

What Happens When We follow The Light

West Valley Presbyterian Church

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Advent/Magi

How many ways can you arrange 10 books on a bookshelf?

Believe it or not, the possibilities are astronomical.

According to Algegra.com:

As long as they are 10 different books, there are 10 ways to pick the first book, times 9 ways to pick the second book, times 8 ways to pick the third book...and so on.

In other words, $10 \times 9 \times 8 \times 7 \times 6 \times 5 \times 4 \times 3 \times 2 \times 1 = 3,628,800$ possibilities!

If 10 books can be arranged 3,628,800 ways, think of the choices and possibilities our lives present.

How do we sift through them all?

How do we determine which paths we should pursue and which we should avoid?

The Bible has an answer for that question:

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path" (Psalm 119:104-105).

And if there was ever an example of a light on a path it was the light of the star that led the wise men to Jesus...

The wise men or magi lived 1,000 miles away from Bethlehem – the place where Jesus was born.

And God meets them right where they are in the midst of their life and guides them by using a star – a light in the heavens

The story of the magi is really a story about God's guidance and following that guidance

Because **there were countless other things these magi could have done with their lives** (as it is with us)

**But they abandoned everything and had one focus, one desire
And that was to find and seek out Jesus**

Now just a little background here.

Magi back then were not Kings like we sometimes refer to them.
They were a certain cast of people
who were well educated in the natural sciences,
in medicine,
in astronomy, and in philosophy; some of them had magical/spiritual
powers that were actually frowned upon by the Jews...

They were also the consultants to royalty and political leaders
Providing them wise counsel and advice when decisions needed to
be made
So they were very highly regarded and respected

These magi knew the position of the stars very well.

**By looking at the sky they could not only predict location, but
they could read the seasons, and they also connected the
position of the star with prophetic meaning.**

So they knew when they saw this particular star, at a particular place
in the heavens that this meant an extremely important and powerful
King had been born.

These MAGI coming to worship a Jewish King or Messiah was quite
an unusual thing.

In fact they even state, "We have come to worship the King of the
Jews"...

So this is very poignant

They come to worship a King of a different people

They are gentiles, pagans, looked down upon by the Jews

And yet something within them must have told them that Jesus was
their King too

**It is the first account we have anywhere of Gentiles...pagans...
coming to worship Jesus. Did you ever think of that?**

And **God leads these Gentiles/pagans with a sign in the heavens and in dreams just like he led his chosen people.** So this is quite significant because it means that all people are included in this plan of salvation and God treats all equally.

So right off the bat Matthew...who is the only one who writes about the magi or wise men... includes people in the plan of salvation who originally would have been considered outcasts

Matthew himself was a tax collector so he had been an outcast too until Jesus called him to be his disciple

And all through his gospel he is constantly including those on the margins because he knows what its like to be rejected...

Now...

There were probably a whole lot more than three magi making the journey to see Jesus because this was a major trip... (*The reason for three wise men in our tradition is that there were three gifts given – gold frankincense myrrh.*) but they would have needed tons of supplies and a whole group of folks to cross this amount of territory safely and well.

So the guess of most scholars is that there was a whole entourage of magi who came to Jerusalem. (IMAGE) Can you imagine the attention that would have drawn. Of course Herod is going to take notice; of course he's going to be threatened because he has everyone 2 and under killed after this lest one of them usurp his throne. Herod was nuts.

So these magi see a star where they live in Persia which would be our modern day Iran or Iraq.

The star rises up initially...they map the coordinates...and then it seems as if the star actually goes away...

And the magi go on this long journey based on their recording of the coordinates of the star

But not because the star is guiding their every step

Because if you look at scripture it seems that the star actually disappears, and then returns at the last minute...

So lets look at the scripture and see why scholars think that is probably what happened...

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi[a] from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

In other words, it rose back there, when we were in Persia (modern day Iraq/Iran). It rose back there and based on the coordinates – longitude, latitude, and my location – we were able to follow it – in other words go in its general direction that we recorded and mapped out.

But clearly the magi were not sure exactly.

Scholars tell us that after an initial appearance the star went away. This is consistent with scripture.

And the magi journey to the general place where they thought the star had been shining - and they end up in Jerusalem...not Bethlehem.

In the general vicinity...- and they are asking around because the star wasn't visible anymore and they were trying to get more information.

A little different than our pageants right...or the Christmas cards we see where the wise men are crossing the desert and the star is right in front of them.

All the way.

Guiding every step they take. Star goes to the right...I go to the right...Star goes to the left...I go to the left...not at all...

And right at the point where they might have thought that their journey was in vain...guess what...

