

**SLD01.09.11 Epiphany**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Matthew 2:1-12**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“What’s to Wonder?”**

#### **Prayer for Illumination**

As a star shone in the heavens, O God, leading the Wise Ones to the mystery of your love, so open your Word to us this morning, that we, too, might delight in your light, that we, too, may be filled with your love, that we, too, might yield to You the best we have to offer. Amen.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, the 12<sup>th</sup> day, and culmination, of Christmas, the day when the Wise Ones follow a star to the Light of Christ, and actually “get it.”

Twinkle, twinkle little star; how I wonder what you are.

“What’s to wonder, silly,” might one ask another. “It’s a star! And a star is a star is a star, right?” And we all know, as Pumba speculated to Simon in *The Lion King*, a star is “a bundle of burning gases.” “Oh, Pumba,” responded Simon, “*everything* with you is gas.” But that’s all a star is, right? Now that science has explained stars to us, there’s not so much to wonder any more. Anything you want to know about a star, just Google it.

Though even if they’d had access to the internet, I’m not sure the wise ones following the star in Matthew’s story would have found what they were looking for. Information – what comprises the star, how far away it is, how long it will last – doesn’t seem so much what they’re seeking, but rather, meaning. What does the star “mean?” Where is it leading? What does it foretell?

For the wise ones, the star is a sign, a revelation, a “star of wonder;” indeed, it’s the wonder that’s captivated them, spurring them on. Toward what, they’re not exactly sure but it feel important. Hopeful. Good. The star, they surmise, is leading them to

something or someone worth wondering about, worth journeying towards. Something, someone, in fact, that could change their lives; who might even change the world.

You know, when speaking of religious doctrine, the Buddhists say, “don’t confuse the moon with the finger pointing to the moon.”

We’re not sure what religion these wise men practiced. They weren’t Buddhists. They weren’t Jews, that’s for sure. Tradition has it that they hailed from Persia, so perhaps they were followers of the prophet Zarathustra and worshippers of the God whom he called Ahura Mazda, regarded as the creator of all that is good and alone is worthy of worship.<sup>1</sup> But one thing’s for sure, these wise ones never confused the moon with the finger pointing to the moon; or, in this case, the star with where the star was pointing.

Mind you, it was no doubt a fabulous star. Record-breaking brightness. An astrological anomaly – which is likely what first caught their notice. But this they could have simply noted that in their records, discussed at their wise men gatherings. But however remarkable, the star that caught the attention of these three seekers was not, itself, the point (no pun intended). The point was where the star was leading.

This is what made it a star of wonder, a light of leading, a trustworthy finger pointing to something grand, something special, something worth leaving the familiar to explore. Sure, the wise men were following a star, but only because of where it was leading them toward something new.

And where was the star leading? Well, they couldn’t exactly say. Learned about different religions, these worldly wise ones were no doubt familiar with Jewish lore, with the writings and the prophets and the law. Apparently they knew, or learned, something

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.religionfacts.com/zoroastrianism/index.htm>

about Israel's history, as well as Micah's prophesy about the shepherd king who would one day rule. Apparently they had even heard that this shepherd king would be born, not in majestic Jerusalem, but, like King David, in dinky Bethlehem, among the insignificant clans of Judah.<sup>2</sup>

Although surely the whole "shepherd king" paradigm must have seemed odd to them, a bit of a socio-political oxymoron – someone poor with power? A humble ruler? A servant-leader?

But then again, perhaps they mused, these Israelites were a desert people with a history of wandering themselves; perhaps the shepherd image held special meaning for them. And "king," well, everybody knows what a king is. Why these journeying wise ones were kings themselves, with power and wealth and holdings adequate, evidently, for them to go wandering off on wild goose chases fueled only by whim and wonder. Indeed, so galvanizing was their collective wonder that these three pooled their resources and speculations and set out together to see...what they would see.

Ever wonder what their wives thought? Certainly you and I generally favor a more measured approach to what we don't know. In fact, don't we regard as most wise those who *know* what they're talking about?

