

The Reverend Heather T. Schoenewolf
January 3, 2010
“The Art of Following”
Matthew 2:1-12

When I was a little girl, my family and I had an annual Christmas Eve tradition. After sharing dinner together, opening presents with our grandparents, we would pile into the car and drive through the neighborhood to see the lights hung outside of people’s homes. In the midst of the heavy winter darkness, the lights – in windows, on trees or lining rooftops – seemed to herald the delicate, precious birth of the one who comes as the light of the world. Once at home, wearing new pajamas that matched my sisters, I would read by the light of the electric orange candles that sat in my bedroom window – too excited to even try to sleep.

And now, as I approach the Epiphany text for this morning – a text shaped by the promise of light – I find my inner child surfacing once again. Perhaps it is some left over wonderment; the residue of the “good tidings of great joy” that has found a home in my heart. But reading once again this familiar story – one often merged with Luke’s Christmas narrative in our pageant scripts and Christmas Eve liturgies – I find the 3 year old inside coming to the surface, engaging the text with the same one-word question over and over again: *Why?* Like pre-school toddlers asking their parents about new discoveries in the world around them, and not settling for anything less than the most complete answer, the conversation I have with Matthew goes something like this:

Me: Why did the Magi go to see Jesus?

M: To worship him.

Me: Why?

M: Because he was King of the Jews.

Me: Why?

M: Because he deserved to be paid homage. And so they went to give him gifts.

Me: Why?

M: Because he was the Messiah.

Me: But why did *they* go?

Yes, Matthew’s answers are all sound. They are all supported by the text, affirmed by these characters in their conversation with Herod. They are all answers that remind us of why we include the Magi in the story in the first place: they made it to Bethlehem; they worshipped Jesus as had the angels and shepherds. They join the unlikely cast of holiday characters whose world stops when God enters the world in Jesus Christ. But the question still remains, still begs to be asked: *Why did Pagan astrologers leave their homes and loved ones and travel for what might have been years to worship the king of the Jews?* This is not the Messiah for whom *they* were waiting; this is not a king they are obliged to worship according to *their* customs or traditions. So why? Why do they go? Why do they give? Why do *they* worship? *And how do they get it right when those who should have been kneeling at the foot of the manger, missed the signs altogether and got it all wrong?*

In the Magi, the story of God’s upside down way of doing things is told once more. Again, God uses the most unexpected people to serve as vessels of good news and to be for us examples of righteousness, as role models of faithfulness.

So I want to dig deeper. I want to learn more about *why* they did it because I want to get it right too. *I* want to be able to see God at work in the world. *I* want to find those signs in the world in ordinary and extraordinary places and find them to be so compelling that I too chase after them. And I want to fall before Jesus in worship and praise, offering all that I have before him.

So who are these Magi? Who are these mystical characters who grace our presence once a year and then return to their homelands by another route? Who are these surprise guests who drop in on Jesus and Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem?

I'll be up front. In spite of their appearance in Scripture there are many scholars who will say that there likely were no Magi. They will say that this episode in Matthew was an imaginative, rhetorical device used by the author to highlight the claim that *Jesus was the fulfillment of prophecy*. Matthew's gospel was, after all, written to a primarily Jewish audience and Matthew's primary goal was to teach his audience that *Jesus was the Messiah, the new Moses*, the one who came as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. And so the story of the Magi is one that harkens back to Old Testament prophecies like Isaiah 60, Micah 5, and Numbers 24. And so the Magi allow for Matthew to weave more Messianic prophecy into his Gospel to help teach his audience who Jesus is and what he has come to do.

But there are still others who will say that the Magi were not kings at all, but astrologers who traveled to Bethlehem simply to follow a star. These astrologers from the East were followers of a Pagan faith tradition, whose spirituality was deeply connected to the stars. In keeping with

the teachings of their time, the observance of a "new" star indicated the birth of a king; the location of the new star how astrologers *would know over which nation the king would reign*. And so discovering the dawn of a new star in the house of Judea, the astrologers set out on a quest of discovery – investigating the rare occurrence, the birth of a new king.

Others will share that the Magi were wise people – learned scholars from the Eastern countries that had, perhaps, in their history, invaded Israel or held exiles in captivity in their region. They had heard the prophecies through Jewish scholars in their midst, and so then melding prophecy with scientific discovery went in search of this newborn king. Their quest was a journey of hope, for in spite of their other religion they lived in a culture that had a disdain for Herod's leadership – who had an unfavorable global reputation. And so the prospect of a new king came as a welcome possibility, an opportunity to hope.

There may not be an easy answer to the question "why," but we have a lot to learn from these Magi. These foreigners, these strangers, these wise astrologers *got it*. Somehow they *knew what to pay attention to*, they could tell what signs mattered, they followed directions and found out where to go. *They knew which king was to be worshipped* – even when *they found him lying in a manger and not in a palace*. The Magi knew something about the art of following. For many of us, this is a lost art. We are trained to be leaders – to hone our ability to facilitate meetings, multi-task and juggle multiple demands. And even if we are not running a corporation or a household, we nonetheless live in a world with multiple demands on our time and attention. Our Blackberries sound while we're in line at the grocery store and our cell

phones ring while we eat our breakfast. We're expected to be everywhere and do everything at once! *This makes following hard.* We don't know which direction to turn, which aspect of our life to prioritize, or what we can surrender in order to move forward and be the people God is calling us to be. It is hard in this day to be good at following.

Yet as Christ's disciples in this world, we are extended an invitation to follow. As Jesus called disciples by the lakeshore his call to us is likewise to follow. We are called to set our sights on Jesus Christ – the light of the world that has overcome the darkness. We are called to leave behind that which holds us back from following – whether it is our egos or our fears, the idols of our schedules or our agendas, whether it is the identity that another has thrust upon us or the addictions that bind us. We are called to embark on a journey – to put one foot in front of the other and follow Jesus.

Somehow the Magi knew this. They kept their eyes open, and in their looking they found evidence of God at work in the world. Now, friends, part of their success had to do with attitude. They *expected* to see God. They were in the business of spotting wonders, of finding the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. And so they knew not just where to look – but they knew to keep their eyes open. They knew to be intentional in their investigation of God at work. They knew to let themselves be surprised by God in the course of their daily lives.

And so we, too, are challenged to keep our eyes open for evidence of God at work in the world. We are challenged to keep the light of Christ's love before us, to hold fast to the promise of God with us in the incarnation, so that we might see the new thing to which God in Christ is calling us. We are challenged to not be trapped in the cynicism or fear of the day but to expect God to work in our midst.

The wise people were tenacious about looking not just upward but outward. Their journey led them not only upward but forward – into new lands and across borders; across the divides of race and class and national origin and belief. The Magi knew that the evidence of God at work in the world could not be ignored – it had to be pursued. And their pursuit led them outside of their comfort zones and into community with those who might have been an enemy.

Let us try to be better followers this year. Let us create space in our lives and in our hearts, in our attitudes and in our homes where we can see God at work in our lives and in our world. Let us pursue the path of Christ with such tenacity that divides in our lives are shattered and that we too become instruments of light in this hurting world. Let us follow the light of the world – Jesus Christ who has overcome the darkness. Amen.