

“When the Light Shines”

Genesis 12:1-4; Matthew 2:1-12

January 5, 2025 –*Epiphany Sunday*

Introduction

- The other day, we wanted to go to Concord Mills
- So, I put my intended destination into the GPS and away we went.
 - o The little machine tells me, turn by turn how to get exactly to where I want to be.
- This little machine is a wonder for me.
 - o I’m geographically challenged, I still get lost in Charlotte even though I’ve been driving here for 35 years now.
- I wonder sometimes if I’m getting dumber geographically now.
- But the GPS gets me where I’m going.
- One time though, when I went to Pittsburgh.
 - o Recalculating
 - I was really worried if I’d be able to get home because the machine wasn’t working.
- Our story today is about navigating, really. Going from one place to another.
 - o We get the story of the Magi but it’s really a story about us, as well, about our journey to faith and beyond.
 - And there’s good news in the story and in the telling of it so let’s begin.

The Magi

- To begin with, let’s talk about these travelers from the East.
- Now, because they’re from the East, we may think of them as being Asiatic but that would be wrong.
 - o They’re from Babylon.
- Babylon, as we know, has quite a bit of history with the Jewish people.
 - o Babylon, as we may remember, was an Ancient Near East bully for a while after the Assyrians.
 - They were the dominant power for quite some time before the Romans.
 - They end up conquering Judah, the Southern Kingdom that included Jerusalem.
 - o They carted off numerous citizens to live in Babylon, called the Exile in Babylon.
- It was during this Exile that the Jewish people would’ve become known to the Babylonians, especially the Magi.
- Now our hymn calls them Kings but that’s not what they were, that’s the result of a mistranslation, really.
- What they were are astrologers.
 - o Diviners really.
 - o We can read more about magi admittedly in an unflattering light from the Book of Daniel.
 - There, magi appear to be helping the King persecute the boys from Israel.
 - o We know from the trip they would’ve had to have been quite wealthy.
 - Travelling that far at the time required a caravan, that’s why there’s likely to be far more of these magi than just three.
 - We get three from the number of gifts, really but the chances are there were a lot more of them.
- The Trip
 - o The distance is about 900 miles.
 - A quick flight on Delta, right?
 - Not so much.
 - Travelling as a caravan may have made about 20 miles a day, so it would’ve taken months to make this distance.

- The Book of Ezra (Ezra 7:8-9) notes that when Ezra led a group of exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem, the journey took about **four months**, reflecting a realistic travel time for large groups with supplies and livestock.
 - Four months is a long time to be away from kith and kin.
 - And, to be on the road at the time, it was sort of dangerous with bandits on the prowl, that's why you needed to travel in a caravan, for protection.
 - So, these Magi arrive in Jerusalem, following a star.
- Seeking the Light
- So, what happened?
 - Matthew 2:2 tells us: *"We observed His star at its rising and have come to pay Him homage."*
 - The Magi spotted a star, a point of light that was new.
 - Knowing what they did, they knew this star told that a King was coming.
 - How did they know?
 - We don't know for sure but we know that God can speak inwardly to us, alerting us of His presence and directing us where to go to serve Him.
 - Don't overlook that these weren't Jewish insiders, God was announcing Jesus to the WHOLE WORLD because Jesus is the Savior of the WHOLE WORLD.
 - The star is a divine sign. In the Old Testament, celestial events sometimes signaled God's activity (e.g., Numbers 24:17 speaks of a star arising from Jacob).
 - They saw the star and immediately began to make preparations for the journey.
 - Excursus – Are you like that? Do you immediately seize upon something to do or are you more of a debater, wondering what to do next.
 - Well, when an epiphany comes upon you, you move.
 - Why?
 - Because it's from God, that's why!
 - Think about Abram in Genesis 12.
 - God spoke to him telling him to Go and BOOM HE GOES.
 - It reminds me of my friend Kevin from Divinity School.
 - He was working in the prestigious Riverside church in NYC.
 - One day, he got a call to work with marginalized kids in LA.
 - The next thing you know, he's living in LA, helping kids.
 - He got the call and just moved his life entirely around to accommodate God's calling on his life.
 - We all have "stars" or nudges from God: a scripture that convicts us, a friend's timely advice, or a door that opens unexpectedly. Are we willing to leave our comfort zones to follow?
 - The Magi's journey wasn't straightforward or easy. As they sought the light, they encountered **darkness**—the opposing forces in the world that tried to thwart their quest. Let's explore that.
- Wrestling with the Darkness
- I always thought that the star's presence was continuous, it wasn't.
 - They begin following a star but then are left to guide themselves for a while.
 - Imagine you're one of them you're looking for a king.
 - You come to a hill, there below you see two towns.
 - One large a vibrant, filled with activity and people.
 - Another is sleepy, small and not much going on.
 - Remember, you're looking for a KING, where are you going?
 - The magi choose wrong.
 - They head to Jerusalem.
 - We may make wrong choices when we're following God.
 - We shouldn't allow it to stop us, we keep going just like the Magi.

