

Journey of the Wise Men

Matthew 2: 2-12

Telling the Story (2 wise men)

Jack: Where are we, anyway?

Bob: According to the map, it's called Palestine?

Jack: Pal-e-what?

Bob: Palestine. Specifically, we're in the region of Judea.

Jack: Okay, so my question's still out there. Where are we?

Bob: You've heard the phrase: "a distant land"?

Jack: Yes.

Bob: That's where we are.

Jack: It seems more like the boondocks to me.

Bob: Well, we are from the Far East, right?

Jack: Yea.

Bob: I'd say, then, that we're in the Middle East.

Jack: I think it's the Midwest, actually.

Bob: Do you remember the city we just left – Jerusalem.

Jack: Of course I remember it – dirty, smelly. And that so called King Herod. He was not a very likeable character.

Bob: I agree. But he seemed to be working really hard at appearing to be nice to us.

Jack: I don't trust that guy.

Bob: Neither do I. But his advisers had a pretty good idea of where the star would lead us.

Jack: What was the name of that town?

Bob: Bethlehem. I don't think anything very important has happened there in a thousand years – not since King David of Israel was born.

Jack: I've heard of him! You mean to tell me that King David of Israel was from around here?

Bob: Not only that, but this area is part of his kingdom Israel.

Jack: Wow. Who'd have realized that the Kingdom of Israel would have degenerated to this "God-forsaken" place.

Bob: Well, it has been a thousand years. Also there were the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and now the Romans. Lots of armies have tramped through here.

Jack: I guess that explains it. You know, it was interesting how everybody back in Jerusalem kept calling us kings.

Bob: I don't get it. I know we dress pretty well and we are clearly a couple of wise men, but kings?

Jack: Yea. We're just a couple of astrologers, following our star. But it's a new king we are seeking. Surely that is a king's star.

Bob: (point to star) The star seems to be setting. You know, you and I have probably seen a million stars in our lifetime. Is this the first one you've ever left home to follow?

Jack: Yea. I know we're both wise men because we can read the wisdom of Life in the stars, at least sometimes, but I've never experienced a star like this one.

Bob: Me either. I just felt compelled to follow it.

Jack: Me, too. We're not alone either.

Bob: What do you mean?

Jack: There were other wise men who saw that same star and followed. I don't know if any of them have made it this far or not. The two years we've been traveling since we first saw the star is a long time.

Bob: I hadn't realized there were others making this same journey. I wonder if we'll all reach Bethlehem together or if it will just be us.

Jack: I have this feeling we'll be the only ones. And showing up two years after the birth of this new king, I imagine the parents will be kind of surprised as well.

Bob: I don't think it will matter how many of us actually get to Bethlehem. The important thing is that we have followed the star and that we are bringing our gifts to the child.

Jack: Tell me again about those gifts. They seem kind of strange things to give a little child.

Bob: We bring gold to symbolize his royalty. This is the new king. We also bring frankincense to represent his holiness. This child is a gift from God. Finally, we bring the spice called myrrh from the land of Sheba, just like the Queen of Sheba brought to King Solomon,

Jack: But why bring myrrh to a child?

Bob: Myrrh is very valuable just as this child is very valuable. Its scent can mask the smell of death and, when burned, it actually expands. This child will surely face hardship and, if Herod finds him, maybe even death.

Jack: These are truly worthy gifts, then, for us to bring. Don't you think it unusual that we who are foreigners bring such gifts to this child of the Jews?

Bob: The wonder of the stars and the lingering of angels' songs still in these skies tell me that the God who would give a child like this is the God of all people, not just the Jews.

Jack: I think we have arrived at Bethlehem. The star shines down on the home of the child. Our journey has ended, yet I can't help but think that our longer journey is only beginning.

Bob's journey – following the star

Above the door at the Mill Creek Brewery there was a sign that said, "Midnight Madness, Beer Bonkers." Those words could sum up my journey the past seven years. Midnights, madness, bonkers, and a Guinness every once in a while.

On June 23, 1999 I signed a letter sent to me from Neal Brees and become the first pastor hired by this church. That's when I became a pilgrim on the journey with this body. I sometimes smile thinking that in 200 years there will be some hall in whatever building this body will be occupying of the various pastors who have been part of this church and there at the end of the hall under the burnt out light will be my smiling face, the first pastor hired by this church.

This journey has been a mix of emotions and a jumble of experiences ever since I signed that letter. There have been important side trips along the way that we have taken together. In the past seven years this church has sent youth and adults on 13 mission trips. Six to Mountain TOP, four to Guatemala, two to the Wind River Indian Reservation and one to the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. We've gone to Colorado for Church camps and ski trips.

There has been loss in my journey. Members have left and started other journeys for themselves. Grandma Wilma, who made cookies for most of the 13 mission trips, can't make them anymore. Bob Hodges passed in July of 2001. My good friend Mark Boney passed away in September of that same year, after he went to Mountain TOP trip with his sons Alex and Seth. That was the first funeral I ever officiated.

