

SERMON: January 6, 2019 The Next Part of the Journey
TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12 (NIV)
SUBJECT: Committing to God's work
THEME: How we follow through also is an act of faith.
PURPOSE: For us to consider what we do AFTER we build our buildings.
PIC: Wise Men following star.

So, picture this –

Your husband (or your wife) comes home one night after a long day at work, and says, “Honey, I’ve got a business trip coming up that I’m going to have to take – it’s pretty far. So take care, hug the kids for me, “**see you in about 3-4 years.**”

So – what is your reaction?

Okay, so there are some jobs that do require extended periods of separation from home and family. I have a nephew serving on a nuclear submarine who will be gone for months at a time. During those times they will be completely shut off from each other.

But imagine this happening before the advent of e-mail, cell phones, cars, or airplanes.

Imagine that this was happening in the first century.

What do we know about the “Wise Men”?



https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2017/10/20/02/01/christmas-2869903_960_720.jpg

Not a whole lot. We usually we hear about the “Three Wise Men”, but the Bible doesn’t say that. Matthew just says that there were three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. There could have been two wise men – one brought gold, and the other brought frankincense and myrrh.

Or maybe there were 200 of them – one brought gold, two brought frankincense, and 198 of them chipped in together and bought some myrrh at a roadside stand outside of Bethlehem!



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/76/2014-06 Israel - Jerusalem 095 %2814753153909%29.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/76/2014-06_Israel_-_Jerusalem_095_%2814753153909%29.jpg)

I would guess that there would not be more than 6, plus their entourage. A typical camel caravan would include up to 18 camels, with most people walking instead of riding. The camels would be used for transporting the goods.

We call them “Wise men”, but the scriptures call them “Magi”. This most likely indicates priests of the Zoroastrian religion from Persia. The Zoroastrians loved preserving knowledge, and they could have obtained copies of the Jewish sacred writings when Israel was under Persian occupation 500 years earlier.

Their life was one of study and of learning. That’s what they were paid to do. This isn’t unusual in Oriental culture. Today the Israeli government pays people to spend their entire lives in prayer and study of the scriptures. They get an apartment close to the Wailing Wall, and they are paid to read, pray, and make babies. (Not a bad gig if you can get it!)

So these Magi studied whatever they could study. One of their favorite studies was - and I hate to say this, but it was true at the time – astrology.

It was considered a great art. (Now, you understand that we do not believe that the stars tell our future – God holds the future in His hands! But at the time, this was a respected art.)

So the Magi saw Jupiter rising and converging three times with Saturn around 7-6 BC. By their interpretation, that meant that a King would rise up in Israel. (Jupiter was the sign of kingship, and Saturn was considered the patron of Israel.)

And not long after that, Jupiter began a retrograde motion – meaning that it seemed to move backwards in the heavens with respect to the other planets.

So the Magi felt like something was up. It seemed to be over in Israel, and they weren’t quite sure what it was, but they felt like it was important.

So they had a choice to make – do we go and see?

This would not be a fly-by-night operation. This would take some time! It was not a case of “Hey, this looks interesting! Let’s grab a Valu-jet and scoot on over to Jerusalem to give things a little look-see.”

No, they would have had to made the trip on foot. Over caravan roads. Through the desert. Through bandits. Through hardship and great sacrifice.

What would drive them to make such a journey?

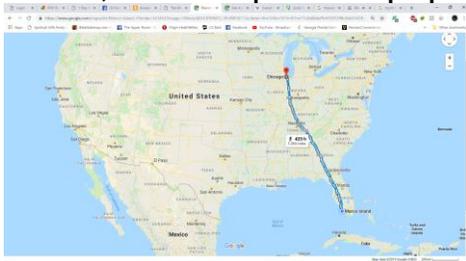
Interesting question came up at our Bible study on Wednesday – did they have families, and if so, did they bring them along?

The priesthood of Zoroastrianism is passed down from father to son, so they would most likely have families. I don’t know if they brought them or not, but consider each option –

It was about 1300 miles from Persia to Israel. A caravan could only travel as fast as the slowest person on foot. Being heavy-laden with these gifts (of which gold is actually the cheapest of the three!), it would have taken many months just to get there!

I figure that the entire journey, from the time that they first saw the first star until they finally got back home, may have taken 2-4 years. This is born out by Herod’s actions immediately after the Magi left – he had his soldiers go and kill all of the male children in Bethlehem under the age of 2. The Magi probably got there about a year to a year-and-a-half after Jesus was born, so Herod hedged his bets and rounded up to two years just to make sure he got the right one.

(Incidentally, scholars believe that the actual number of baby boys killed was between 10-20, based upon the population of Bethlehem and the birthrate at that time.)



But remember, they walked! 1300 miles! That would be like us leaving church today and walking up to Chicago!

So, why? What motivated them to do this?

They weren’t Jews. This wasn’t their religion. These weren’t their people; this wasn’t their politics; this wasn’t Rome or Babylon or any of the great cities.

This was Israel. Truthfully, one of the most insignificant nations of that time period. It had been over a century since they had even ruled themselves, and that was forcefully shut down by the Romans.

