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Matthew 2:1-12
January 5, 2025

Wonder

Last year, on this day when we celebrated the Epiphany or day when the Magi encountered Jesus, you might have received a gold star with a word written on it. We called them “Star Words” or words that God might use to guide us into the coming year.

My words were “Adventure and Friendship.” And so I wondered, how those words might guide me in 2024. Sure enough, Karen and I embarked on many adventures this past year to the East Coast to visit our children, Las Vegas to see the rock band U2 in concert at the Sphere, and Spain to walk 160 miles on the Camino de Santiago with some new pastor friends. I was also blessed to see my best college buddy in Georgia twice, became more involved in Geordie Ziegler’s men’s group, reconnected with former Young Life friends, and met new friends in a philanthropic group that I’ve joined.

All of which, I believe, were fueled by these two words which God planted in my heart. Adventure and Friendship.

I’m curious to hear from some of you. What was your Star Word and how did it shape your year?

As we celebrate the Lord’s Supper this morning, we are going to receive new Star Words for 2025. May they guide you in your journey.

Our scripture this morning talks about Wise Men, or Magi, traveling from Babylon who were also on a journey being guided by a star. These were most likely pagan astrologers who had searched the stars and the Hebrew scriptures for signs of God’s new King who fulfilled the words of the Prophets. One who unlike most human kings, would rule with justice, and mercy, and grace.

It has been nearly two years since Jesus was born in Bethlehem. By this time, the Christmas decorations had long been put away, and Jesus was now cutting teeth and entering his “terrible twos.” Joseph and Mary no doubt had returned to life as normal while still wondering about the mystery they experienced at Jesus’ birth with the shepherds and angels.

Join me as we read Matthew 2:1-12.

2 Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea. This happened while Herod was king of Judea. After Jesus’ birth, Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem. **2** They asked, “Where is the child who has been born to be king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose. Now we have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard about it, he was very upset. Everyone in Jerusalem was troubled too. **4** So Herod called together all the chief priests of the people. He also called the teachers of the law. He asked them where the Messiah was going to be born. **5** “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied. “This is what the prophet has written. He said,

6 “ ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are certainly not the least important among the towns of Judah.
A ruler will come out of you.

He will rule my people Israel like a shepherd.’ ” (Micah 5:2)

7 Then Herod secretly called for the Wise Men. He found out from them exactly when the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem. He said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report it to me. Then I can go and worship him too.”

9 After the Wise Men had listened to the king, they went on their way. The star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them. It finally stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. **11** The Wise Men went to the house. There they saw the child with his mother Mary. They bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures. They gave him gold, frankincense and myrrh. **12** But God warned them in a dream not to go back to Herod. So they returned to their country on a different road.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

The journey of the Magi to see Jesus is a story filled with wonder, faith, and divine guidance. There are several key threads that I want to tug on this morning as we consider this word wonder and see how God used it as way of leading the Magi to Jesus. There was the call to wonder. There was the journey of faith. There was the joy of discovery. There were the gifts that were bring. There was a transformative encounter with Jesus. And finally we will explore how their quest could inspire our own spiritual journey’s today.

The Magi's journey began with a star - a celestial wonder that caught their attention and sparked curiosity. These Wise Men from the East were likely pagan astrologers, well-versed in reading the night sky, receiving divinations, and interpreting dreams. Today we might call them spiritual, not religious folk. Yet this particular star shining in the east was different from others they had studied, compelling them to embark on a long and arduous 900 mile journey from Persia or modern day Iraq to Jerusalem. They believed that such unusual stars announced the birth of a new World Leader, a king.

In our lives, God often uses our questions and wonders to call us. That’s why we invite and not shut down questions in church. We are all journeyers seeking God. Some are just further along in their journey than others.

The prophet Jeremiah reminded God's people who were once stuck in exile, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all of your heart. I will be found by you," declares the Lord."¹ The Hebrew word used for seek comes from the root word baqash. It means to search out, strive after, beg, or make inquisition about. To desire.

Sadly many Christians today have made desire a dirty word. As if it was something bad or to be steered away from.

But St. Ignatius of Loyola, the father of spiritual direction, saw desire differently.² He believed that God created us with desire and even implanted our desires within us. But then the world, like Herod, has a way of distorting those desires and replacing them with things that aren't of God.

Compare the God given desire of the Magi with the distorted desire of King Herod. The Magi desired to find Jesus which drove them to extraordinary lengths to find him so they could worship him. Herod, however, desired money, power, and control which drove him to extraordinary lengths to find Jesus so he could destroy him.

A parent, for example, might have the God given desire to care for and provide materially for their family. But then the world skews those desires to where we become dissatisfied with how and what we are providing that we become workaholics or greedily chase the money stream. We can become fearful that what we have is not enough. And scripture is clear fear isn't from God, its from Herod.³

What is important, is aligning our desires with those of God.

Author Vinita Hampton Wright posts, "It's healthy to ask often, *What do I desire?* Ignatius posed this question to retreatants many times. He prayed that God's desires would be formed in them as they named what they needed and wanted.

We can find God in our longing and our desiring, because God is the ultimate end of all human desire. So, we need not fear desire but stay in conversation with it, as we remain in conversation with God."

