

A Journey of Faith

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Have you ever been on a long journey? Where did you go? Why did you go there? Did you have hotel or Air BNB reservations for when you got there or did you throw caution to the wind and just go? Did anyone know you were coming? The Wise Men set out on a Journey of Faith. They saw the bright new star in the sky and they knew they needed to follow it. They knew that it led to a miracle. They knew that they had to go. They didn't know how long the trip would be. They didn't have reservations at the local hotel in Bethlehem for when they got there, for they didn't know where they were going. No person knew they were coming. Yet, they left with gifts to give. They left on a journey that would change the world. They left on a journey that would fulfill prophecy. They left on a journey knowing they had to follow a star till they got where they were going. They left on a Journey of Faith.

We have heard the verses again today that spoke of their journey. How many times have we heard it? After hearing it every year, does it still bring you the same, joy and wonder and excitement you had when you heard it the first time? Although I hope you would tell me yes, chances are that there are a few of you that are no longer filled with the same wonder that you had at the first hearing. Chances are there might even be one of you that is wondering why we are still singing Christmas carols today, because it is January 7th after all.

I want us all to look at this journey with fresh eyes. The story starts with the wise men coming from the east. Was it Old Testament verses or was it some ancient text, was it an angel telling them like the shepherds or a dream or was it the voice of the Holy Spirit that told them that the star was the sign that the King of the Jews was born. Well, that is a theological debate and possibly the subject for another much more theory-based sermon. However, that is usually not my style and it definitely not going to be today. Today, we are going to look at it at the whole story and its implications. For no matter what theory may have actually happened, they still needed true faith to begin the journey.

Faith...What is Faith? Hebrews 11:1 says; "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." That means I am confident that the things I am hoping for are going to happen even if I can't see the evidence of that right now. It means I believe God is going to make this happen, according to His will, so it is so. It is going to happen. What a beautiful sentiment that is so hard to swallow in this day and age. We need to see the scientific evidence and conclusions. We need to have it explained how it is going to happen. We need to have our plan all mapped out and when we follow the plan it will happen. We will have control over the situation. Yet, the manifestation of faith isn't controllable by you. The things that happen in faith aren't necessarily going to follow your plan. When God is involved, it is possible that even the scientific evidence, processes, and conclusions are going to get thrown out the window. There is a reason that when God shows up and things happen and it is called a miracle. Yet, don't get me wrong, God shows up in the logical and scientific places too. Yet, He is not confined by them. So, Faith is knowing something is going to happen even if there doesn't seem a way and it doesn't follow a logic pattern. Yet, we are humans. Our faith can be small. That's ok. For Luke 17: 6 tells us; "The Lord replied, If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it would obey you." If you don't already know, a mustard seed is really small. That is all the faith you need, just a little bit.

Yet, before I start preaching a totally different sermon about the faith the size of a mustard seed, let's get back to our story. The wise men went because they had faith that the star meant that the King of the Jews was born. They had faith that the star would lead them to the King of the Jews. There was no news program broadcast on TV or Radio that announced the birth of Jesus. There was no one calling them on the phone. There was no social media post, YouTube short, Tic Toc dancing video, or snapchat quick pic to announce the birth of Jesus. There were no emails, telegrams, letters or smoke signals. There were none of our modern means of communication going on here. Yet, the biggest and most important event in human history was happening and the only things there to announce it were ancient texts, angels, and the call of the Holy Spirit.

God choose this time in human history for Jesus to be born, so that He would go on to die on the cross and be resurrected, so we could be saved from ourselves. God choose this time in human history with these means of communication because God is looking for faith and these means of communication require faith. Think about this for a minute. Just think what would happen if you looked at the person sitting next to you right and said that something was happening right now and you found out that it was happening because an angel told you. Do you think they might for, at least a second, be skeptical and be worried for your mental health. I hope they wouldn't, but with certainty I can say there is at least one person sitting here today that would have a moment of doubt in what you were saying. Why? Well, that doesn't fit the norm of how things happen around here.

At the same time, we put the people in Bible stories in a different mindset. Well, it's in the Bible so of course they wouldn't have thought twice? It's biblical times, right? Things like this happened all the time, right? Wrong. In fact, between the book of Malachi and the book of Matthew where we are presented with the birth of Jesus and the coming of these wise men, there is no evidence that God had done anything spectacular in 400 years. No Prophets. No Miracles. No Divine intervention. Nothing. 400 years. Think about that. Who will be in this church or one like it in 400 years? Depending on how old they are when each generation has kids, how many Greats are we going to have to put before the word grandchild to describe your relatives sitting in that future church. 400 years of silence. So, if we had the chance to talk to one of those wise men, would we ask something like; "Now you are telling us Mr. Wise Man that you are going on a long journey for the birth of a King simply because you have faith it is going to happen? Is that right?" Think about that. Put yourself in those shoes. How much faith would that take you after 400 years of silence from God?

Let me point out too, these people in these biblical stories are still just people, except for Jesus of course. These people have the same bad thoughts. They have the same propensity for sin. They had doubts. They had their faults. Some of them might have had some bad habits that they needed to change too. Oh my goodness, did you just say that my beloved biblical characters acted like humans too? Some of you might be saying to yourself; "How could that be? These biblical characters seem so perfect in every way. On the other side you might be saying, "Well, I guess I never really thought about that." Well, that kind of why I am bringing it up. However, if you are saying to yourself: "I already knew that. Well, just remember. Chances are there is at least one person here today who didn't or really hadn't thought about it.

