

Being Magi¹

Matthew 2:1-12

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I have never been one to read horoscopes, at least not regularly or seriously (though I admit that I do sometimes read mine if I happen to be on that page of the newspaper). I don't know what my astrological sign means or what it says about me – nor if my personality fits with my sign. I did not consider zodiac signs when choosing my life partner, nor do I consult the stars when making big life decisions – and I wouldn't normally suggest that you do this, either. But this morning, just for a bit, I'd like for all of us to consider becoming astrologers, becoming magi, at least in a sense. I want us to consider living like these "wise men" who we often name as kings. I want us to go into this new year not living in fear, but confronting the Herods of this world with the hope and overwhelming joy that come with knowing the power and presence of God. Being magi.

I have always loved this story from Matthew's gospel. It's the best part of the nativity picture, I think – so mysterious, so dramatic, so intriguing. Mary and Joseph are important, to be sure, but they just wear bathrobes in the Christmas pageant, while the wise men come in with their re-purposed and bejeweled Burger King crowns and tin-foil covered packages, perhaps wearing long capes of thick, sparkling fabrics. The image of the magi captures my imagination, as I think about these outsiders from Persia or Babylon, who likely rode hundreds of miles across the Syrian desert, a journey that might have taken two years by camel – these astrologers so determined to follow the star to the place where Jesus was. And this image has captured imaginations for centuries, as people have imagined details about these mysterious figures: determining that there are three of them, naming them kings (even specific kings), giving them different ethnicities, different regions, their own Christmas carol which suggests that each of these "three" brought their gifts for a specific purpose – gold to crown Jesus as king, frankincense to symbolize his divinity, and myrrh to embalm him at his death. And we're part of that imagining, as we'll sing that song together this morning, even though none of that information is in the Scriptures. It's just such a beautiful picture: every time you hear the hymn, you can see the camel train bouncing slowly across the desert.

But everything about this story is both dramatic and absurd: these Persian astrologers traveling hundreds of miles, not knowing exactly where they were going, but somehow knowing that they were looking for the newborn king of the Jews, something they read in the stars. Then they consult the chief priests, who have read the prophecies in the Scriptures and *know* that Bethlehem is the place, but they don't try to get there at all. Then you've got the evil king, who doesn't really have much power – he's a stand-in for Rome in this region that nobody really cares about, so he'll do *anything at all* to preserve and wield his power. But the thing that I love most about this story is in verse 10: It says, "When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." Or other translations say they were "filled with joy" or "overjoyed" or even "beside themselves with joy." Now you may think, "Yes, I would be overwhelmed with joy, too, if I had carried these expensive and probably heavy gifts hundreds of miles following a star, and it had finally stopped." But if you keep reading, you see that the magi are overwhelmed with joy not because their journey is over, but because of what they've found. They entered the house where the toddler Jesus was with his mother, and immediately they knelt down and worshiped him, giving him precious gifts. They were overwhelmed with joy because they had found Jesus.

¹ This sermon is adapted from one preached by me at Seattle First UMC on January 6, 2008.

Of course, these guys didn't know about Jesus like we know about Jesus. We are kind of cheating here, because we already know the whole story: Jesus' amazing life and ministry, his awful death, his resurrection. We know that Jesus will turn water into wine, heal the sick and cure the lame, make the blind to see and even raise the dead. But when the wise men walk into that house, they don't see all of that – they don't see miraculous powers or incredible work for justice – they just see a toddler held by his mother. They could not have had any idea just what Jesus would become.

And yet, Matthew's gospel tells us that they are overwhelmed with joy. Or the Greek literally translates, "They rejoiced with a great joy exceedingly." These guys are gentiles – they might have heard the prophecies of the coming Messiah, but they had no reason to study the Hebrew Scriptures the way the Jews did, and no reason to believe that this star, or this baby, would fulfill those prophecies. There was no reason for them to hope for a Messiah in baby Jesus. And yet these highly educated foreigners followed that star to the place where Jesus lay, through the darkness of Herod's reign, rejoicing with a great joy exceedingly when they found him, becoming the first church as they fell down and worshiped him.

