

DECEMBER 28, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON "The Magi" Matthew 2:1-18

This week is the last week in Advent. We continue our series asking the questions "who are we?" and "who are we called to be?" through the lens of the people in the Nativity story. This week we consider the Magi, the wise men.

While there are traditions and such that have developed around these figures, there is something that is evident to me. Nowhere do we read their origins. Nowhere is it specified exactly what all they would have been knowledgeable or expert about. Most everything is speculation. Except this.

They were seekers. And so are we all.

All of us are seeking something our entire lives. The question is "what are we seeking?"

Pleasure, purpose, wealth, fame, power, influence, belonging, relationship, opportunity, excellence, comfort, challenge, all of these and countless more are sought after by us.

The other questions that also matter are "why are we seeking?" and "how are we seeking?"

If we are people of faith, the why should be a common why. Whatever we are seeking is to live into the most faithful and fulfilled life possible before God. If we find what we seek, the reason must be rooted in our faith.

The "how" also has to be in keeping with God's desires and design. If we are looking for something the what is in keeping with God's desires, the why is to live faithfully before God, and we must do the looking in a way that is pleasing to God.

Everything in the seeking is in and with integrity.

There are some helpful aspects of the Magi for us to keep in mind in modern day. They balance two things that are often presented at odds with each other. They seek both the natural and the supernatural.

A few details about Magi in general are useful. Coming from the east, they were Gentile, meaning to learn about a Jewish king they would have had to study things outside of their normal purview. Magi were often priestly figures in their own religions and tended to look for answers in the stars. Less like astronomy, they were more like astrology. As in a more formal and studious sense of your horoscope.

Notice some details in the story. They knew enough that it was a Jewish king, so they went to Jerusalem, the Holy City of the Jews. They didn't go straight to Bethlehem because they were asking directions from the people who should know. They are looking for a King, not a Messiah. This makes sense as Gentiles would have little use for a messiah. A King on the other hand, that's noteworthy.

Herod is the one who asks about a Messiah. When the teachers and priests tell him about Bethlehem he sends the Magi on their way. THIS is where the star appears to really start guiding them. They saw a star as a "sign", but it had sent them to Jerusalem, not Bethlehem.

This is the natural seeking of the Magi. They sought learning and understanding. In their learning something had caught their curiosity enough to follow it out. Any explorer knows that setting out to find something is uncertain. They gather the best information they can, seek their goal, but they might be mistaken about the information. It could be incomplete, it could be misinterpreted, all kinds of possibilities.

Here they found what they were looking for. They found this newborn King. Bringing gifts and worship of royalty wouldn't have been terribly uncommon at that time. Their study led them to Jesus. What they did once they returned home we do not know. Matthew's point may have been much simpler.

Whatever prophecies they had come across regarding this new King of the Jews were reliable. The promised coming was reliable enough that even Gentile learned men and possible priests in their own right found their way to the Christ.

In a good deal of Christianity today learning is discouraged and even demonized. "Don't look too deeply into things because it could lead you away from your faith." Unfortunately this messaging, not the learning, is what drives many away from faith in Jesus. If scripture isn't strong enough to stand up to questions and criticisms, how true can it be? Truth is truth no matter what poking and prodding we do at it.

What people really mean by these statements is "you might learn something that will cause you to disagree with what I've told you about faith and Jesus." In other words it isn't fear that I'll be led away from Jesus, it's fear that I'll disagree with them.

I've found this to be true. I've learned a lot over the years. It's caused me to disagree with some of the people

who told me about Jesus. It's also made my faith stronger and I believe given me a fuller and more honest sense of God revealed in Jesus Christ. That gives me better focus and stronger faith.

The truth is it's not learning if the only things I "learn" are things that agree with what I already think I know. Somewhere I have to be wrong.

If we claim to have a God that is so big, loving, and amazing is to be incomprehensible, telling you that you have to agree with me on everything makes no sense. Because I'm then saying that I have comprehended the incomprehensible. I have it figured out and you just need to listen to me. A God that simple minded Brent can fit into his own box isn't very big, or amazing. That God is strikingly small and likely looks more like me than it does like the one true God.

In fact, if the Magi had adopted this thinking. If they had studied only things that their culture agreed with or approved. If they were only allowed to pursue things that fit neatly into their own religion. They would never have found Jesus. They would have rejected all of it as wrong, or fantasy, or deviating from what they were allowed to believe. Instead they learned. They applied their seeking and in applying it they found the Son of God. Seek. Ask questions. When something doesn't make sense poke and prod to get an answer that does make sense. Find perspectives that fill out your own more fully. Challenge yourself with views different from your own. You may find Jesus more clearly, powerfully, and inspired than ever before.

Like the Magi, when we seek in ways that we know how, we might just get a boost from beyond ourselves. When we are told to seek and we shall find, it's not a lie. Whether or not we like what we find is another matter. Seeking an answer we will always find one.

The Magi found in Jerusalem that they were on the right track. When they got there the star led them to their goal. This was the supernatural.

Everyone knows that stars don't behave like the one in the story of the Magi. People both Christian and nonbeliever alike have tried to give some kind of scientific explanation for this. They are missing the point!

Whatever this star was it is a symbol of God's supernatural guidance. They were seeking Jesus even if they didn't fully know who it was they were looking for. They were rewarded by God's supernatural hand giving them some help to find who they were looking for.

All of us at some point have likely had our own star. We've been searching for something of God. Our calling, purpose, direction, strength, comfort, healing, and much more.

We looked and searched however we could in our own methods and manners. Something stepped in that was beyond us. It might have been an unexpected comment or helping hand from a stranger, friend, or family member. Maybe it was a circumstance that opened your eyes to what you were seeking. Maybe it was just a light bulb that went on with no warning or explanation, or some reservoir of inspiration or strength that filled up with no warning or seeming cause.

Something that you can only explain as God and Spirit stepped in to make up the rest of the distance between your own natural work and the goal you were seeking.

The Magi are all of us. We seek God and God uses both natural and supernatural means to bring us to Jesus. The Jesus that is LORD, King, and Redeemer.

The Jesus we seek was clear in His life and sacrifice. Seeking Him will not always be comfortable. It won't always make the religious folk happy. It won't always lead us to cushy, easy, convenient choices.

It WILL lead us to a life of transformed and transforming faith. It will lead us to answers that have power not just to satisfy us as believers, but also respond with compelling truth to those themselves still seeking.

What are we seeking this Christmas? It's both different and the same for all of us I'm sure. Are we seeking the comfy, sanitized image of a story that makes us feel good about ourselves and our faith? Are we celebrating that God broke into the world in a way that breaks every worldly expectation and agenda? Are we grateful that a Redeemer came to make us right before God, and challenges us to live into His image day to day? Is it a little bit of all of the above?

The celebration of Christmas is rich and deep because it is all of this and more. It is the springboard for New Year's each and every year. Seeking a full sense of Jesus at Christmas gives us perspective to approach a new year with humility, promise, hope, joy, peace, to chart a course for 365 days. And it is all under the incredible umbrella of God's life giving love.

May that be your experience this week and in celebrating Christmas. Embracing the love of God in a way that gives life that will infuse and inspire each and every day that follows. Amen.