

On the Road to Radiance

The magi seek the Messiah

based on Matthew 2:1-12

In my country, I am part of a group called the magi. Sometimes we are called wise men or even holy men. At one time we were a tribe of priests, but over time this changed. Instead of devoting ourselves to the study of holy texts, we became skilled in philosophy, medicine, and the natural sciences. I, myself, study the heavens.

People are always looking for answers, and they look to us for many things. Some consider us soothsayers and interpreters of dreams. They believe we can foretell the future from the stars, and that a man's destiny is determined by the star under which he is born. I can't say there isn't some truth to this, for the stars follow a natural rhythm of seasons and time. They represent order in a chaotic world, so I understand why people look to the heavens to find their answers. Many times, I have followed signs in the sky when traveling. One journey has stayed with me longer than any of the others—a journey to find a king.

In the Egyptian month of Messori, an unusual star rose, shining with extraordinary brilliance. We understood this to signify the arrival of a king into the world, and we were not alone. In fact, the world seemed to be waiting in eager anticipation. Many cultures had a long-established belief that at this time, the East was to grow powerful, and a ruler would rise out of Judea. The location of the star reinforced this direction, so some of my fellow magi and I set out to follow the star and find this king.

The journey was not quick or short, but we had prepared for the trip and we had the means to buy supplies along the way. Eventually, we found ourselves in the town of Jerusalem, at the palace of the current ruler, Herod Antipas. Our arrival caused quite a stir, and upon hearing the reason for our visit, Herod sought counsel from the Jewish chief priests and scribes in

Jerusalem. Herod wanted to know exactly where the “anointed one of God” was to be born. The Jewish leaders confirmed our understanding—it was foretold he would be born in Bethlehem, in Judea. They quoted their religious texts, “You, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means the least among the leaders of Judah; for from you will come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

After gaining this information, Herod met with us privately. He asked us for the exact time the star had appeared. We volunteered the information, but I felt a small sense of apprehension. In my studies, I spend a lot of time analyzing darkness and light. Usually I am observing them from the realm above, but there is also darkness and light on the earthly plane that is no less fascinating. It emanates from people's hearts and the nature of their character.

People who live their lives in darkness or in light are easy to recognize. They can't help but show their true nature. But those who wander between light and darkness live in the shadows, half in darkness and half in light. They are more difficult to see and even harder to understand. To me, Herod Antipas seemed to be such a man. He acted eager to send us on our way, even implored us to diligently search until we had found the child. But then he said something I found strange. After we had found the child, he told us to report back to him so he himself could go and worship this king. Not only did his desire strike a note of insincerity, but the light in his eyes was full of shadows. What king worships his replacement?

I was more than happy to return to the road and overjoyed to see the star was still before us. We followed it to a humble cottage in the town of Bethlehem. Inside we found a young child and his mother. Upon entering the home, we knew without a doubt this was the child we sought. With great reverence we bowed and without an ounce of hesitation, we worshiped him.

Once we had shown our respect, we unpacked the gifts we had brought the tiny king. Our gifts were gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the most valuable gifts our country had to offer. We were touched by the family's awe and delight in receiving them.

Here I saw nothing of what we had left at Herod's palace. No shadows, only warm, glorious light, much like the star we followed. I was filled with wonder.

When we finally left and retired for the evening, I expected to fall into a sound sleep. Instead I had a restless night and woke with the remnants of a dream still with me. I soon discovered that my companions shared a similar dream. In the dream, we were warned not to return to Herod's palace or report on the whereabouts of the child. We were in total agreement that the dream was a warning we would heed. We would make our way home by a different route, giving Herod's palace a wide berth.

The road home gave me time to reflect on everything I had seen. The darkness I had felt in Herod's presence was unnerving and chilling. The light I felt in the presence of the child destined to be a king was luminous and incandescent.

Do you remember before when I told you people are always looking for answers? Over the years, I have learned many things. In my travels, I have seen many more. I always seem to be on one road or another, but no matter what road I'm on, I always follow the light.

What about you?

Matthew 2:1-12 NIV
The Magi Visit the Messiah

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] 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."^[b]

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."

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.

On the Road to Radiance.

Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14;
Ephesians 3:1-12; **Matthew 2:1-12**

We have been on the road to readiness. Then we were invited on to the road to repentance. Repentance puts us on the road to restoration. Next the road to revelation shows us Jesus.

Which leads us to the road of rejoicing. Today on the road to radiance we find the warmth, joy, & love that only these roads can lead us to.

