

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Matthew 2:1-12
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We Press On Knowing God is With Us

The Columbian Newspaper ran an article a few days leading up to Christmas titled, “Words Capture Stories of 2023.”¹ Among those words were...Fatigue, Wonder, Grief, Limbo, Humiliation, Exasperation, Meaning, Disappointment, Pain, Hope, Anger, Focus, Questioning, Disillusionment, Awe, Shock, Appreciation, Alienation, Wariness, Celebration, Protectiveness, Intention, and Prayer.

And I thought, these words perfectly captured the sentiment of our weary world as it rejoices. That even amidst the gloom and doom, wonder, hope, meaning, awe, appreciation, and celebration still break through.

This morning as we celebrate the Epiphany or day that the Magi brought gifts to baby Jesus, we see that not much has changed in our world since then. It was just as weary then as it is now. But we see how God shows up through some very unexpected strangers who overcame incredible odds to find what they had been searching for a very long time.

So please join me as we hear this familiar story from Matthew 12:1-12 and we are invited to see ourselves within it today.

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem **2** and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. **4** When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. **5** “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

6 “‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. **8** He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

¹ Laurie Kellman, “Words Capture Stories of 2023,” The Columbian Newspaper, December 23, 2023.

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. **11** On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. **12** And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

Just this past June, Journalist Sydney Porter of The Washington Post wrote, “Young People are flocking to Astrology. But it comes with risks.” As it turns out, more and more young people are turning to astrology for life’s answers about themselves and others, particularly millennials and GenZ’rs. By Millennials I am referring to people born between 1981 and 1996. By GenZ’rs I am referring to people born between 1997 and 2012. Ms Porter stated, “More Americans know their zodiac sign than their blood type, and likewise, as many as 70 million Americans check their horoscopes daily.” “Our brains are constantly looking for patterns and ways of anticipating the future.”²

Why?

The Age of Enlightenment and Rationalism birthed in the 17th century which was supposed to make humans wiser, stronger, and more able to solve life’s problems and make life better. But what has happened is that it has left this younger generation more skeptical than ever that we can come up with these answers ourselves. So they are quite literally reaching for the stars.

As were the Magi in our scripture today. The Greek word for Magi comes from the root word magos which means magicians, sorcerers, or Oriental scientists. These were learned people who knew the stars. Astronomers. But they were also astrologers who believed in the mysticism behind the stars, like many millennials and GenZ’rs today. That “God diagramed the great workings of history in the stars. [So] to study the stars was to peer into the dark future.”³

These Magi had come some 900 miles from the east, most likely Babylon or modern day Iraq, where they had been studying the stars. They had also been studying the Hebrew scriptures left behind some six hundred years earlier by Jewish exiles in Babylon. These scriptures prophesied the coming of a new king from Israel. Balaam’s prophecy in Numbers 24:17 said, “A star will come out of Jacob; scepter will rise out of Israel.”

² Sydney Porter, “Young People are flocking to Astrology. But it comes with risks.” The Washington Post. June 13, 2023.

³ Greg Cootsona “Comet of Wonder,” Christianity Today, (11-23-15), Page 42 as posted on Preaching Today.

We may understand a scepter to be a staff or wand held in the hand of a ruling monarch symbolizing sovereign authority. In astronomical terms, a comet was called a scepter because of its tail.

So they were looking for an unusual astronomical sign in the heavens, like a comet or a congruence of planets which combined to create one big bright star than normal. Whatever it was that they saw, we aren't exactly sure. Scholars today remain uncertain of what it might have been. We just know that it was powerful enough to have captured their attentions and to be included in our Gospel story today.

What I'd like to do this morning is to look more in-depth at the Magi and the religious leaders of Jerusalem. Then we will see how the Magi might help us make vital connections with what younger generations are seeking today. And finally we will see what the Holy Spirit might be inviting us to participate in our quests for God.

So first let's look at the key differences between the Magi and the religious leaders of Jerusalem back in King Herod's day.

The first thing that I was struck by in this story was the Magi's curiosity. They came to Jerusalem with a very important question, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him."

The chief priests and teachers of the law, however, had no questions, no curiosities, just answers. Notice how quickly they were able to answer Herod's question about where the Christ was to be born. "Well, in Bethlehem in Judea," they replied. But had they been expecting his coming like these pagan Magi had? NO! Remember, it had been some four hundred years since they had received any word from God about anything, much less, the Messiah's birth. They weren't anticipating anything. And yet the Magi had been chewing on this for more than six hundred years. They were ready to receive it! Hungry for God.

The next thing that I noticed was the Magi's dedication and willingness to take great risks in search of truth. Babylon was over 900 miles from Jerusalem. The journey would have taken months, over very rugged terrain. And traveling in a great entourage would have created quite a scene upon arrival.

The chief priests and teachers of the law did nothing with the knowledge they had. They would not risk anything, not even a five mile journey down the road to Bethlehem to see if indeed the baby king had been born.

The Magi were not intimidated by King Herod, his reputation, or his powerful influence.

The chief priest and teachers of the law were so enmeshed in Herod's evil reign that they could not see the forest through the trees and were too afraid to bring it to Herod's attention if they had.