...they (the magi) went on their way (after they talk to King Herod), and the star they had seen when it rose (in Persia) went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

What they had been seeking after for years was suddenly available... the star they had seen in Persia reappears...and they were brought face to face with the greatest gift ever given to humanity...Jesus Christ!

They were...

Overjoyed – when they saw the star – because it had reappeared and leads them to Jesus Christ and they worship him,

The funny thing is I never seen a Christmas card with an overjoyed wise man on it? I never have. Have you?

They all look so somber and serious. (IMAGE) But the Bible which isn't too replete with comments about peoples emotions actually says that **the magi were overjoyed**...

I wonder what that looked like?

Did they skip to the manger? Race their camels? Or just get really excited together and with eager expectation hurry to the scene where Jesus was.

I don't know exactly, but I'll tell you one thing.

When we do our best to follow the light of God's guidance in our lives...JOY is always the end result...and it always brings us closer to Jesus.

The magi did three things that I think are very important things that we can apply to our own lives in terms of following Gods guidance.

I. The magi took a risk and followed through

The magi didn't know the exact destination.

They followed a star that they had seen rise in Persia that they knew was significant but that probably disappeared after it initially rose.

Maybe as the seasons changed, maybe there were clouds, maybe the star was a body of light that moved around – we don't know – there are lots of theories...but the star wasn't always there to guide them...and...

It isn't easy to follow God in the dark, not being sure, having a general sense of direction but not a precise one.

But often that is where we are in our Christian walk as well. Someone once said, **"Never doubt in darkness what God has shown you in the light."**

The magi remembered the guidance of the light; the star; and being wise, they recorded where it was.

A lot of their journey was done in darkness...going the general way they thought they should and following by memory the coordinates they had written down...

They didn't give up following through on the guidance just because the star wasn't there

In my own life – I am learning all about this. I am learning that I can have a lot of good intentions, (I have a lot of good intentions, I really do)

but if I don't follow through – if I don't actually tangibly follow the guidance of the light of the Holy Spirit *even when I am not feeling particularly spiritual* – there's no star of inspiration out there egging me on – if I don't follow through with what I've been shown in the light *when I have felt inspired* - I'm just all in my head.

Its just a bunch of "Christian-talk". A bunch of lingo.

Following the light of the guidance of the HS might mean that when I am in the dark...I don't see that star..I still have to

Pray for an enemy

...we talk about this in the Bible but very few of us actually do this but its one of the most powerful prayers in the world

Or talk to the person on the bench in the park who no one wants to talk to because they look and act differently

One of you did this recently = you stopped and you helped someone like this – you built a relationship - and it meant so much...

We throw a lot of food and items at folks who are in need around this time of year – and that's great - but we don't actually sit and talk to them

And the beauty of what one of you did was you built a relationship with someone who needed that so badly

Studies show that the worse thing about poverty or homelessness is not hunger, or cold – but the fact that no one talks to you – it's the loneliness

Someone else here invited a person that no one liked in a certain group she was involved in to Thanksgiving Dinner

It turns out this person had nowhere to go...

And it was a huge “out of my comfort zone” experience at Thanksgiving this person said, but it was what the HS was leading one of you to do, and you followed through...

So ask yourself this season...am I following through on the guidance of the Holy Spirit this season?– Or am I just in a frenzy running around...at a busy time

Am I actually acting out my faith...following through like the magi who gave up everything to seek Jesus first...or am I just talking about it

I truly believe that Christians should talk a whole lot less
And live out extravagant acts of love and generosity
a whole lot more
The world would be different if we did that, and people would have a
whole different perspective of what the church is

II. The magi moved out of their comfort zone

My kids are all home for Christmas and I love that. I miss them when
they are gone.
Its great to have everyone home

Being home for Christmas' is a great thing
The perfect Christmas is when we are cozy and warm and with family
and friends.
But what about that first Christmas?

The magi weren't home for their Christmas.

They sacrificed everything to find Jesus and worship him.

2 years of traveling 1,000 miles when they weren't even sure where
they were going exactly.

They gave up all the comforts of home so that they could find him and
worship him.

And Jesus wasn't at home either that first Christmas.

Talk about sacrifice and moving out of your comfort zone.

Jesus emptied himself, and left his home in heaven, was born small
and weak as a human child with the cross looming before him on the
horizon of his life.

**That first Christmas, for both the magi and for Jesus, was more
about sacrifice than comfort.**

I did something recently that I can't fully disclose but it was in direct response to something I felt led to do. And I so wanted to ignore that leading because it was so out of my comfort zone.