I know you have heard this story before. But maybe not quite the way this old sermon tells it. It's titled: "Star Trek: A Narrative." I weave a few of my own thoughts into this story of an old journey on this first Sunday of the New Year. 2020 was quite a year, wasn't it? We and the world had quite a journey and new stories to tell. Anytime we tell a story, it freshens our thinking and reminds us of our own stories. Stories always have an allegorical, symbolic aspect to it. That is to say people or events in the story can be taken to represent people or events in our own life stories.

The Christian life, is most often represented in the Bible, in biblical materials, and in biographies of followers of Jesus, as a journey. It begins with Almighty God planning to cross paths with us, then with our confession of Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, followed by a journey with the King of Kings. This journey and story has many victories, some failures and always challenges. And it ends when we at last meet the Savior and the Father, face to face, in God's heavenly kingdom.

So take this story as an example of your own faith journey. The story of the Magi is our own story. The details are different, of course. But the journey is essentially the same. It is our story because the Magi were the very first Gentiles to whom God revealed his purpose and who, in the end, not only worshipped Jesus, but met him face to face.

The magi was tired, the journey had been long and very hard at times. Despite the companionship that he enjoyed on the way, he had often found himself feeling discouraged. But for all that - tonight was special. His journey was over and he felt a peace and a glow in his heart he had never felt before.

It had all begun months earlier - it seemed like years now - when he had noticed a new star in

the heavens, a star that did not belong there. One that had never been there before. At first he thought that he had made a mistake, that the charts that he had relied upon for years were in error. But as night followed upon night he saw that the star moved, that it was changing position against the familiar constellations. Finally, certain of his discovery, and not sure what to make of it, he told another astrologer at the court about what he had found.

Events followed fairly quickly then. At first anyway. After his discovery was confirmed by his friend, all the astrologers and soothsayers gathered to observe the star and to discuss what it meant. After a few days of intense debate, days in which astrological charts were cast in the dozens, and clerks scurried back and forth with complicated calculations, after an incredible amount of work and confusion, it was decided that the star signaled the birth of a new king. In fact of a great king. And this king had been born, or was about to be born, in a land somewhere to the west of them.

For another few weeks various attempts were made to discover what king had been born in the western lands or what Queen was expecting a child. But normally kings don't appreciate the news that a great king is about to be born. They usually immediately feel threatened. So the astrologers were cautious about sharing their discovery with their country's ruler.

And, because there was no news to be had from those far lands - and because their leader still expected advice every day; and couples still wanted charts drawn up when their children were born; and because business also was very good among the merchants who wished to know the best time to buy and sell their goods; because of all these things, very soon most of the wise men in the land forgot about the new star & the excitement caused by its appearance.

But there were a few who could not forget. A few magi continued to discuss the star long after the news of its appearance had faded from the minds of the rest. It seemed to one magi

and two of his companions that the star was a sign of tremendous significance. Never had they heard of a new star appearing. And never had they seen a star move in the heavens.

Together they discussed how the star must be a sign from the gods that something very important was happening. And everyone had agreed, the king the star announced was no ordinary king. The star was such a powerful sign, that one magi finally resolved to set forth and to find the king who lay beneath it. He knew that his life would be incomplete if he did not meet the king the star pointed to.

His two friends, who were equally excited by the star and in awe of the power it pointed to, agreed to go with him on his trip. So it was that one night, leaving behind all that they held dear and knew so well, they set forth. They had travelled a long way since then, a long way, and often the way had been difficult. Often there had been delays and uncertainties. Often there had been danger and confusion.

There were times when he and his friends could not move onward. The sky would be obscured by clouds and they could not be sure if they were heading in the right direction. So they would set up camp wherever they found themselves and wait. Just like Israel in their wilderness journey.

Always when he had to wait he lost some of his confidence. He was never sure if, when the clouds parted once again, that the star would still be in the sky. Perhaps it would disappear from view as suddenly as it had appeared. Maybe he was chasing a ghost star, a star with no real significance, a star with no real existence. Perhaps he was a fool on a fool's errand. At other times when the star shone brightly and the three of them could move onward, their progress was impeded by terrain that even people travelling by day would have had trouble with. A leg of their journey that local residents told them would only take a day would take three. And the easy paths that other

travelers told them about, never seemed to be as easy as they expected.

It seemed at times that there had never been a easy night for them: always there was some anxiety or other to disturb them - even on the most level paths. Sometimes, in fact, those paths worried him the most, for others might be roaming, others with evil on their minds, others ready to kill or steal from passing strangers.

But the worst thing, the thing that made the journey the hardest, was the comments of others. Most of the people they met on their way could not understand why they were following a star. They thought they were crazy to travel by such an obscure light, crazy to have left behind the safety of their own land, the security of their jobs in their own ruler's court.

People would ask him and his friends why they had not stayed at home with the other wise men. They would suggest, without actually saying so, that perhaps they were not as wise as those others who had seen the star, but not followed it. "So, a king has been born" they would say. "This happens often. What is so special about this king that you would undertake this journey? What possible difference can it make to you?" they were often asked.