We also see the gifts that the Magi brought for the baby king. Gold for his royalty as the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Frankincense for his deity as the Son of God. And myrrh for his humanity and the death he would one day suffer. Costly gifts Herod would have craved for himself.

The chief priests and teachers of the law, however, were completely empty handed. They had nothing to offer even if they had ever found him.

The Magi upon coming to the house and finding Jesus and his mother Mary, bowed down and worship him. This was the one they had been looking for. The one that stars had pointed to. As we heard in our children's book on Christmas Eve...this was Maker! The one who even created the stars that they studied.

The chief priests and teachers of the law, however, never stopped bowing down to the feet of Herod and most certainly could not look up to the heavens to see the handiwork of God.

And once they unloaded their gifts fit for a king, the Magi were open to the Holy Spirit's prompting through a dream to avoid Herod and instead go home by another route.

The chief priests and teachers of the law, were so stuck in their ways that they were not open to the mystery that God sometimes works among us.

All in all, the Magi had an encounter with Jesus Christ the Son of God.

The chief priests and teachers of the law missed Jesus' coming all together.

Folks this should make us in the organized church shutter. Because we represent the chief priests and teachers of the law. Those on the inside. But notice that it's those on the outside who often point us to Christ.

So if Matthew, who was a Jewish convert to Christianity, lifts up these pagan astrologers over the religious leaders of his day as the true faith seekers, what can we learn as we approach today's millennial and GenZ'rs who are leaving organized religion in groves?

We need to embrace inquisitiveness as a way of faith seeking understanding. Just as folks outside the church are asking lots of questions as they search for truth, so we should ask lots of questions as we try to understand how and what truth they are searching. Let's not assume that we own the market on faith. The truth is that God is still revealing new things through culture, society, science, the cosmos, and God's Word. Scripture might be closed, but faith seeking understanding is wide open.

Now I'm not saying that we should adopt everything from our culture. We should not because some of it is harmful. What I am saying is that sometimes in God's mysterious way, God speaks to us through it.

We need to create space where everyone is welcome regardless of where they are on their faith journey. The Church is most beautiful when it reflects the diversity of Christ. If we create space where people can be their true selves

without having to pretend that they are something they are not, then people will have authentic encounters with Jesus among us, and we will all be changed as a result.

We need to continue proclaiming God's truth, but humbly present it in a way that is open to other perspectives, in case we are wrong. Millennials and GenZ'rs are highly skeptical of any sort of objective truth telling authority, particularly the Church. They've witnessed how Church authority has been abused to try to get people to conform into a particular image. And so they shy away from it.

We need to acknowledge that the way younger generations form community might be very different from the rest of us. The first thing I did when I went to college, began active naval service, or moved to the Pacific Northwest, was to find a church where I could be around other young Christian adults who were like me and enjoyed doing the things I liked to do.

Today, that thought could not be further from today's younger mindset. Many people find community through various online avenues. It's more safe than jumping in-person somewhere first. You can test the waters better that way. I'm just curious, but just showing a raise of hands, how many of us who are newer to Cascades started worship with us online first for a while until you felt comfortable to take the plunge and come in person?

We need to embrace the fact that the way some folks practice their faith might be very different than ours. Service, relevancy, and authenticity are very important markers for today's Millennials and GenZ'rs. They want to know that the church is making a positive impact in the community that they can be part of that.

We need to let go of past expectations about church membership. Millennials and GenZ'rs couldn't give a rip about becoming formal members of a church. They feel that they can "belong" without joining. The unfortunate thing about our form of governance however is that formal membership is required before serving in positions of church leadership. So if they want their voices heard and feel like they are making a difference in the direction of the church, we may need to find others ways for them to participate and develop ownership.

We need to foster relevant connections from the secular pathways they are seeking meaning to the God behind them all. If astrology is their interest, then let's introduce them to the God who created the stars and calls them each out by name every night. People are seeking meaning and purpose in life. Let's trust that God will reveal how it all goes together or not in God's time, not ours.

And finally, we need to be patient with folks as they figure out what this all means. If the Magi were willing to travel 900 miles and wait six hundred years to figure what it all meant, then maybe we too need to be patient as well. Some people come to Christ in an instant like the shepherds in the hillside. For others, it takes years of intellectual and spiritual pursuit. The important thing is that they come.

As I close this morning, I want to send us off with a gift as we start off the New Year. I started my sermon telling the words that defined the stories of 2023. What I'd like to do is replace them with new words for 2024. You might have noticed a star theme in our Christmas decorations this year. That very was purposeful.

As you come up for communion in just a moment, you'll notice there are gold stars on each table. Pick one up and take it with you. There are words written on the backside which we call "Guiding Words." Just as no two stars are the same, no two guiding words are the same. Prayerfully consider how the Holy Spirit might be inviting you to use that word to guide you on your path this year. And then this time next year, maybe we'll take some time to share how those paths unfolded.

So in the meantime, may we be like the Magi as a community of faith and as followers of Christ, who study, asks questions, and faithfully seeks to understand. May we pay attention to the Holy Spirit and how it sets our footpaths straight. And most importantly, may we press on knowing that God will be with us all the way.

Amen.