



**Sermons from St. Marks
United Church of Christ
New Albany, Indiana**



An Amazing Faith Journey

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

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The story we read from today in Matthew's Gospel is one of the most beloved stories in the Bible and probably one of the most embellished stories in the Bible. The reality of the story is that Matthew tells us a lot less than most people realize.

First, he doesn't tell us how many wise men there were. Popular tradition states that there were three wise men, but Matthew doesn't give us a number other than the number of gifts. There were three gifts, but the number of wise men is left to our imagination.

It is presumed that they were kings or royalty, but again, Matthew doesn't tell us. We can surmise it in the fact that a King, Herod, wanted to see them, and that usually only royalty had the kind of entourage that they had. But Matthew doesn't tell us for sure.

They have been referred to by some, and even in some translations of the Bible, as astrologers. This may be accurate in the fact that they were following a star. Again, Matthew doesn't tell us for sure.

We know this. They were wise men from the east who came to pay homage to Jesus.

Often the focus on the story is what the wise men bring to Jesus. Today I want to focus not on the gifts that they were bringing, but on what it is they were seeking.

This journey was a big deal. Traveling long distances, even with animals, was a long, arduous trip and people did not go on long arduous trips just for fun or for trivial things. A long trip was serious business. This means that the wise men were very serious about this journey.

To me this is a story of an amazing faith journey with two things that really stand out about the wise men.

First, they found great value in the journey.

The Valedictorian of my high school was a young man named Eric. In a class of almost 350 students he came in first place academically. This turned out to be a great issue for the school because they had never named Eric to the National Honor Society and had barely taken notice of

what he was accomplishing in his four years of high school. Eric was one of those old sneakers and ripped jeans kind of kids with wild hair and was more interested in baseball than almost anything else. He was also brilliant.

Upon the news that he was the Valedictorian they had an emergency induction to the National Honor Society and told Eric that he was going to give the Valedictory speech at graduation. Under the circumstances, they were a bit afraid of what he was going to say.

He began by speaking of the circumstances in his life over the last few weeks and then he became very provocative. He said that being the Valedictorian was nice, but even better and more important than that was the journey. He found great value in the journey.

The wise men did as well. They learned that journeys do shape us and change us. Faith is very much a journey. You don't see them very often any more, but there used to be a lot of bumper stickers that read "I Found It." The 'it' that they found was Christian faith----but Christian faith is not an 'it.' It is also the journey that is so important and so crucial.

Lots of people refer to St. Paul as a person who had a one time conversion experience and found 'it,' but there is more to the story. Paul, to be sure, did have the conversion experience, but it marked a beginning of a faith journey as a Christian more than a destination. Paul's faith grew and evolved. His later letters were much different, more laid back, more forgiving, if you will, than his early letters.

In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul is astounded by the Corinthian church when he learns that a man is living with the man's stepmother. Paul decrees this to be sinful and condemns not only the man but the entire Church in Corinth for tolerating this. He writes:

When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, [5] you are to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 5:5)

A few years later, Paul wrote his second letter to the Corinthians and he comes back to this situation and his words are so incredibly different:

But if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but to some extent--not to exaggerate it--to all of you. [6] This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; [7] so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. [8] So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him. (2 Corinthians 2:5-8)

Paul's letters to the Corinthians was written somewhere between 50-60 and most scholars believe that there was a two to five year difference in the dating of the letters. Paul, as he grew in his faith, changed. The journey of faith and his experiences walking with Christ changed him. Like the wise men, Paul discovered the value of the journey.

The second thing that the wise men discovered is that what they were seeking was different from what they found. In their quest for this spiritual discovery it is highly unlikely that the wise men were expecting that they were going to find themselves with a peasant couple and their newborn baby. They were probably surprised.

Yet, what makes these wise men so memorable is that they embraced what was given to them. Despite the fact they were surprised by God, they accepted and had faith in what they saw and heard.

God is a God of surprises and we never know what to encounter. Sometimes I think that we become too familiar with God and approach God like we know what is best.

I don't know about you but I've done this way too many times. I'll pray and I'll ask for God's will to prevail, but I'll imply that if God were really smart, He'd do it my way. Prayer is less a way of learning to appreciate the will of God, and more a way for me to tell God what I expect from Him.

At the end of the movie, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, we see Luch watching Aslan, the Lion, walk away. Aslan's character is bigger than life and his goodness is a very Christ like goodness. As Aslan is walking away, leaving Narnia, Luch, the youngest girl, is reminded by Tumnus that Aslan is not a tame lion. Aslan might be powerful, good, and loving, but he's not tamed, not under anyone's control.

Our God is not a tame God. God does not seek our approval for things. God's will does not bend to our will. God is a God of surprises and instead of fighting that, we are invited to embrace it like the wise men embraced it.

The wise men went on an amazing faith journey and came to face with the newborn Savior of the world. They believed, they grew, and we, to this day, remember and are inspired by their quest for growing in faith.