So, why do I keep stressing their humanity and the quietness of God leading up to the birth of Christ? I am stressing this because, not only do I want you to have the story, but I want you to have the full realization of who was in this story so you are able to put yourself in their shoes. I want you to read a bible story going forward and for you to think of what would be going through your brain if you were in that spot. So, today you are a wise man, a wise person if you prefer. You have seen the star and have

gone on this journey. Well, if you were a visiting anybody of importance, it was seen as a sign of respect and sometimes, it was required for you to drop by the capital on your way into the country, especially if you are coming to see a newly born King. So, you have arrived in Israel, you are still following the star and you drop by to see the local ruler, Herod. Yet, after you tell him what you are doing there, he seems frightened and maybe just a little confused when you say you have arrived to see the newly born King of the Jews. However, after some consultation with his experts, he tells you to go find the child and tell him where the child is so he can go pay homage to the child. Yet, this ruler is acting so suspect. He may be ruler but he shouldn't quit his day job to be an actor. So, off you go to follow the star again and to find Jesus in Bethlehem.

You and you two fellow other wise-people arrive and bring the gifts of Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. Why did you bring those gifts? Well, according to a Dec 2023 Biblical Archeology article; "These valuable items were standard gifts to honor a king or deity in the ancient world; Gold as a precious metal, frankincense as perfume or incense, and myrrh as anointing oil." You have arrived after traveling a long distance to find the newly born King of the Jews. You find Him in humble surroundings. What do you think? Do you have doubts? The current ruler Herod, had no idea he had been born and no idea where He was. You find him and he in the middle of all this in a humble home. Do you doubt? Are you skeptical? They gave the gifts. They knelt down and paid him Homage. Would you have let your doubts get the better of you or would you have done the same?

Then, we are told, due to a dream, they were warned not to return to Herod. So, they took another way home. So yet again, there is another leap of faith. A dream warned them not to go back. This dream could have only been brought to them by the Holy Spirit. Would you have heeded this dream or would you have gone back to your guaranteed audience with the current ruler? For it was an honor to be invited back like that. Yet, in this case, it was for a nefarious reason that Herod wanted them back. If you do not already know how God intervened here and the atrocity that occurred after the visit of the three wise men, your homework assignment is to go home and read the rest of the 2nd chapter of Matthew. I will spare the little ears from hearing about this, today. I make not promises for the future though. Today, it is homework.

So, we have talked about the story of the Wise Men. We have tried to put ourselves in their place. I could start to regale with stories of how other people were inspired by the story of the three wise man. I could talk about some current researcher or professor with the latest research and theories. Yet, I am not going to do that. I am going back to putting you in the situation. For, putting you in the story not only allows you to relate to them, it starts to allow you to relate their story to your life. Isn't that the purpose of these bible stories? Isn't that one of the reasons that they were written? For, while it is a great history lesson, these stories aren't just there to teach us to do good deeds and to be good people. These stories are to remind us that we are not good people doing good things, we are a sinful people that need the redemption of Jesus Christ. We, as Christians, are sanctified through His Grace, not by our works or what we can do. Without Jesus, we would be in a pretty sad state of affairs, but, through the three forms of grace we are saved. The three forms of grace are a sermon or sermons all by themselves so I will just jump past that for today and just say simply, We need the grace of Jesus.

Let's talk about our journey of faith. Every day each one of us is presented with new obstacles, new encounters, and new situations that are a stepping stone in our journey of faith. Each day we are given an opportunity to live our faith. While our journey may not seem as grand as the Three Wise Men journeying from a far to give gifts to and to worship the newly born Jesus, it is just as important. Each moment is a gift to God. Did you tell someone else about Jesus today? It is a gift for Jesus. Did you feed

an orphan or a widow? It is a gift for Jesus. Did you visit someone in the hospital or prison? It is a gift for Jesus? Did you give someone who was thirsty a drink of water? It was a gift for Jesus. Did you sit at home and pray for someone and the only one who knew was God? It is a gift for Jesus. Yet, it is how these things are done that make the difference. These things won't get you to heaven. You don't get to earn your salvation by works. You must bring bringing these gifts with a pure heart. You must be doing this as a gift for Jesus. They must be a Thank You to Jesus, not as a notch in our belt. A look at me and my good works attitude is not what I am talking about here and I want to make sure I am not misunderstood. This must be something we actually want to do for others and Jesus and not just be an activity checks the box for some perceived necessary box. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who came to us in the Christmas Season in a lowly manger is the only way to be saved. We must believe. For just as Romans 10:9 tells us; "Because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. The act of doing these things for others as gifts for Christ is an act of honor and worship to Jesus. It is not how we get to heaven.

To take this to an even deeper level, Let me bring you to a place you might not normally go when you are on the subject of the Three Wise Men. However, today we are going there because it is important. "1 Peter 1:18-25 says; " You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without defect or blemish. He was destined before the foundation of the world but was revealed at the end of the ages for your sake. Through him you only have come to trust in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are set in God. Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God. For "all flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower fails, but the word of the Lord endures forever." That word is the good news that was announced to you.

So, with these last verses in mind and the story of the Wise Men being in focus for our own journey, let us never forget, the gifts of the Wise Men to Jesus were items that will wither in time, like the grass. Our gifts, which we seek to give to Jesus in our Journey will fail like the flowers unless our gift is to tell another of the Creator of us all. It will wither and fail if it doesn't teach others to follow our Risen Christ who started the Christmas season by coming to save us from ourselves by appearing to us as a newborn Baby, living a sinless life, dying on a cross for our sins and being resurrected for our salvation. Our gifts will wither and fail if we don't teach others to trust the Holy Spirit and follow a guided journey of faith, even when the entire journey is not clear.

May the true reason of the season be in our hearts and our lips every day of the year! As we go into this New Year, let our hearts be renewed with the love of Jesus and let us be armed with the reason for the season in our hearts every day of the year! Amen.