

## Sometimes, A Star

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“For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” – Matthew 2:2

What is it that leads people to the Christ? That's the question for which the story of the Magi is an answer. It's not the only answer, but asking that question on the first Sunday of a new year is worthwhile because turning the page of the calendar from the old year to the new one is a good and logical time to ask important questions. And is there a more important question than what leads people to the Christ?

Typically, we ask less theologically loaded questions at this time of year, questions like: What do I want to do differently this year? Are the kids going to make their marriage work or will they split up? Will there be anything that doesn't look like dysfunction coming out of Washington? How bad is the climate going to get before we take action?

Those are big questions, and when we get the opportunity to ask those sorts of big questions, we should take advantage of it. Questions are good because, most of the time, they open things up. They force us to consider possibilities. They direct our minds in new directions. The best questions make us use our imaginations.

Were there three wise men?, for example. That's a question that forces us to consider the possibility that there may have been five or there may have been two. The answer we see in all of our manger scenes is three. I have yet to see a creche with five wise men holding their gifts, but Scripture doesn't tell us how many people came from the east. Scripture only mentions three gifts that all of us know from memory – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – and so our ancestors in the church made a connection early on in their telling and re-telling of that story that might not have existed: three gifts, three wise men.

Our minds do that a lot with Scripture – we fill in the gaps with our own assumptions and think that we read it in the Bible. I keep urging you to read the Bible for yourselves – read and re-read – so that you don't make those assumptions – or at least so that you'll be aware of the difference between what you're assuming is in the text and what's actually in the text. That's why we studied the book of Revelation during Advent.

There might have been three Magi, there might have been a dozen; Scripture doesn't say and it doesn't really matter. It's simply a question raised by the story, and that's one of the things that makes this a good story. It raises questions that prompt us to consider possibilities.

And who were these Magi, after all? Were they kings? We assume so – there we go again, assuming – based on the verses from Isaiah that Jim read earlier in the service: “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. . . . They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.”

In that prophecy, Isaiah was talking to and about the holy city, not the holy child; but what the holy city represented for the Jewish people, the holy child represented for the first Christian people: God's presence on earth. God with us. Immanuel. Jerusalem and Jesus became functional equivalents

in the minds of the earliest Christians, so it seemed perfectly appropriate for those Christians to see Isaiah's prophecy as applying to Jesus no less than it applied to Jerusalem. A prophecy didn't have to apply to just one thing. That's the way the First Testament prophecies functioned for the writers of the Second Testament, and until about three hundred years ago, nobody had a problem with that method of interpretation. But when history, rather than theology, became the most important question for readers of the Bible – Did it really happen and did it happen just this way? – then we began to have problems with passages in Isaiah being applied to Jesus.

So the question I asked at the start of the sermon is an attempt to get us out the weeds of history and the Bible's stories and shift our focus back to theological concerns: What leads people to the Christ?

The star led the Magi, and that's not accidental, because Magi were star-gazers. Stars were their business. We don't know exactly what Magi did, but it appears that they used the stars to predict the future – astrologers, we would call them today. Most of us in churches don't have a very high opinion of the business of astrologers – for us, predicting the future is the business of prophets, not astrologers – but in the world of the Bible, where people lived much closer to the natural world than we do, people paid attention to the stars, the sun, the moon, the clouds, the trees, the winds, the soil, and the animals to see what messages they might have for us from God.

Is that really so different from what climate scientists are doing today? Aren't they warning us about the damage we're doing to God's creation, and the consequences we're likely to face if we don't change our ways? Aren't climate scientists calling us to a kind of repentance, just like the Old Testament prophets and John the Baptist and Jesus? And don't we hear plenty of people scoffing at them? Some things never seem to change, and that's one of the things that makes the Bible true.

And the story of climate change – and it is a story of how we got to where we are – is like the story of the star-gazers who looked to nature for messages: it raises big questions. For example, Is climate change a fact, a factoid, or junk science? That's one of the big questions that we're tossing all around the world these days, and it'll take time for us to arrive at an answer. And whatever answer we arrive at won't satisfy everyone. Some folks still think the earth is flat, and that's fine with me as long as they don't work for NASA.

The story of the morning, which is found only in the Gospel of Matthew, says that a star drew the star-gazers to the Christ; what draws others to the Christ? What drew you to the Christ?

Something did, or you wouldn't be here this morning. Something drew you to the Christ, God's Anointed One, the Messiah, the Word of God Made Flesh, the eternal, uncreated Logos that was in the beginning with God and was God. Something drew you and continues to draw you to that – what is it?