There was no political or world power reason to go to see the new king of the Jews. By earthly standards, this was a minor note on the third page at best!

And to go would be a major undertaking! Whether they brought their families with them or left them behind for 4 years, this was going to be a major expedition! It wasn't just a minor event in their lives - this was going to cost them something.

What would you dedicate 4 years of your life to, not knowing how it was going to turn out?

Let me talk about the word "sacrifice". This is a good, biblical term. It meant something that you couldn't ignore. It was a cost you paid that was going to make a complete difference in your life. You could have this thing, or this one. Sacrifice meant that you couldn't have both.

What do we sacrifice for today? For our kids. We will go to great lengths to make sure that they can have opportunities that we never had. Some people take on another job; some turn down a job to be with their children.

These Wise Men sacrificed for something that they weren't quite sure about. But they believed that, whatever was before them, was going to be worth it.

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We sacrifice for what we believe in. I find it amazing that these non-Jewish, non-Israeli-born wise men came this far! They could have been robbed; they could have been arrested by Herod as a foreign spy insurrection; they could have been rebuffed by the Jews who would say, "This is OUR business – you stay out of it!"

It's incredible to me that these foreigners, these non-believers if you will, saw what nobody else saw.

Anybody could have looked up and seen the stars. Anyone could have read the scriptures and have looked into the prophecies. As a matter of fact, when Herod called together the Jewish scholars they knew exactly what he was talking about and gave him the right answer.

So why weren't they there, worshiping Jesus, too?

God has always done things hidden right in plain sight. For those who have faith, they see things that the average person doesn't see.

But it's not enough just to HAVE faith – we have to put the miles in under our feet.

1300 miles, in this case. The Magi didn't just notice the events unfolding before them; they realized that it was going to be difficult to follow the vision they had been given – but they decided that it was worth it.

To put it at a personal level, I could make a lot more money and have a whole lot less stress by doing something other than ministry. I have sacrificed a lot to be a pastor.

But on the other hand, I don't consider it to be a sacrifice. I love helping people grow in their understanding of God.

When someone comes to me and says, "What you said or what you did a few weeks or a few years ago – that helped me through a rough time, and I trust Jesus more because of it" – THAT'S my payment. That's what makes me feel that my life is worth it.

As I was preparing this message, something else occurred to me. Next week we are going to make a decision on what we want to do with our Facilities Expansion.

I understand that for 8 years you have been talking about closing in the narthex, adding more bathrooms, and setting up gathering spaces where we can welcome new people and spend more time together.

It occurred to me that, with a "Yes" vote next week, it will still take 2-4 years to get everything completed.

So the question that comes to me is similar to what I imagine the Wise Men faced - ***Is what we're facing here worth it?***

Do we believe that this is a God-sent mission? Our task is to let God use us to love and heal the community of Marco Island. Some of it will be on our premises; a lot of it will be off of our property and out in the bars and restaurants and maybe on the beaches and in the shopping centers.

But we still need a place to gather, to connect with each other, to get our marching orders for another week. And the people that we meet out in the community will be drawn here by Jesus' Spirit so that they can see if what we preach out there is lived in here, too.

I am in agreement with the plans that I have seen – adding bathrooms, putting in showers, renovating our Fellowship Hall, and enclosing our open-air area to make a welcoming, inviting Gathering area.

Now, if we just build these things and stop there without going out to love on this community, it would be a \$1.5 million mistake! But ***if we focus our plans on “How can God use what we have to draw people to Himself?”, then we be building on the right foundation.***

The primary concern of the Wise Men was to come and worship Jesus. They didn't come all of this way just to offer gifts, but to fall at His feet and worship Him.

The gifts were nice, and some have suggested that that's how God worked it out so that Joseph could take his family away to flee to Egypt when Herod sent the soldiers, but the gifts were secondary. Their primary passion was to worship.

So – 2-4 years from now. 2021. What will we see on this property?

I hope to see new bathrooms. I hope to see a wide, spacious meeting place with a coffee center and video screens and a brighter, warmer fellowship hall.

But what I REALLY want to see is people engaging – people talking – young people, old people, new families, established members – sitting together and sharing each other's joys and struggles.

I want to see new faces mixed in with the old ones, people whose lives have been changed by Jesus and who are coming here to find out how they can serve God next.

It's going to take faith to build these buildings. But it's what we do AFTER that shows what we really believe.

Pray about where our church is headed. I want for you to know that we're not just worrying about building buildings. We are actively seeking right now for a full-time Director of Christian Education who will oversee our Children and Adult discipleship ministries.

We have put out advertisements for an Audio/Visual technician who can not just work on our sound and lighting, but take them to the next level. We have plans for a Communications Director to help us connect with each other as a church and to make our church more visible to the community.

Our goal is to follow Jesus wherever He leads, knowing that the path may sometimes be through unfamiliar territory –

But knowing that God is waiting for us in that barn, or at that restaurant, or in that park, or here on our own property, and we will worship Him there.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² 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.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.