

## Matthew 2:1-12

### In It For The Long Haul

Having been on flights just this week and anticipating a long flight for our next vacation, then having this passage about the magi as the scripture reading, this week has had me thinking about journeys. I have been very fortunate to be able to choose how I travel and where I travel. I have been to the Netherlands to visit family and to Mexico and Cuba for vacations. I have traveled by car, ship, and plane, and even did a little excursion by train once. I think many of you could come up with a few memories of your own trips, from day trips by boat or car to broader and vaster experiences.

Today we consider a journey written about in the Gospel account of Matthew regarding wise men. You will note that I did not say *three* wise men, even though we love to sing *We three kings of orient* as a staple at this time of year. The thought that there were three wise men or magi comes from the naming of the three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but Matthew never tells us how many wise men made this trek from the East.

And who were these guys anyway? Why are they in the story? These people had no understanding of God's promises about a Messiah. They are star gazers, likely astrologers who in curiosity follow what appears to be a star with significance, one they had not seen before. The story that follows the reading for today speaks about a slaughter of children two years and younger. The slaughter is the result of Herod's temper after the wise men skip out on returning to Herod to give him more information about the child the prophecies had spoken. It is because of this story that it is thought that the arrival of the wise men likely happened about two years after Jesus actual birth. So, the wise men would not have come upon a babe in a manger, but a curious two-year-old.

As with all the stories about the birth of Christ, these are stories handed down to us. Do we know any more than is written in these words? No, but through these words we are again reminded of God's expansive love for the world.

The mysterious and wonderful news of God with us is shared with the poor as it was shared with the shepherds. For them it was a story of joy and hope that would be told to all that would listen.

The birth of God with us is to be shared widely as it was shared with people from a far away land that had no ties to the Jewish faith. We have no idea whether or not their meeting Jesus as a child and their journey changed them. We have no further information about the wise men after they journey back to their homeland via a way that did not include having to deal with Herod.

Through this particular story of the wise men and the Messiah's birth we know that the information was shared with those who held dangerous positions of power that could have and tried to destroy God's inbreaking into the world through a child.

And there is that piece that we cannot ignore...God came as a vulnerable child. God chose to work through humanity to bring about the message of God's love. Even as I write this it seems so beyond comprehension. And I have had to think about this a lot this week, along with considering my journey of faith and why this person Jesus has made such an impact in my life. You see, I spent the last week with my children, and particularly my eldest son. None of my kids go to church or believe as I do. To my delight, my son sat and had conversations with me regarding faith. Not that I changed his mind about anything, but I was grateful that we got to talk. He listened and I listened. He questioned me and to be honest, I did not have any great answers. Yet these conversations are all part of my journey of faith. Rather than weaken my faith, conversations like this make me want to be better at articulating why God means something to me and possibly to others.

It turns out I am pretty crappy at sharing what it is about the Bible, Jesus, and faith that makes my life more meaningful. I just know that reading the words of scripture as set down in the Bible, with all the good, bad, and the ugly, has made a difference for me. I don't understand it all, but it has changed me in good and beautiful ways that I could not have anticipated. Like the wise men, I have journeyed long. They had a star, I have the Bible as my guiding light, the stories of Jesus are words that can and have transformed my being and trajectory. It truly has been a journey of faith that has had low times of serious questioning and anger to amazing moments of grace and hope.

For me, I have come to understand that faith is a journey for the long haul. It takes time for it to mature and grow, and it is a different journey for each person. We don't know what happened to the wise men after they left to go back home, but we are told that they had enough faith in this bright star, enough curiosity, to follow it where ever it led.

There is more to this story as well. The story of the wise men takes the story of God out of the hands of those who are the insiders to the faith and lets others in on God's action. So often we Christians think people have to look and act like us for them to have anything of value to share with us about our faith. Our churches are not as diverse as we would hope, but how often is it that we want others to conform to our way of thinking. Even our groups of friends tend to be like minded. It is so much easier to not have to constantly be treading through conversations and experiences that make us uncomfortable or might require that we change our perceptions and understanding. That takes effort on our part. We would prefer that people conform to our ways of worship and our understanding of God at work in the world. We feel most comfortable with those who live and think like us.

Yet we do not have to look far to find those who live vastly differently than we do. And when I say that I do so knowing that we each have our own biases about how people should live and be in the world. We don't understand other cultures and countries. We find it near impossible to comprehend the journeys that people are taking in the world today to find safety and security. We, who only have to move a few steps to get food from our refrigerator, cannot begin to know what it means that millions of people world

wide do not have enough to eat, or are living in fear of bombs, have no electricity, and are watching as infrastructures are disintegrating before their eyes, that is if they have even had the privilege of knowing any security in their life times.

We are living in a time when there is so much diversity in thought and actual circumstances, in people and places, that we know we cannot comprehend it all. Yet God, through Jesus and in the stories handed down to us in scripture, has allowed us to see and know that God worked in all that diversity. From shepherds in a field, to a couple just trying to find shelter for a night, to wise men from an Eastern country, to power in a palace. God's story of grace and love is one for all people in all places.

May we be people open to however God is revealing God's self to us, to the church, and to the world. Let's choose to be part of this story of faith for the long haul and see what happens next for our own lives, that of the church, and in the world.

Epiphany is a time to be reminded to look with curiosity and wonder at our lives and the world. To hope for moments of clarity and understanding. Maybe these words from a poem called *For those Who Have Far to Travel, A blessing for Epiphany* written by Jan Richardson from *Circle of Grace*, can help to open our hearts and minds to the wonder of God and the journey of that can transform us so that we can bring God's grace into the world anew through our living and loving.

If you could see  
the journey whole,  
you might never  
undertake it,  
might never dare  
the first step  
that propels you  
from the place  
you have known  
toward the place  
you know not.

Call it  
one of the mercies  
of the road:  
that we see it  
only by stages  
as it opens  
before us,  
as it comes into  
our keeping,  
step by  
single step.

There is nothing  
for it  
but to go,

and by our going  
take the vows  
the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to  
the next step;  
to rely on more  
than the map;  
to heed the signposts  
of intuition and dream;  
to follow the star  
that only you  
will recognize;

to keep an open eye  
for the wonders that  
attend the path;  
to press on  
beyond distractions,  
beyond fatigue,  
beyond what would  
tempt you  
from the way.

There are vows  
that only you  
will know:  
the secret promises  
for your particular path  
and the new ones  
you will need to make  
when the road  
is revealed  
by turns  
you could not  
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,  
make them again;  
each promise becomes  
part of the path,  
each choice creates  
the road  
that will take you  
to the place  
where at last  
you will kneel

to offer the gift  
most needed—  
the gift that only you  
can give—  
before turning to go  
home by  
another way.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jan Richardson. [Epiphany: For Those Who Have Far to Travel « The Painted Prayerbook](#). Accessed January 4, 2024