Ever been stuck in a quandary yourself, not sure at all what you should do, when someone you trust comes along, your mom, your dad, your teacher, your spouse, and tells you what you should do? What a relief! Don't we treasure guidance, wisdom, good advice, as well as those who offer it? Especially when we just can't figure out what to do next?

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<sup>2</sup> Oxford Annotated Bible, RSV, fn p. 1127.

But these ones whom scripture call wise, I'm not sure they knew exactly what they were doing.

Their wives: Honey, where are y'all going?

We're not really sure.

Okay, so, *why* are you going?

Well...see...there's this star....

Never mind. When are y'all coming back?

We're not exactly sure.

And you hope this journey will yield....

Really, we think something *very* important.

Yeah, right, think their wives. At least it'll be good to have them out of the tent for a while.

These guys may be wise but definitely not in a mapquest, triptik, travel plan sort of way. Sure, Matthew has them showing up at the first camel station in Jerusalem and asking, "So, where's this kid born king of the Jews?" Like they had it all figured out.

Who knows how many times they'd already stopped? How many places they'd already asked? "...so, where's this toddler born Sultan to the Turks? Where's this princess born Tsarina of Tyre?"

After all, if these seekers *had* been all that keen and clear about Jewish kings, why, there was Herod sitting solid on his throne right there in Jerusalem when they arrived, though the wise ones didn't even stop by to say "hey" until they were summoned.

No, what captivated and motivated these wise guys on their journey was not the foreordained, the predictable, the explicable. Indeed, what drew them couldn't be explained at all, even to themselves, except as some sort of cosmic mystery, some universal come-hither with an irresistible magnetism, which, in their wisdom, they were less interested in explaining than responding to. Mere information they had conquered long ago; what they wanted now was to be swept along by, and into, the mystery of a Coming One who would be the Light of the World.

Did they understand? No, they didn't understand, nor did they need to. It was a difficult journey, but only the experience itself could, would satisfy.

Hear the wise ones speak in T.S. Eliot's poem called *The Journey of the Magi*<sup>3</sup>

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times when we regretted  
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling  
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities dirty and the towns unfriendly  
And the villages dirty and charging high prices:  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,  
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;  
With a running stream and a water mill beating the darkness,  
And three trees on the low sky,  
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow.  
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,  
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,  
And feet kicking the empty wineskins.  
But there was no information, and so we continued

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ishk.org/school/poem/poem\\_013.html](http://www.ishk.org/school/poem/poem_013.html)

And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon  
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.

Whatever the insight, knowledge, or understanding of these wise ones, only the experience itself was (we may say) satisfactory.

Only, you know how it goes: one person's lodestar is another's headlight, as in – a deer in the headlights. And upon hearing that there might be a competing king in the 'hood, King Herod was that deer. And, like any of us when we feel threatened, scared, unhinged, Herod is not the least bit interested in mystery.

"Who is this kid, where is he, and how do we get rid of him?" is all he wants to know. Just give me the facts of the matter, please, so we can deal with this "situation."

I used to love to watch NYPD Blue and I always got tickled when Jimmy Schmidt would announce in manly understatement, "What we've got here, Chief, is a 'situation.'"

Well, when the wise men show up looking for a Jewish king who isn't Herod, what Herod has on his hands is definitely a "situation."

Picture the two contrasting scenarios in this tale: wise ones wandering along, souls smitten, spirits searching, eyes bright with anticipation ...looking for Jesus.

Now see Herod pacing in his throne room, teeth clenched, shoulders tight, mind racing, fist banging his palm...looking for Jesus.

Who do you suppose what they were looking for?

It's tempting to say that the wise men did. Certainly that's how our Christmas plays go. But there's always more to mystery than happy endings. What happened next for these three seekers of truth?

Hear this final word from Eliot's Magi:

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.

Follow a star of wonder to the Light of the World, and *everything* changes.

To the glory of God. Amen.