**First United Methodist Church**

**618 Eighth Street**

**Columbus, Indiana 47201**

**Rev. Howard E. Boles**

**January 5, 2025**

“A Crooked Path”

Texts: Matthew 2:1-12 and Isaiah 43:16-21

The reading from today is wrapped in mystery. According to the scriptures, there are some folks who have been following a star. They presume that this star is an indication that there has been a special birth, and they have come to pay their respects to this child. The Greek word for these travelers is “magoi” which can be translated as magicians. Some interpreters have described them as star gazers, astrologers, even kings.

We don’t know how many of them there were, but tradition tells us there were three of them. This is based solely upon the number of gifts they offered. Three gifts signified that there must have been three travelers, after all, it would have been in poor taste to arrive empty-handed. History has even given them names and ethnicities. Based upon a 6th Century document, we have come to know them as Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar, one being Middle Eastern, one African and one Asian.

Modern Christmas cards and nativity scenes depict the wise men arriving at the stable shortly after the birth. But a close reading of Matthew’s gospel indicates that they entered not the stable, but a home. This would suggest that a significant time has passed since the birth. Scholars speculate that it could have been up to two years later.

With so much uncertainty, what do we know for sure? About all we can say is that they were men. After all, many have pointed out that if they had been women, they would have stopped to ask for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, clean the stable, make a casserole dish and they would have brought much more practical gifts.

For our purposes this morning, I want to share a few observations about this story that we know and love so well. The first of these is an observation about their activities.

As I stated previously, the Magi were seen as stargazers, as people who paid attention to the events in the night sky. In this particular instance, they saw something unusual, a star that was out of the ordinary. But I wonder if we are limiting their abilities to say they were stargazers who paid attention to the night sky. What if, instead, they were people who were highly attentive? What if they paid attention to all their surroundings? Along with seeing the signs in the night sky, what if they were highly intuitive people who noticed all the things around them?

This would befit the later teachings of Jesus who was frequently telling his followers to pay attention to the world around them. Signs of the kingdom were all around. Beauty could be found in every direction. Hope was always nearby. Possibilities were always present, if they had the eyes to see, the ears to hear. Jesus was inviting his followers to pay attention to the things around them that others might so easily overlook. Maybe that is the kind of people the Magi were, folks who paid close attention to the world around them.

I am reminded of a story that my friend and colleague Mike Mather has shared. His church decided to change how they did their food pantry. When people would request assistance, they chose to see them not as needy individuals, but as people with gifts and talents. They would ask those who came to the church three questions. First, what three things do you do well enough that you could teach them to someone else? Second, what three things would you like to learn that you don’t already know? And finally, who beside God and me is going to accompany you along the way?

One of the first people to come to the food pantry was named Adele, who worked part time as a cook at the University of Notre Dame. When asked what she could do well enough to teach others, she said she was a good cook. So, they invited her to cook a meal for the church staff. The food was fabulous.

Shortly thereafter, the local Chamber of Commerce asked to hold an all-day leadership training event at the church for their members. The church agreed, but with one stipulation. They asked that the Chamber use their caterer, Adele.

A few weeks later Adele fed seventy business and civic leaders of the community. The church printed business cards which were placed alongside the meal. A year later this led to the grand opening of Adelita’s Fajitas at the corner of Eighth and Harrison Streets in Elkhart.

Rather than seeing Adele as a person filled with needs, they chose to see her as a person filled with gifts. Had they provided her only with food from the food pantry that day, they would have cared for her and her family. But by seeing what others so easily overlook, the support they gave that day would be life transforming.

The star shining brightly in the night sky was there for anyone to see. In fact, barring cloud cover, everyone would have seen the same sight the Magi saw. What made the difference was their attentiveness. They paid attention to what most people overlooked.

As we enter this new year, it is a chance to see with fresh eyes. This is an invitation for us to see what has always been right there, but which we might not have noticed. What are the gifts you possess? What are the hidden talents, waiting for a chance to shine? What resources do you have that could help someone else? How can we help those around us to see in themselves and in the world around them? Maybe the Magi weren’t kings or even all that wise. Maybe they were just people who paid attention to the things around them and from those observations discovered new things every day.