There has also been growth within the church and within me. New members, new babies, new places to worship and finally our own building. We've dedicated a bunch of babies in the last seven years. We've also celebrated our youth when they graduate from high school and our young adults and adults when they graduate from college, seminary and other institutions of higher learning. We have worshipped in various places, the club house, the Westport Ballet building, the Dream Center, Rockhurst College, Wornall Road Baptist Church, St. Marks Church, and finally here in this facility. I remember when Marty Horn said, "Hey, I found another building to look at."

There have been others that have come after me: Gary Harris, Jerrod Hugonot, and this man. The winter of 2002 brought an ice storm and in the middle of the storm God brought Jack Price. He has been a mentor, a guide on the journeys, he encouraged me to continue my education at Central, and brother to share the good times and the hard time along the way. He also encouraged me to continue my education at Central Baptist Seminary. I first met Jack at one of our "Stressless Thursdays." I looked him in the eye and said, "So you think you're the senior pastor? Well don't count on it brother, I'm older than you."

Together we've had harebrained ideas that are now part of the tradition of this body. Sermon on the Mound, Holy Ghost Wienie Roast, Children's Theater Workshop, the Godspell, Joseph, Fiddler on the Roof, the Hanging of the Greens, the Celtic service, Spaghetti Supper and Talent show, Colorado, and various others. There are other harebrained possibilities that we haven't discovered yet and they may become other traditions.

The Magi were gentiles who came to visit the king of the Jews. When they walked into the house of Mary and Joseph, Jesus became a global king, not just the king of the Jews, but a king for all of God's people. He calls us today to be a global church, to blow out the walls of this building and make the connections with all of God's people. Along the journey we have heard that call to be a global church. We have made connections with people in Guatemala, Kenya, Pine Ridge, Wind River, the Appalachian Mountains, and with other churches in the Kansas City area. Jesus continues to call us to be a global church, to look else where, to make other connections, to feed and tend his sheep.

In his book, *Discovering Celtic Christianity*, Bruce Pullen lists the "Marks of the Pilgrim"

1. Quest: searching for what is ultimately important, and moving towards a goal.
2. Flexibility: adapting to the situation, for there are many paths to our destination.
3. Patience: calmly enduring trying situations.
4. Simplicity: taking only what we need with us.
5. Dedication: committing ourselves to achieving the goal.
6. Risk: taking a chance that what lies ahead is better than what has been.
7. Joy: delighting in what we encounter along the way.

For me I need to keep looking at this list and continuing on my journey and taking risks.

Jack's journey – following the star

My journey has been following a star named "meaning of life" and "understanding God". I wonder sometimes if that's even possible? In my beginning, my family was how I understood God. Last week, I stood at my father's grave, which was also my mother's grave, saying goodbye and thank you. I realized that God loving the world was for me inseparable from my family loving me.

My journey continued and I began to feel questions bubbling up about life and my role and the meaning of my own life. I grew hungry to know more about my faith and its tradition, more about the Bible. The journey led to seminary and study, to read the mystics, and ponder the why's of death and loss. As a pastor, I began to embrace a deeper understanding of "God loves the world" – one with scars, fear, and ambiguity.

Eventually, the time comes when you no longer call yourself a *young* adult, but just an *adult*. It's the time to become who you are, not in some far-distant future, but in the present. But that doesn't mean you can't still dream and be open to change, new experience, and transformation. It just means that the time to live life is now.

I've been to Bethlehem and now realize that the longest journey is not the one to Bethlehem, but from Bethlehem back home. On that journey, I've learn to believe only a few things and to believe them very deeply. This is what I believe.

The greatest force anywhere is love. The enemy is fear and love displaces fear. What we call God love is an image of the underlying force in the universe. Human love imitates God love and reflects the fundamental truth of life.

Life is all about birth, growth and rebirth. Even at death, we are born to a new dimension of life. The mystery of faith is stepping through the gateway of fear, disillusion, and greed to find the real presence of God. The Spirit is not something we possess. She emerges from within us. She is the co-creation of God and us.

I still don't understand that much about God, but enough. All we need to know about God, we know, even though we'll learn more. All we need to be church in an authentic and powerful way, we already possess, even though we'll receive more. All we need to have eternal life now and in the future, we already have, even though there is more to come.

I understand this much and it is enough, even though the journey continues. We follow our stars. The American poet Robert Frost wrote:

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud --
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,

So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

(“Choose Something Like a Star” by Robert Frost, 1947)

Each one of us chooses something like a star to guide our journey. Our stars have many names: beliefs, money, religion, family, spirituality, philosophy, and art. Stars seem so stable, steady, unmoving, and reliable. Yet, the constellations we see in our sky don't exist elsewhere in the universe. Even though they seem so reliable, so much we tend to trust is not ultimately reliable.

Wise men seemed to follow a star. In reality, it was the power behind that star that called them and guided them. That same power calls us today to broaden our vision and to trust the power of God love that is given to all people and received from all people.

We gather in our churches each week to meet this power, God, in each other. This happens in the process of worship and in being together. Very often, we see at least a glimpse of the power. When we leave each other and go into the world, we are able to meet the power out therein all its various hidden, surprising, and ordinary places of our lives.

We recognize the power, God, that we met here in the lives of our friends, our enemies, our co-workers, and our competitors. We know God there because we met God here -- God of the stars, God of Bethlehem, God of surprises, and God who loves us and calls us to love one another in the name of Jesus.