

Where the Star Leads

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Matthew 2:1-12

Today is Epiphany, the day of the church year when we celebrate how a star led the wise men from the East to the place where Jesus was. The Gospel lesson assigned for this day is always the same, because only one of the four canonical gospels records this visit. As you hear Matthew tell the story, notice how the wise men come first to Jerusalem, the seat of royal power, and how Herod reacts to the question they ask, and then what the sages from the East do after he sends them to Bethlehem.

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.

Julia Rohrer, who is a personality psychologist at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, wants to create a radical new culture for social scientists. She is trying to get her peers to publicly, willingly admit it when they are wrong.

*To do this, she, along with some colleagues, started up something called the Loss of Confidence Project. It's designed to be an academic safe space for researchers to declare for all to see that they no longer believe in the accuracy of at least one of their previous findings. The effort recently yielded a paper that includes six admissions of no confidence. And it's accepting submissions **until the end of this month.** ¹*

So begins a recent article that was brought to my attention by one of our former Theologians in Residence speakers here, Brian McLaren. The piece, entitled "Intellectual Humility: The Importance of Knowing You Might be Wrong", was written by a man named Brian Resnick.

Julie Rohrer, who started the Loss of Confidence Project, says, "I do think it's a cultural issue that people are not willing to admit mistakes. Our broader goal is to gently nudge the whole scientific system and psychology toward a different culture," where it's okay, normalized, and expected for researchers to admit past mistakes and not get penalized for it. ²

As I read Resnick's article, I couldn't help but think of the story of those wise men from the East who came to Jerusalem looking for the new king of the Jews. They took note of an extraordinary phenomenon, as good scientists would do. They saw a star brighter than any they had seen in the night sky and that sent them to their books. And after they consulted their various books and their astrological charts, and determined that it must be a sign of a royal birth foretold in some document belonging to another religion, the sages headed West, following the star in the direction of a far-off land.

When they arrived in Judea, some natural presuppositions of theirs caused them to lose sight of the star's precise location for a time. Their studies and skills had led them to the right general area, and *after all*, a star is not as exact as a GPS would be. But their confidence in their worldly wisdom took over and it took them to where they would expect a royal child to be born, Jerusalem, the capital city of the Jews. I think of the old character from *Get Smart* Maxwell Smart, who used to say, "Missed it by *that* much!"³

When they arrived, they went to the ornate palace and they sought an audience with King Herod the Great. What you need to know about Herod is that, though he was installed as "King" of the Jews by the Romans and was responsible for the rebuilding of the Temple, he was really just a puppet. Herod was not even Jewish but Idumean, and he was both easily threatened and ruthless.

So when the wise men, whose best knowledge and confident presuppositions had landed them in Jerusalem, asked Herod about where the new king of the Jews had been born so they could bring him homage, the King wanted to get to the bottom of it. To understand his reaction, imagine how a leader like Vladimir Putin would react to people asking him where the new ruler of Russia was living. Just imagine that.

That's when Herod, who didn't really know the Bible, had the chief priests and court prophets consult the Hebrew scripture for him. When Herod heard in Micah's word about a king to be born in Bethlehem, that's where he sent the wise men, telling them to bring word back to him about this child.

An aside. We know, but don't really like to hear, the dark continuation of that story. The part about how when the wise men didn't return with news, so he couldn't eliminate just one child, Herod had all of the children two and under in and around Bethlehem killed. All of them casualties of a fearful ruler who had a particular view of power and would never admit he might be wrong. All of them dead as an unfortunate, unintended consequence of the wise men losing sight for a moment of where the star was leading.

Let's stick with the wise men, shall we? Or the wise ones, (I love that in our pageant this year we had not only three wise men, three kings, we also had a wise queen). After their conference with Herod, these wise people headed toward the tiny village of Bethlehem, guided by the star in the sky again, right past their presuppositions and up to the house where the child was. Scholars suggest that the wise men arrived well after the birth because they would have had to travel a ways after seeing the star.

A colleague describes what the house might have looked like. Down a narrow and noisy lane, filled with the sounds of children and animals, the house would likely have been built of rough stones and mud brick, with windows covered by woolen cloth and a flat wooden roof. That's the house they would have come to. Not a palace to be sure. More like a hovel. Not the sort of place you'd expect to find a king, though Bethlehem had been the birthplace of David 1,000 years before.

It's worth reflecting on just how strange the scene seems.

Not only are the wise men no longer in the designated seat of royal power, they are as far from it as they could probably imagine, even though they are just nine miles away from it. Missed it by that much.

Although I sympathize with those who say that diapers, a rattle, and a bottle of wine would have been more helpful to a new mother like Mary, the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that the wise men bring into the house would have been typical gifts to bring to any king; fragrances, and resins, and precious metals.

But they have a significance that the wise ones can't fully comprehend. The gold an emblem of royalty, yes, of course. The frankincense wafting in the air though, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and the myrrh, not just a spice used for healing, but a spice used for burial. Not what you might expect to bring a child. The wise ones don't fully understand the meaning of what they bring with them, but they bring it anyway and they fall at Jesus' feet.