What are we desiring today? Could we name what we needed or wanted? These desires may not be as dramatic as a new star, but they can be just as powerful. Like the Magi, we must be attentive to these signs of God's presence and activity in our world.

In the story we see that the Magi's journey was no small undertaking. As I mention previously they traveled hundreds of miles, over field and fountain, moor

¹ Jeremiah 29:13

² Vinita Hampton Wright in "Find God in our Desires" on <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/finding-god-in-our-desires/>

³ 1 John 4:18

and mountain, likely facing numerous challenges along the way. Their quest was driven by a deep desire to find and worship the newborn king. It was a journey that required faith and action. The Magi didn't just marvel at the star; they planned, prepared, and left home to follow it. And so our faith, too, should move us to action.

Is our faith this morning feeling active? Or have we become a little staid put?

Now notice that the Magi's journey, led by wonder, didn't lead to a straight path. The scriptures tell us that they followed the star to Jerusalem in Judea, in the time of King Herod. They went as far as their knowledge took them. Then when they arrived, they sought the counsel from others who could help them hone in on what they were looking for.

Proverbs 3:5-6, tells us "Trust in the Lord with all of your heart, do not lean on your own understanding, but in all of your ways acknowledge God and He will set your foot paths straight."⁴ And so God invites us to take steps of faith, one at a time, trusting that He will lead us in good places.

Even King Herod did not know the scriptures about where and when the new King of the Jews would be born. So he also gathered around him, the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, who told him where the Christ was to be born.

"In Bethlehem in Judea, for this is what the prophet [Micah] has written."⁵

The point, my friends, is that oftentimes our path is not straightforward. Sometimes, our spiritual journeys take unexpected turns, or set backs, or challenges, or delays.

The important thing about our faith journey is that we don't give up. When we persevere with all of our hearts, we will eventually find what we are looking for. And what happens in the process, as we pursue our desires, while being in constant conversation with God, we develop a closer intimacy with the One who gave us our heart's desires.

Notice the impact on the Magi once they found the one they desired. Matthew writes, "When they saw the star where it had stopped over the place where Jesus was. They were overjoyed."

The Greek actually says that "they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy," not just overjoyed. This was a spiritual, personal, and physical reaction to their journey reaching its climax. They entered the house, saw the child with Mary, and immediately fell facedown in worship.

This past summer, as we traveled on the Camino de Santiago, there is this euphoric moment when one arrives at the Cathedral of St. James, containing the bones of James, the brother of Jesus. For many people, it is much like the Magi

⁴ Proverbs 3:5-6

⁵ Micah 5:2

arriving at Jesus' home. Rejoicing with exceedingly great joy that leads to worship. Our long arduous journey had come to an end. Our searching was over. And we could now rest spiritually, personally, and physically. Many people fall face down in the square before the cathedral upon arrival.

St. Augustine in his Confessions wrote, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and hearts are restless until we rest in you."

For me, the journey was not so much about arriving at the Cathedral. It was about developing a deeper intimacy with the one who journeyed with me. And so the moment of discover and worship is the heart of the story. The ultimate goal of our spiritual journey is to encounter Jesus Christ, not to become stronger, wiser, or more religious. And when we encounter Jesus and recognize who he is, we joyfully fall down and worship him.

If we don't or can't, then it could be that we've been led astray by a Herod who has twisted our desires and led us down paths that God didn't intend.

Notice also that the Magi didn't come to Jesus empty-handed. They brought valuable gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These weren't just random presents, but carefully chosen offerings that reflected their understanding of who this child was. Gold was a gift fit for a king. Frankincense was used in temple worship, signifying Jesus' divinity. And Myrrh used in burial, foreshadowing Jesus' sacrificial death.

What gifts are we bringing to Jesus today? Our time? Talents? Resources? Curiosities? Wonders? Desires?

It takes vulnerability to fully offer ourselves to Jesus in this way. But as we do, we are changed.

After worshiping Jesus, the Magi were changed. They received a divine warning in a dream and chose to disobey Herod, returning home by another route. Their encounter with Jesus altered their path - literally and figuratively.

And so this, my friends, is the transformative power of a genuine encounter with Christ. When we truly meet Jesus, we can't help but be changed. Our priorities shift, our perspectives broaden, our desires match up with God's, and our paths may even take unexpected turns.

I want to end with a story about our closing song this morning: *We Three Kings*.⁶ It was written in 1857 by an Episcopal Priest, lawyer, and writer named John Henry Hopkins, Jr. It was intended as a gift for his nieces and nephews to be given on the Epiphany January 6th marking the last of the twelve days of Christmas.

Tradition and folklore over the centuries turned the Magi into kings. We know that they weren't kings per se, but certainly they came from the royal Persian

⁶ Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 176-182.

families for whom they worked. We do not know exactly how many of them they were. The Greek word Magi is plural, so there must have been at least two. Again, folklore assigned one king to each of the three gifts brought for the Baby Jesus...Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. The important thing is not to be caught up in the details of the song, whether they are right or wrong, but to spiritually embark on our own journey of wonder and openness as we worship.

So as we begin this New Year, let's follow the example of these pagan astrologies known as Magi. Let's be inquisitive seekers of Christ, asking questions of our faith, willing to journey far, give generously, and then be transformed by our encounters with Him. And may we, like the Magi, be filled with wonder and rejoice with exceedingly great joy as we draw closer to Jesus.

Amen.