The second insight into this story is found in their journey. When they saw the star, they made an educated guess that something important had happened in the direction of that star. Given its location, they surmised that an important birth had taken place. They set out to learn more.

Some of our familiar Christmas carols treat the star like an early g.p.s. Many traditional songs speak of a star that was shining in the night guiding them right to the place of the birth. But that doesn’t match with the written text. According to Matthew, they saw the star and its general direction. They made an educated guess and set forth.

And though we often tell the story by noting how they arrived at their destination, it is worth noting that they made some wrong turns along the way. Their first stop was in Jerusalem, which was a logical mistake. Jerusalem is about five miles north of Bethlehem and when you are following something as indistinct and uncertain as a light in the sky, five miles is negligible. At it raises the possibility that on their way to Jerusalem, they may have walked right through Bethlehem without knowing that it was where they were trying to go.

Jerusalem was the bustling big city of the area. One would expect that if something significant had happened that it would be known to the people there and would likely have happened there. So, they ask around. And no one seems to know what they are talking about. Biblical scholars and wise people were consulted, and their recommendation was to try down the road a bit. Go to Bethlehem. So, their journey continued.

But how easily they could have given up at that point? They could have decided that it wasn’t anything special. No one in Jerusalem was aware. Maybe they had overestimated the importance of this star. They could have quit, but they kept going.

And that is a place where I find inspiration in this story. How many times have we been frustrated, discouraged, tempted to give up? It is difficult to know when one should give up and when one should keep going. But there are values that we hold so dearly that we will keep searching, keep working, keep striving, hoping that one day we will see the fruits of our labors.

That is the situation the prophet Isaiah was addressing. The people have been hoping for a long time. They are frustrated, discouraged, on the verge of giving up. It is a familiar feeling. We have all been there. But amid that discouragement, the prophet offers them hopeful words. God has not forgotten them. God has called them by name, knows them intimately, understands their circumstances. And he offers the words that help them hold on for a just a while longer, believing that the things that hope for are just around the corner.

When we think of a new year, we think of fresh possibilities, new dreams. But we also carry with us the remembrance of things past. We want something more for our lives, for our community, for the world around us. And sometimes we can feel that discouragement. Why bother? Why be hopeful? Nothing ever changes. Or worse yet, we become discouraged by the evil we see around us. A car driven through a busy street filled with people. Innocent lives lost and countless lives forever changed.

I suspect if we knew the fullness of the journey of the Magi, we would experience the same things. Times when they were tempted to give up the search. Arriving in the wrong place and no one seems to have seen this star which they have been following. What was so important to them that they left everything behind to chase this dream was unseen or insignificant to the rest of the world. But something compelled them to keep going. And their perseverance was rewarded as they entered the home and found the young child.

It is difficult to know when it is best to keep going and when it is best to turn around and pursue some new adventure. But for this morning, let me this offer heartfelt statement. In this new year, let us continue to believe in outrageous possibilities. Let us continue to believe in people and the ability for humans to live in peace and harmony. May every act of violence only strengthen our resolve to believe in that and to work for those things. Let us believe that God has entrusted great things into our hands. We have the power to make a difference. The Bible is filled with stories of everyday people doing great things. May we be that kind of people.

I believe that we have a holy calling to care for one another. I believe that God sought out those who were overlooked, ignored, and struggling and invites us to continue that work today. We are called to build bridges, to practice radical hospitality, to make a place where all people can experience love. At times we get frustrated and believe that such work is deemed unimportant, that it is everyone looking out for themselves, we get discouraged. We may worry that it is all in vain. But the power of traveling together, like the Magi, is that we can encourage one another when the road is difficult. Let us not give up.

Like the Magi, we are chasing a light in the night sky. Amid the darkness, the light invites us to keep seeking. May that light guide our actions in 2025, and may that faith lead us to the joy that awaits.