

When You Can't See the Star

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Dave Letterman, on his late night show, will often give a Top Ten list. This humorous list refers to something in current events. Well, I'm no Dave Letterman, and this isn't Late Night, so all I have is a Top Five list this morning. Are you ready? Here's the Top Five Things Most People Don't Know About the Magi.

5.) They were magi, not kings. Matthew specifically uses the Greek word for magi, from which we get the English word 'magic.' Here it refers not to kings, nor to magicians, but rather to astrologers. They were, after all, drawn to Judea by a star. Babylon, the center of astronomical studies at that time, was also known to send magi to visit important kings.

4.) Nowhere does Matthew say there were three of these magi. We probably got that number because there were three gifts. Now some of you might protest that we know there were three magi, because their names were Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. These names appear in a passage written around the year 700, far later than any of the gospels were written. And the descriptions given to these three men are an attempt at describing the spread of Christianity around the world. One is described as Caucasian, one as Indian or Persian, and one as Black. It is far more likely that the three gifts came as part of a caravan, complete with magi, servants and supplies.

3.) The group of magi didn't show up at the manger. In fact, the Gospel of Matthew doesn't mention the manger. No innkeeper, no shepherds either. But in verse 11, Matthew says that to see Jesus and Mary, the magi entered a house. This is a significant change in residence.

2.) The reason we don't have the magi at the manger is that they didn't show up right away. We celebrate Epiphany 12 days after Christmas. But it was entirely possible it was 12 months after his birth before the magi showed up. The only hint we have as to how much time has passed is Herod's decree in verse 16. He orders the death of all male children under the age of 2 years old. So likely, it's been 6-18 months and Herod is covering his bases.

And the Number 1 thing most people don't know about the magi? They didn't see the star all the way. "What?!" you say. How is that even possible? Again, we have to look at the text. Matthew says the magi first saw the star at its rising. But it isn't mentioned again until the magi leave Jerusalem for Bethlehem. In verse 11, in the original Greek, it takes four words to describe the overwhelming joy they felt at seeing the star. This implies that they hadn't seen the star in a while. They followed the star from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, but from their home to Jerusalem was a different story.

And that was the longest part of their journey, too. You know, it takes a lot of courage to follow a star that you can't see. Put most people in the wilderness and ask them to find their way out, do you know what happens? They think they're walking in a straight line, but they generally walk in a giant circle. Since the magi didn't end up back in Babylon, they must have had some way to navigate. But it must have been something other than this amazing star.

Since they were experts at astronomy, they might have followed other stars. But that would mean navigating and travelling only at night. So perhaps when these well-traveled magi first saw the star, they noted the general direction, then planned to visit the biggest city on the

road to find out what the locals knew. That would explain why the magi didn't go directly to Bethlehem, but instead stopped in Jerusalem to talk to King Herod.

We are not all that different from the magi. Except we aren't following a star. We're following Jesus. But like the magi, we don't get to physically see the thing we're following. We only get to catch glimpses. We read the stories in the gospels, we listen for God's voice in prayer, but following Jesus is not like following a clearly marked path.

Have you seen the commercials for Fidelity Investments? After talking with a broker, a green line magically appears at the client's feet. This is the path they are to follow to their financial future. Wouldn't a line like that be great? We could have a line to show us how to get to our financial future. Maybe another line to show us the path to success at work. Another line for how to get to happiness. And of course, a line to show us how to follow Jesus. But if the wise men only got glimpses of the star, I think we're going to have to be satisfied with only glimpses of Jesus.

If you can't see what you're following, it makes it a lot easier to fall off the path. To end up somewhere you completely didn't expect. In college once, I was supposed to follow a friend to a restaurant. When we started out, her car was directly in front of mine. But then we got separated at a four-way stop. She wasn't that far ahead; I could still see her car, so I kept following. Imagine my surprise when the car turned into Home Depot! It turns out, while I thought I was following my friend, I was actually following a similar-looking car. Fortunately for me, the restaurant where we were headed was visible from the Home Depot.

The same thing happens when we follow Jesus. Since Jesus isn't here walking next to us, not literally, and since we don't have a big green line to follow, sometimes we think we're headed in the right direction, and it takes us a while to realize that somewhere or other, we've

gone astray. Sometimes in big ways, sometimes in small ways. And so every once in a while, we need to stop and look around. We need to make sure that we're on the right path.

After the magi have given Jesus their gifts, God warns them to take a different path home. The path they have been on, which once was fine, is no longer safe. They have to examine where they are and how to get where they want to be. And again, we can identify with that. What path have you been on? Is that path going to take you where you want to go?

The beginning of the year is a good time to take stock of where we are spiritually. To examine our paths. To make a commitment to following the path – at least the best we can given the fact that the path isn't visible. So today I am inviting all of you to join in our historic Covenant Renewal service. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, didn't originate this service, but he did use it frequently, and he put his special touch on it. The hymn we close with today was written by John's brother Charles, specifically for a renewal service. So let us now turn to the insert in our bulletins and renew our faith and our commitment to God.