The easy answer, of course, is God. God draws us to God. That's true enough. Jesus said as much when he said, “No one comes to the Father except through me.” That's in John 14:6, and it's a statement that's troubled a lot of people over the years, and it's a statement that's caused a lot of trouble over the years. Christians rephrased that statement to say, “No one comes to the Father except through us,” and boy, did that ever stir up trouble. And boy, was it ever wrong. The eternal, uncreated Word of God that John says took flesh is the One who's speaking those words in John, and the Word of God – and the Word of God is the same thing as God, John said at the very beginning of his gospel – that Word says that no one comes to God except through God. God draws us to Herself. Is that such an odd idea or such a controversial assertion?

But God comes to us in this world of time and space – “Christ plays in ten thousand places,” Hopkins put it – and that myriad of ways God draws us to the Christ is what I'd like for you to spend

some more time with this morning, and perhaps this afternoon over Sunday dinner. Not how God drew the Magi to the Christ, and not how God draws your neighbor to the Christ. How does God draw you to the Christ?

For many people, it's the stories, like this morning's lovely story of the Magi. What is there not to like in this morning's story? It's almost a fairy tale in its simplicity and message. And the story that only Luke tells, of the boy Jesus in the temple with the doctors of the law – it's a charming story of great beauty, and we are naturally drawn to beauty. Since many people are drawn to the Christ by the stories about the Christ, we should always make sure there's a place where those stories can be told and shared and thought about and reflected upon. That place is called the church. It's why we exist. We are the custodians of those stories. The stars were the business of the Magi; the stories are the business of the church.

Some people are drawn to the Christ because of habit, and certain habits are good things. There's nothing wrong with the right habits – eating right, exercising, reading something worth the time you're going to sacrifice to it, saying your prayers at night or when you get up, saying grace before you eat, going to church. You and I may be the last generation of habitual church-goers. Going to church was simply what we did, come Sunday morning.

We know that things have changed now, and there's all manner of competition for the Sunday morning time slot that used to belong to church, and our churches are struggling as a result. Maybe things will change again and churchgoing will become a habit for our young people and our young families. That would be a wonderful thing, for them and for us. It would give them the weekly chance to engage those big questions for which they all seem to be seeking answers, and it'll give us the chance to be the church for a new generation. The big questions will remain, and the stories we tell here will remain saturated with big questions, because, as Philip Larkin said in his poem “Church Going,” the church is “a serious house on serious earth.” We mean business here, business in a way the stock market can't even begin to fathom.

And some people are drawn to the Christ because of Christian ethics, especially the works of mercy that are foundational to the Christian life. Take up your cross, Jesus said to his followers, and although the cross takes many forms, what they all have in common is sacrifice – the sacrifice of time, of energy, of money, of our ego's relentless demand for its own satisfaction. If you put all of that in a bag, you'd call it the self, and that's what the sacrifice symbolized by the cross is – the sacrifice of the self.

You have to have a deep and wide view of the Christ to see that “the least of these who are members of my family” might refer to cats and dogs, but when we made the decision to dedicate this year's Giving Tree to the South Euclid Humane Society, we said we wanted to help those helping pets in need. Some folks would say that relieving the suffering of God's non-human creatures is a nice thing to do, but it's not Christian; I don't agree. Mercy is mercy is mercy, and if God is love and if Jesus the Christ is God incarnate, then showing love to an animal is no less Christian, it seems to me, than showing love to a person who's homeless. Maybe you don't agree; that's up to you.

Is it Christian to feed the folks who show up for Loaves and Fishes? None of us would say it isn't. Is it Christian to teach young people from the high school how to feed and cook for themselves? Few of us would say it isn't. It is Christian to lobby our leaders for policies to help people in poverty and to help people out of poverty and to help keep people from falling into poverty? Not many of us here at Faith would say that it isn't. It is Christian to build a wall to keep people out of our country? Jerry Falwell, Junior, says it is; I don't agree. Some of you don't agree with Mr. Falwell, some of you don't

agree with me. Today the question is, What draws people to the Christ?, and the wall has drawn many.

Stories, habit, ethics, music, art, architecture, stained glass, social service, prophetic witness, the convictions of conscience, truth, beauty, the natural world, even a border wall – they all draw people to the Christ. Hunger and thirst – physical and spiritual – those draw people to the Christ, as well. Natural disasters draw people to the Christ. The Red Cross, the Salvation Army, and all the others who are the first to arrive and the last to leave – are they not drawn to the Christ? And is it not the Christ who has sent them to the disaster area?

Those who are drawn to the Christ are sent by the Christ, inevitably. Jesus the Christ has apostles, not courtiers. We're not called to the cross to clutch it tightly. We're called in order to be sent, and we're sent in as many ways as we're called.

Sometimes, it's a star. Most times, it's something else. What will it be for you? What will draw you to the Christ so that you may be refreshed and made new and sent by the Christ? We've all heard the saying that chance favors a prepared mind; Christ favors a prepared heart. Are you preparing yours?