

The Journey of a Thousand Miles - 1/01/12 - Beech Mennonite Church

Scriptures: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13 Matthew 2:1-11

This announcement once seen in a church bulletin (no, not here at Beech): *“The director of the Christmas pageant is still looking for wise men. No experience necessary.”* (1)

Today’s familiar story of the Magi, told only in Matthew, leaves many questions unanswered. Just who were these Magi? What exactly was the star they saw? And why were these guys so excited about a new Jewish king that they would embark on a long journey to find him? Doing a little research this week on these questions led me on my own journey, one that took me to some interesting and unexpected people and places.

First, the question of the Magi’s identity. Most scholars think they were well-educated priests in the Persian Empire, what is now Iraq. Experts in divination, interpreting dreams, and the study of astrology/astronomy. Their title “Magi” comes from the same root as “magician.” And what about the special star they saw? We don’t really know for sure. But we can travel way back in time, almost 1500 years before Jesus, to a man named Balaam. Do you remember him? He was the guy with the talking donkey, in Moses’ day. He gave this prophecy to Balak, king of Moab: *“a star will come out of Jacob, a scepter will rise out of Israel.”* (Numbers 24:17) But how would these Persian Magi know anything about Jewish history? We find the likely bridge in the prophet Daniel, chronologically about halfway between Balaam and our Christmas Magi. Remember that Daniel, along with many other Jews, was carried away into captivity in Babylon around 600 BC. There he is selected, because of his physical and mental fitness, to serve in the King’s court, along with other magi. So Daniel might have the distinction of being the first Jewish magician in the Persian Empire. One night King Nebuchadnezzar has this terrible nightmare, but can’t remember it when he wakes up. None of the other magicians can do the impossible: tell the king what he dreamed and give the interpretation, though he threatens them with death. But Daniel, whose life is also on the line, prays to Yahweh, receives the answer in a vision, and comes before the King. *“Oh King, no (one) can do what you have asked. But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries...”* He goes on to tell the king both his dream and its meaning. After this, King Nebuchadnezzar gives Daniel the title *“Chief of the Magicians”* (or Chief Magi) (Dan. 4:9; 5:11) The following scenario, then, is well within the realm of possibilities: Daniel gets lots of questions from the rest of the King’s magi about this powerful God of his. He takes advantage of their curiosity by sharing the details of his Jewish faith. Perhaps he even opens up his scroll to show them the prophecy of Balaam about a coming King to be announced by a star. In fact, many scholars believe that this prophecy, introduced by Daniel, was passed on secretly among a certain sect of magi in Persia for the next 600 years. Which brings us back to these particular wise men in the Christmas story.

One night they notice a new star in the sky and know that it signals the birth of a Jewish

king. I still wonder why that was so important to them. It had to be more than mere curiosity that motivated them to take this long, dangerous journey. What was their political situation like? Were things so bad in their country that they hoped this new Jewish king would conquer their land and bring peace? Or was there a deeper, inner longing they couldn't quite put their fingers on?

Let's imagine them now as they excitedly prepare for their journey. Do you think they get any opposition from their wives, children, or neighbors when they disclose their plans? "*You've got to be out of your mind?*" A little like the movie *Bucket List*. Morgan Freeman's wife just can't believe the kind of trips he decides to take as Nickelson's sidekick. The Magi, well-versed in many types of literature, probably knew about Solomon's work called *Ecclesiastes: There is a time for everything*. One of them, going to his closet for a suitcase, may have added this line of his own, "*And a time to pack your bags for a new journey.*" Certainly one of them would have quoted this one: (and I know you can finish it): "*The journey of a thousand miles....(begins with the first step.)*" I tried this yesterday at Jeanette's family's get-together. Her one sister from Kidron quickly finished it this way: "The journey of a thousand miles is a l-o-n-g trip!" She has a daughter and 3 grandkids in Kansas, almost exactly that distance. This quote is also from Solomon, right? Wrong. But interestingly enough, it would have been circulating during the time of these Magi. It is attributed to the Chinese philosopher Laozi, about 600 BC. (2)