Their kneeling is a model of humility and obeisance, given to one who, even if they arrived two years later at a house and not a stable, would still have been only a toddler. It would have gone against all they understood about power, bowing in this way to a child in such humble surroundings. Talk about a loss of confidence project for them.

We don't really know what happened next with the wise ones, only that, in the words of James Taylor's marvelous song, *they were warned in a dream of King Herod's scheme and they went home by another way.* ⁴

Now, there are two ways to take that. One is that they almost certainly took a different physical route back to their country. But I like to believe that, not only did they go home on a different geographical path, they went home in another way altogether.

Something in them had changed, even after that very brief encounter with a very different sort of king than they might have imagined encountering.

I like how T.S. Eliot imagines at least one of them being changed at the end of his poem, "The Journey of the Magi." ⁵

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

I don't know what happened to the Magi, the wise ones, after they returned from their adoration of the Christ child. But I like to think they went home a little more intellectually humble, a little less confident in their presuppositions and preconceived notions, a lot more open to what life would show them in the days ahead, and a lot less at ease in the old dispensation with its cherished idolatries, old certainties and misplaced loyalties.

So then, what about us? We traveled through Advent. We heard the songs of the angels. We beheld our Savior's birth. We hailed a light that triumphs over darkness. And with the wise ones, we found

that he was not to be found in the palace, but in a place of humility, whether that be in a ramshackle house or a stable. How might that change us?

A few thoughts:

1. BE VULNERABLE. Seeing the vulnerability of Jesus, we might be more willing to be vulnerable as individuals. To put down the mask and be real. A friend in the *Twelve Step* program I'm in says that he can tell the ones who aren't going to make it. They are the ones who are too smart. Too smart for it, too smart to admit that they need help, that they can't do it on their own, that they need a higher power.

The good news is, Ralph Waldo Emerson was right, "When it gets dark enough, you can see the stars". So some of them come back. A lot less smart, and a lot more humble.

2. FOLLOW THE STAR TO HUMAN NEED. Seeing how the wise ones missed it by "that much", we might resolve to keep our eyes on the star which will lead us to the humble Christ child, and to see him in those in pain and need, which, as a friend reminded me yesterday morning, is all of us at some point or other, but it is certainly the ones we serve when we have our hypothermia shelter.

We were still in the thick of the 12 days of Christmas when I went to work out one morning. And after my workout, since I can no longer get my coffee from my Korean friend Jae who has retired and closed up his convenience store, I typically go the 7-11. As I was getting out of my car, I saw a man sitting outside the store, homeless. I thought, "I don't have time for this." I got my coffee and headed back out to my car, and then I remembered the star. I looked at the man, reached into my wallet and I gave him a five dollar bill, which was nothing really. Then I extended my hand and said, "My name is Aaron, what's your name?" The man looked surprised. We smiled at each other. He told me, "My name's Tony." It was a moment of real human connection.

How might we resolve to keep our eyes on the star that lead us to humble Christ child?

3. HAVE INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL HUMILITY. We might also have the intellectual and spiritual humility to admit that we might be wrong about something or other. It doesn't mean punting on confidence and certainty and conviction altogether. There are certain guiding principles that we can and do and should cling to. But sometimes our presumptions and presuppositions get in the way of us following our principles. How might we have the intellectual and spiritual humility to admit that we might just be wrong about something?

4. Fourth, and last, we might actually choose to FILL OUT A STAR WORD FOR THE YEAR. Hopefully you had one in your bulletin or an usher handed you one on the way in. On that star, every year at this time, we encourage people to write a word for the year, a word that hopefully will draw them closer to God, closer to the Christ Child, closer to the God who is made known not just in power but in vulnerability.

Over the past several years, I've chosen words like present, and joy, and enlightenment, and courage. Last year, I chose the word calm (or it chose me). All year long, I lived with that word, written on a star attached to my computer monitor, and duplicates of it on my door frame, and my dashboard, and my bathroom mirror.

Believe it or not, I am calmer than I was when 2018 started. I know that's a low bar to set, but I lived that word thinking, "God wants me to be more calm, to be still and know that God is God."

So here's my word for this year. Hold me to it. The word (for those of you who have eyesight like mine) is OPEN.

1 Brian Resnick, "Intellectual Humility: The Importance of Knowing You Might Be Wrong" Vox.com 1/4/2019, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/1/4/17989224/intellectual-humility-explained-psychology-replication>

2 Brian Resnick, "Intellectual Humility: The Importance of Knowing You Might Be Wrong" Vox.com 1/4/2019, <https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/2019/1/4/17989224/intellectual-humility-explained-psychology-replication>

3 Quote from "*Get Smart*", TV show from 1965-1970, NBC (National Broadcasting Company).

4 James Taylor, "Home By Another Way," track # 8 on album *Never Die Young*. Columbia/Legacy label. 1988.

5 T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi" in *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber & Faber Ltd. 1974.