And how is it that these magi, having little evidence that this baby is anything other than any other baby, are rejoicing so? How is it that these pagans are rejoicing rather than the chief priests of Herod's court who have been longing for a Messiah for hundreds of years? How is it that these magi, who know far less about Jesus than we do, rejoiced in a way that we rarely do, even at Christmas? I think it's a simple answer, really: **the magi lived in hope**. And not just hope in themselves or hope for the future, but hope in the presence of God, which was confirmed for them first by a star, and then by a dream. It wasn't just the baby that brought exceedingly great joy – joy came from hoping in a God who still speaks, who still leads, who is still present.

It would be easy to look at these guys and say, "Well, super, they lived in hope. Great story." But it's important to acknowledge that hope was not their only choice: the Gospel story gives us two options for how to react to the birth of Jesus. We can be magi, rejoicing and living in the hope of God's presence, or we can be Herod and all Jerusalem, who lived in fear of change and upheaval. You see, Herod is the perfect foil for the magi: he's a ruthless dictator, unafraid to kill even his own family members to maintain his rickety position of power. He knows the prophecy – he knows that the scriptures tell of a Jewish king to be born in Bethlehem, and he is afraid when these pagan foreigners show up asking about this baby whom they wish to worship. Herod knows there is room for only one king, and he is terrified that it won't be him. So he lets fear rule his actions, declaring that all baby boys in Bethlehem should be killed in an effort to get Jesus. And that fear spreads, as fear so often does, becoming an epidemic, so that not only was Herod afraid, but all Jerusalem with him.

And maybe Herod was right to be afraid, because he was not as powerful as he thought he was. His evil plan had nothing on the magi, nothing on that first church, because they refused to be governed by fear. The magi took that hope that they had in the star over Bethlehem, and they let it lead them not back the way they came but into a new kingdom, an alternative society called the kingdom of God, where power comes not from fear but the love of a shepherd – a new, upside-down kingdom, ushered in by the birth of Christ, where the mighty fall and the low are lifted up, where the last are first and the first last.

There were two choices for the magi, and there are two choices for us. The tricky thing is that there is a little Herod and a little magi in each of us. There is hope and there is fear in all of us, as individuals and as a church, and at different times in our lives and in our life together, we have let each rule. We have been governed by both fear and hope. My prayer for us in 2012, as we set resolutions and dream dreams, is that we will choose to be people of hope this year, and that in doing so, we will experience the overwhelming joy that the magi experienced. My prayer is that we will resolve to take even the smallest steps to depart from the land governed by fear, taking a new road and living boldly in

the hope of the magi; knowing that Christ has come and that God is still present and still speaking; knowing that there is an alternative to systems which dominate, exploit, and terrorize with fear; knowing that in the end, this little baby is actually a sovereign king who will defeat the power of death. This baby is Jesus, at whose name every knee will bow.

Now I'm not suggesting naivety here. I'm not suggesting that if we have the right, hopeful attitude, all will be right with the world – that would be nonsense. If that were the hope of the epiphany, no one would believe it, with such blatant evidence to the contrary readily available all around us. We can see places and people governed by fear every day, places where violence reigns and innocent lives are daily lost or exploited. The hope of epiphany is not that Jesus has come and all is right with the world. The hope of epiphany is that God is still present: in stars, in dreams, in the community around us, in the table that we share. We have to choose to live in that hope, or the fear that governs so much of our world may spread even among us. Hope is not over with the passing of Christmas, my friends: on the contrary, today hope has just begun.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul urges the struggling church at Philippi to humble themselves and live after the example of Christ so that they can live in unity. And he tells them they have to live this way so they will "shine like stars in the world" "in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation," to shine like stars in the darkness. This is what I imagine for Browns Point in 2012: I believe that should we choose to live in hope rather than fear, believing in Christ's presence and Christ's promise, there is no way that the world will not know the overwhelming joy that we have found. Should we choose to live in hope, we will shine like stars, and there is no way that our neighborhood won't know the reason for our overwhelming joy. Should we choose to live in hope, not only will we be able to see the star which the hymn tells us is still proceeding, leading us forward, but we will be able to rejoice exceedingly with a great joy in the presence of God, even when surrounded by darkness. And that, my friends, is good news.

This is a day of new beginnings, time to make choices about how we will live. May we choose hope. May we be magi, on this journey and always.

Amen.