- Look what they did.
 - o They started by asking for help.
- Unfortunately, that puts them in the sites for Herod.
- Herod
 - o A truly bad man
 - o Puppet king for Rome he had limited authority.
 - o He kept the Romans happy by building huge projects.
 - The Second Temple was largely his project even though he was only marginally Jewish (by marriage).
 - o But he did some horrible things as well.
 - Killed his wife.
 - Killed two of his sons.
 - As he was dying, he had hundreds of people killed so that the city would be in mourning when he died.
 - Slaughter of the Innocents
- The Magi come to Herod, asking, where is the King of the Jews to be born?
 - o The problem here is that Herod is the King of the Jews and he isn't looking for any help.
 - o Herod understandably becomes anxious.
 - He calls his chief priest and scribes to come and help him learn where such a baby is to be born.
 - In Bethlehem.
- But notice, they only come to Herod because the light of the star has disappeared for a period of time.
 - o It can be like that for us.
 - We get started on a spiritual journey with a full head of steam then something changes.
 - We may stop but we shouldn't.
 - If God has put us onto this path, we should not waver.
 - o We should also remember what faith it.
 - Hebrews tells us, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, things LEFT UNSEEN.
 - The Magi were travelling by faith.
 - We should be too.
- But notice and don't miss this – what put the wisemen back on track, so to speak.
 - o The Bible
 - As the chief priests and scribes consulted, what do you think they read.
 - They read the Bible, that's how they knew to point to Bethlehem.
- We need the Bible, too to guide us along our way.
- We are all going to travel in darkness to God's plans at times.
 - o We get started, know the way but then we've got to navigate ourselves for little stretches.
 - For those, we require the WORD.
 - The Bible is what keeps us on the right track, so to speak, just as it reoriented the MAGI to the right place.
- Someone who faced spiritual darkness for a time was a man by the name of Joe Kennedy.
 - o Joe was a football coach in Bremerton, Washington.
 - o It was his practice to kneel and pray at the 50 yard line before a game.
 - Some of his players would join him.
 - o Opposition arose to his display of faith and soon, the school district told him not to do it.
 - He did it anyway and was fired.
 - o Thankfully, the Supreme Court overturned the rulings and allowed the coach to go back to work.

- He had faith in times during the darkness.
- There are always Herod's out there, trying to stifle the light of Jesus Christ.
 - But Christ's light is always victorious.
- Despite Herod's schemes, the Magi press on. They eventually behold the Christ child. Once they see Him, their response is **worship** and sacrificial giving.

Offering our Worship

- Once the Magi get sent in the right direction, they find Nazareth.
 - I'm sure at first it seemed strange to these foreigners.
 - Why would a KING be here, in Nazareth?
 - BUT them, they saw Jesus.
 - They were overjoyed and they paid Him HOMAGE.
 - They worshipped Him.
- First, they bowed to him and worshipped Him.
 - These travelers, who'd risked and endured so much were now exactly where they were supposed to be, worshipping the Christ-child.
 - True worship is evoked every time we're brought face-to-face with Jesus.
 - It doesn't matter where we are, just like it was for these wisemen.
- What were the gifts that they brought Him?
 - Gold
 - Fit for a king.
 - Frankincense
 - Fit for a priest.
 - Myrrh
 - Fit for a prophet.
- Manny Pacquiao, one of the most celebrated boxers in history, grew up in extreme poverty in the Philippines. His prowess in the boxing ring skyrocketed him to global fame and wealth—he became the first boxer to win world titles in eight different weight divisions. Along with success, however, came a lavish and, by his own admission, morally compromised lifestyle: gambling, heavy drinking, and womanizing.
- **A Radical Turning Point**
 - Around 2012, Manny experienced a profound spiritual awakening. He has often spoken about a vivid dream in which he sensed God warning him to leave behind his destructive habits. The encounter prompted him to dive into Scripture and fully commit his life to Christ.
- **Surrendering the Old Life**
 - He publicly turned away from gambling, drinking, and other vices.
 - He risked alienating some fans and sponsors by speaking openly about his faith—fully aware that his newfound convictions could cost him endorsements or popularity.
- **Resulting Blessings**
 - **Personal Transformation**
 - Pacquiao testifies that he found a deeper sense of **peace** and **purpose** once he surrendered his old ways to follow Christ's teachings.
 - He began leading Bible studies and using his fame to share the message of God's grace.
- **Blessing His Community**
 - Manny started funneling significant portions of his wealth into charitable projects.
 - He built thousands of homes for impoverished families in the Philippines, provided food distribution to rural areas, and funded educational scholarships.
 - This generosity has **transformed entire neighborhoods**, giving families safe places to live and new opportunities for the future.
- **Ongoing Witness**

- Despite ridicule and criticism—some media outlets dismissed his outspoken faith—Pacquiao continues to model **obedience and compassion**.
- He often tells interviewers that no material success compares to the **joy** of knowing Christ and serving others in His name.
- **Why It Matters for the Sermon**
 - **Parallel to the Magi's Gifts:** Just as the Magi traveled far to present costly treasures to the newborn King (Matthew 2:11), Pacquiao freely offered up his most valuable assets—his career influence, financial resources, and public image—to honor Christ.
- **Transformation Through Surrender**
 - The Magi's encounter with Jesus sent them "by another way" (Matthew 2:12), and Pacquiao's life also took a new direction—one marked by faith, generosity, and public devotion.
- **Blessing Multiplied**
 - In surrendering his old lifestyle, Pacquiao not only found **spiritual renewal** but also became a channel of **blessing** for countless others. When we "lose" our lives for Christ's sake, we often discover them renewed and enlarged for God's work (Mark 8:35).