The trip actually was a thousand miles or more, from their home in Persia to Bethlehem in Judea. When the entourage gets underway, it's probably a much bigger deal than what we often see depicted on Christmas cards. Likely there were more than three of them; the three gifts don't lock us into that number. And these were men of prominence and considerable means, traveling as someone has suggested, with "*oriental pomp,*" and with an "*adequate cavalry escort*" (3) to protect them from mercenaries and bandits as they cross the vast desert. Traveling at night was the obvious plan for two reasons: cooler temps than during the day, and so they could be directed by this special star. Traveling by camel, no doubt, the trip could have easily taken them a year or more. Unlike some of us on a road trip, however, there weren't any arguments over directions - just follow the star! Better yet than a GPS! They were probably well taken care of (food, water, etc) by their servants. Perhaps their biggest challenge was mental - second guessing their impulsivity. "*What if this whole thing doesn't work out? We'll be laughed out of town when we get back home!*"

Finally, they enter Jewish territory. This land has been a border zone of military conflict for many years, battered back and forth between Roman armies to the west and Persian armies to the east. Naturally the Magi head for Jerusalem, the capital of the Jews. They begin asking people on the streets, "*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We've seen his star and have come to worship him.*" Word of the arrival of this intimidating group of eastern Magi quickly reaches King Herod. It's a slap in the face for one who isn't even a Jew but one who has "*...contrived and bribed his way into that office.*" (4) He is not a ruler to be taken lightly. Paranoia about threats to his power has already

pushed him to kill members of his own family. So King Herod's reaction to the Magi's arrival is predictable. But the scheme he tries to concoct falls flat.

We read that the Magi are "*overjoyed*" when they see the star leading them to the very place where Mary and Joseph are staying. Certainly they are even more ecstatic upon entering the house and seeing this young child destined to become a King. Mission accomplished! The long trip has been worth it! They probably had thoughts similar to those of Simeon and Anna (from last Sunday) "*I have seen the Promised One. Now, even if I don't make it back to Persia alive, that's OK.*"

Many lessons can be drawn from this story – lessons for us here at Beech as we face a new year. We could look at the role of Daniel as a bridge-building evangelist, sharing his faith with inquisitive Magi who want to know more about his powerful God. We could look at the way the Magi worshipped the Christ child, bringing him costly gifts. But the most fitting lessons for us today might be found in the journey itself.

First, we are all invited to make that journey to see the King. Although we are at many different places in life, we can all follow His light. From the youngest to the oldest, we can all move ahead, one step at a time, to new levels of understanding and commitment. This is called spiritual growth.

Second, there are sure to be difficulties on our journey. Maybe they will be more of a mental or emotional nature, second-guessing our decision to travel, dealing with fears of ridicule or rejection, having doubts about whether it will be worth the effort. But with God's strength and the encouragement of fellow travelers, we can face these challenges. This too will bring spiritual growth.

Third, because we follow after a loving and benevolent God, we can be sure there will also be positive surprises along the way. Like the Magi, we can be "overjoyed" as we see God's light leading us to new adventures.

Three reasons why I am excited about the **theme** we have chosen for 2012: "***Come grow with us.***" You will be hearing much more about this in the weeks and months ahead. Our new banner will keep reminding us of our theme. ("Thanks again" to Tim and Gayle.) I have shared a few additional thoughts in today's Newsletter. And I plan to focus the next 6 sermons, leading up to Lent, on ways we can grow. I'd like your input as well. So I've hung a "brainstorming" paper just outside my office door and would love to see the tree fill up with your ideas for growth during 2012.

We return, in closing, to our Chinese philosopher's quote. It can also be translated this way: *Even the longest journey must begin where you stand.* That pretty much sums up today's message. We won't make any progress on the journey to see the king until we take that first step. It begins right where you stand now. No waiting until you are more secure financially. Or until the kids leave home. Or until you have more time in your schedule. Or...any number of excuses you and I could make. Are you ready for the journey? Are your bags packed?

Credits:

- (1) *Rolling in the Church Aisles* – Publications International Ltd, p. 33
- (2) http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/a_journey_of_a_thousand_miles...
- (3) <http://ldolphin.org/magi.html>
- (4) Ibid