It had to do with some people I was supposed to reach out to –
*(God has this thing...this passion for people
Loves people way more than I do; drives me crazy
Why do you love people so much? Blows me away...)*

And this thing that I was led to do created a huge inconvenience for me....

I was totally put out doing it, and since it is an ongoing kind of thing I still am...

But I am committed to doing this thing and...
Following through on it...and not just thinking about doing it...cause I am in my head a lot

And doing this totally inconvenient out of my comfort zone thing has actually brought me great joy and brought me closer to Jesus.
But it's awkward and it is a sacrifice

I think **we all need an area of our lives where we intentionally decide we are going to give in a way that makes us a little bit uncomfortable;**
that creates a certain amount of angst and inconvenience because **that kind of edge or discomfort helps us to grow as Christians.**

It's like that when you work out – I like the elliptical at the gym...I go about two or three miles...but I know that until I develop a little bit of a sweat I am not really getting more in shape.

When you work out you are supposed to push the envelope a little bit, go a bit beyond what you think you can, stretch yourself, and not just stay comfortable.

Keep your eyes open this Christmas for a chance to move out of your comfort zone in Jesus name and stretch your limits

III. The Magi found Jesus and found joy

The magi were overwhelmed with joy when they found Jesus

That long journey had been worth it – the sacrifice, the moving out of their comfort zone, the risk, the uncertainty, the danger

They had persevered and

What they had been seeking, they found

They were overjoyed

And from that joy of being in Jesus' presence everything else flowed

With overwhelming joy they gave of their gifts

With overwhelming joy they worshipped Jesus

That's supposed to be the vibe of the church today

The late Dallas Willard said that **“God is the most joyful being in existence.”**

When we are in Jesus' presence we can't help but be joyful beings too. Joy is contagious and someone once said **“Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.”**

CS Lewis said, **“Joy is the serious business of heaven”**

“When the magi saw the star they were overjoyed”

Nothing is generates more joy than being in the presence of Jesus, and that's what the wise men gave their all to attain.

Again Lewis says,

“Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

The wise men knew what was most important and pursued that with all their heart.

The upshot?

They were overjoyed.

God will be faithful to you in your journey too to bring you joy as you follow through on living your faith and as you take the risk to seek Christ with all your heart, even if it means moving out of your comfort zone

I want to you a story about a man that did just that and the story sums all of this up and honors our new deacons this morning.

These people have **followed through** on what they sensed was a leading of the Holy Spirit.

To many of them this is a **risk**...

Many of them are not exactly in their **comfort zone** – doing this deacon thing....they've told me this

They are trusting in God to see them through this journey because we have a need

And they are hoping that joy comes out of it...I do too!

Well I know a story about a deacon who was rather afraid to do "deaking" too

He was recruited to do it, and actually felt led by the Holy Spirit but he just couldn't seem to get comfortable with the care aspect of this ministry.

He was out of his comfort zone but had a taken a risk and followed through on what he thought God wanted him to do.

But the journey was really hard for about a year. He really couldn't find his place.

One day the pastor said to the deacon, "I have a group of young people who go to the old folks home and put on a worship service once a month. Would you drive them to the old folks home?"

The deacon agreed but he didn't like nursing homes; he wasn't comfortable there – but he went anyway.

The first Sunday he sat in the back with his arms folded, as the kids did their service up front. All of a sudden, someone was tugging at his arm.

He looked down, and here was this old man in a wheelchair.

He took hold of the old man's hand and the old man held his hand all during the worship service.

The next month that was repeated. And then the next month...and the next month

Then one day the old man wasn't there.

The deacon inquired and he was told, "Oh, he's down the hall, right hand side, third door.

He's dying. He's unconscious, but if you want to go down and pray over his body that's all right."

The deacon went and there were tubes and wires hanging out all over the place.

The deacon took the man's hand and prayed that God would receive the man, that God would bring this man from this life into the next and give him eternal blessings.

And a deep sense of joy came over that deacon as he prayed. Do you see how joy always seems to come when we stay faithful?

As soon as he finished the prayer, the old man squeezed the deacon's hand and the deacon knew that he had been heard. He was so moved and as he left the room... he bumped into a woman who was the old mans daughter.

She said, "He's been waiting for you. **He said that he didn't want to die until he had the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.**"

The deacon was amazed at this. He said, "What do you mean?"

She said, “Well, my father would say that once a month Jesus came to this place. ‘He would take my hand and he would hold my hand for a whole hour. I don’t want to die until I have the chance to hold the hand of Jesus one more time.’”

Christmas works when we let Jesus guide us into unfamiliar territory – a foreign land— when we take the risk to follow through, go out of our comfort zone – when we do those things...we will be touched and find joy– just like the Magi...**Merry Christmas**