

**Series: Joy in the Journey**

**Today: The Wise Men**

**Text: Matthew 2:1-12**

**A Communion Meditation preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, January 3, 2010**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

In a few weeks Cherie and I will celebrate our 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. It is a long story, too long to tell here, about how a California boy and a New Jersey girl wound up falling in love and committing their lives to each other. If anyone were to ask me how we made it for 40 years, I would have to give the credit to my wife who is a very patient woman.

I remember our first Christmas together. It was just a month before we were to be married. We had celebrated Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with her family in northern New Jersey, and on Christmas night we drove back to Cherie's apartment in Summit, New Jersey in a blinding snow storm.

Now you have to understand that as a native of Southern California, the closest I had ever come to a white Christmas was watching Bing Crosby singing the Irving Berlin favorite as the doors of Holiday Inn swung wide to allow the guests a view of a snow fall. While I must admit that I had always dreamed about what it might be like to actually see a white Christmas, I did not anticipate that my first experience of it would be on the Garden State Parkway traveling in a 1967 Volkswagen with no snow tires.

After a 2 ½ hour trip that normally took 35 minutes, my introduction to a white Christmas was not all that I might have hoped it would be. Loaded down with Christmas packages, we climbed the outside stairs, and when we reached the top, Cherie stopped and turned around. "Look," she said. "Look at what?" I asked. "Look at the snow!" she exclaimed. I should have

realized then what I have learned over the last 40 years—how very different we are. I asked her, “Where have you been for the last 2 ½ hours?” “Yes, but we haven’t had a chance to see it. We have only driven through it. Look!”

She held out her hand and one of the millions of falling snow flakes landed on her glove. “See how delicate it is, and it’s the only one like it in the whole world.” Through her eyes I was able to appreciate the beauty in a snow fall, and from that Christmas night to this day I have always felt differently about the snow.

This morning I would like us to look at a familiar story through a different set of lenses to see if we can see what we may not have seen before. Let me suggest to you that this story about three eastern sages is a story of insight, integrity, and inclusion.

### **INSIGHT**

What we do know about the Magi is this: they were a learned class from ancient Persia who were likely the instructors of Kings. They studied philosophy, medicine, and natural science, and they also studied astrology as a way to predict the future.

The history books of the era tell us that around the time of Jesus’ birth there was a common belief held in the Middle East that the next ruler of the civilized world would be born in Judea. As astrologers, they may have heard of an obscure passage in the book of Numbers in the Hebrew Bible (Numbers 24:17) which talked of a Star rising from Jacob and a scepter from Israel. It is quite possible that they put all this together with an unusual alignment of the stars which prompted them to journey to Jerusalem and inquire of King Herod when and where the next ruler was to be born.

Their search began with scientific examination of the body of knowledge that was available to them at the time in which they lived. It was not about their opinions. Everyone has

an opinion, but they wanted to know if their opinions were consistent with the scientific inquiry that was available. From that study, they gained an insight which led them to make a journey few others would have been willing to make. Perhaps we can learn from them. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we sought to draw our conclusions from an honest study of what we know and allow our insights to be based on honest questions we ask instead of simply sharing our opinions with one another?

### INTEGRITY

However, what makes our story unique is not just the insight these three men gained from their study. There were other people in the Middle East who believed someone special was to be born. What is unusual about their story is their integrity. From their study they came to believe that something important was about to happen, and they took it to the next level. They put their beliefs into action. They went to pay homage to the Christ.

The writer of Hebrews defines faith in the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter as the *“belief in things hoped for, the substance of things not yet seen.”* Clarence Jordan translates that same verse this way: *“Faith is the activation of our aspirations; betting your life on unseen realities.”* (Cotton Patch Translation).

This is the faith of the Magi. They studied the physical sciences, and they studied the stars. They read the philosophies of their day and they determined that something great would happen in Judea. Then they saw a star in the east, and they followed the star until they confirmed for themselves that what they believed had happened was actually true. In other words, they put their faith into action.

In his book entitled The Substance of Faith, Clarence Jordan tells of the time he preached in a Southern Baptist Church in North Carolina during the height of the civil rights movement.

He was prepared to deliver a message on the evils of segregation and racism. However, when he arrived he found a church of over 600 members that was fully integrated in the Deep South in the 1960's. So he expressed his surprise to the pastor and asked how it had happened, and the pastor told an amazing story.

He said that during the depression he was a worker in this little mill. He didn't have any education. He couldn't even read or write, but he got someone to read the Bible to him, and he was moved by what he heard and he gave his heart to Jesus. Later he felt called to preach.

The church was too poor to have a preacher, so the pastor just volunteered. The people accepted him, and loved him, and in spite of his lack of formal training, things continued just fine until one day someone read him the passage of scripture that God is no respecter of persons, and the following Sunday that is what he preached.

The Deacons of the church came to him after that sermon and said to him, "Brother Pastor, you know we don't let a black man spend the night in this town. Why we don't even let them pass through. Now we don't want you preaching like you did this morning anymore."

Jordan asked the pastor what he did then, and the pastor said, "I fired them Deacons." Jordan asked why they didn't fire him, and he said, "Because they had never hired me. I just volunteered."

Jordan asked if he had any more trouble, and the pastor said, "Oh, yes sir. They came back at me." "Well, what did you do?" he asked. "Well, sir, I had to put them out. In fact, I put everyone out who agreed with them. I told them that anyone who didn't know any more about the Gospel of Jesus than that not only didn't deserve to be an officer of the church, they shouldn't be a member of it either."

Jordan asked what happened next, and the Pastor said, “Well, I preached awfully hard, and I finally preached them down to two. But those two were committed. I made sure that any time after that, anybody who came into the church understood that they were giving their life to Jesus Christ and they were going to have to be serious about it. What you see here today is the result of that kind of commitment.”

The faith of the Magi is not just claiming to believe the right thing. It is putting your beliefs into action even when the right thing does not always make sense in terms of the prevailing value of the culture.

### **INCLUSION**

There is a final word we need to hear as we come to the Table of the Lord today. The word is “inclusion.” The story of the wise men was included in a Gospel written for Jews by a Jewish author, Matthew. It was a message to them and to us. The Messiah they longed for was not exclusive. He came for us all. He came for Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free, people of every race and nationality, for rich and poor, for gay and straight. The babe they worshipped was the Messiah for all people, and one of the presents they brought was myrrh which was used to anoint the dead. Perhaps they knew where it would all end: his body, broken for us; his blood shed for us. Perhaps they knew that one day they would sit at the Lord’s Table back in Persia and remember Jesus, the savior of humankind. Welcome to the Table of the Lord.