is how great his love is for you.

And so how can we not respond? How can we remain indifferent to his call? How can we ignore or neglect his Word? How can we refuse to step out in faith – even if it means a few risks?

Brothers and sisters, Jesus has come to us. He’s called us. He’s spoken to us. He’s traveled from heaven to earth.

Let us heed his call. Let us attend to his Word. And let us seek him by faith.

Because to know him truly is the greatest gift of all.

Amen.

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**This sermon draws on material from:**

Augustine. *Essential Sermons*. Translated by Edmund Hill. The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2007.

Connell, Martin. *Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year*. Vol 1. New York, Continuum.2006.

Green, Michael. *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000.

Leithart, Peter J. *The Gospel of Matthew Through New Eyes; Volume One: Jesus as Israel*. Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2017.

Wright, N. T. *Matthew for Everyone: Part 1*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

***This sermon draws heavily from a sermon I preached here on January 5, 2020.***

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church’s core value of “Reformed Catholicity”), and also (following the Apostle Paul’s example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.