When he or one of the others replied that this king had a special star, a kind of star never seen before, people would laugh and say that life was too good to go off chasing after a king that no one had ever seen, let alone heard about.

Even the other astrologers they consulted along the way thought that he and his friends were being foolish. "What difference can it make to you", they would ask? "Right now you could be making a handsome profit casting charts for businessmen or telling your nation's generals when to make war and when to make peace. Instead here you are wandering, looking for someone or something that may not exist."

And so the days and the weeks passed. They pressed onward, but often they wondered if

anything would come of it, and always, even on those marvelous days when they had no doubts of their own, they had to contend with the doubts of others.

There had been days, when resting by the roadside in their camp, or casting charts in a village square to earn money to pay for their food and lodging, he had been tempted to give up his quest. He would feel comfortable, money would be jingling in his purse, his belly would be full, and he would think about the hazards of their journey and how good he felt to do what everyone else did. And he would forget the new king for a while.

But then night would come and he and his companions would look up and they would see the star, and it would seem to outshine the others in the sky. They realized again just how special it was, and how important the new king had to be. So they would once again mount their camels and set forth to find him.

Yes, he was very tired, the journey had been long and very hard at times. But tonight was special. He had at last arrived at the place the star had led him to. The country he and the others were in that night was not a very important one. It lay under Roman rule. And it was primitive and backward.

But they had heard rumors that a king was supposed to be born in it. When they had gone to the capital city and asked about that king, the man who governed the nation had told them to go and check in a town called Bethlehem. Earlier that night they had left the city and the star had shone brightly from the direction that Herod had indicated. They followed it, until they had entered the village of Bethlehem, and when they had arrived there it seemed to him that the star was, for the very first time, directly above the king's head. And that it shone in a special way upon one house.

He had dismounted and with the other two had entered the house and saw an infant child in his mother's arms. For a moment he doubted that

he had found the great king. For though the star shone through the chimney hole so that its light seemed to rest upon the child's face, everything else seemed to be all wrong.

There was no sign of royal wealth in the house. There were no expensive oils to sooth the skin. No costly furs or linens upon the sleeping pads to bring easy sleep to the baby. There were no servants running around. There was nothing in fact to indicate that the babe was anything but the child of a poor peasant, of a man, who by the few tools and pieces of wood stacked in a corner, seemed to be a carpenter.

Yet - there was a feeling in the room, a feeling that seemed to radiate from the mother, father and the child. The star light seemed to cast a halo around them. So he had explained to them why he was there with the others. In return the mother had told them of a dream she had, a dream in which her Creator God had told her - she would bear a child to rule his people and to bring light to the gentiles.

Then her husband told them why the baby was special. He told them that when the king had been born, shepherds had seen angels and come to the stable where the baby had been born and worshipped the child. And Joseph told of the other events that occurred with this baby, like Mary's song, Zechariah's story, and Simeon and Anna.

And then the magi had looked again at the child, and at his parents. He thought about the light she had mentioned, and how the star had brought him to this very place. And a feeling of joy overcame him, a feeling that he saw had overcome his friends. He saw and felt the radiance of the Almighty.

Then, without a word or a look to each other, the magi had knelt, and paid homage to the new king. They had prayed that God his father would bless him in all his days, and make him greater even than the star that had led them to him. Then they had given the child those

things that they had brought to give to the new born king - gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now, outside the little house he thought about his journey. He felt tired, but he felt also a peace that he had never felt before. He realized that he would never feel incomplete again, for the king who had been born, was not a king like all the other kings he had known. Instead he was a king who would look after all those who were like him: the poor, the humble, and the weak. He was a king who would conquer with love, and rule with compassion. He realized that somehow the God that Mary and Joseph spoke of, was the only God that mattered. This true God was in the child they had seen.

He prayed for the second time that night. He prayed that he might be one of those loved by that child, one of those loved by that God; and that he might always see the light of his star inside his heart and follow his way. He knew even as he prayed - that his prayer was being answered.

It had been a long journey, at times it had been a discouraging journey but it had been a worthwhile journey, because not only had he found a great king, he had also found the Almighty God who cared so much for his creation and his creatures, that he had taken on flesh and come to dwell among his people. This baby lite up his soul in a way he could not put into words. They felt the radiance and listened to the prompting to return home by a different way.

Jesus, light of the world has come. He shines on our own journeys. We are on the road to radiance in the light of his laws and love, the King's truth and grace. May God's light be radiant on us and in us during this coming year.

Developed from a 1993 sermon by
Rev. Richard J. Fairchild

It's so good that I had to use it as a spring board for this sermon.