

Dare to Follow the Star

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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Those Magi of Matthew's Gospel, who were they? Matthew is very vague about their identity. We always assume that there are three of them; there is no mention of the number. We put crowns on the kids with fake beards and sing, "We three kings of orient are..." There is no evidence that they are kings. They came from the East – that is all we know – and that they are called Magi. In the Hebrew Scriptures there are references to magi, wise people.

The book of Daniel tells us that the King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon¹ has a dream that he needs interpreted. He consults his court magi (or magicians), for help interpreting. The court magi were not able to interpret the dream nearly so well as Daniel and his friends who were newcomers in Babylon.²

Whoever they are, the journey of the magi, following a star, has captivated theologians and storytellers like O Henry for centuries. Herod hears that the magi have made this great journey to pay homage to Christ and he is deeply troubled. This is *classic dramatic irony*, for we, the listeners of the story, know that Herod is lying and currying favour with the magi. I'm wondering: Do the magi know that they are being manipulated?

Perhaps they are so captivated by that star, that vision, that they don't read the room well. Does that diminish your opinion of the magi, if they were single minded following the star, and not being a bit skeptical, cynical about the danger?

Imagine the pitfalls that the magi, however many there were, faced as they journeyed across the wilderness from the East – marauders who could have robbed them. There was a great risk that there might not have been the king, the Christ, they sought after all the effort. Nonetheless, passion and courage, and deep faith carried them. We can be certain that this was a journey of faith, trusting a star and ancient stories that pointed them towards Bethlehem.

The story invites us to ask ourselves: Have we ever had a journey of faith like the magi?

Perhaps it's a niggling dream inside of you that never relents – making no sense to others, but it feels like something that needs to be explored. Or, have you ever seen an advertisement that, at first seems like any other advertisement, but as you see it again, you pay attention? Perhaps it's a cause that touches your heart. Perhaps it is a community that invites you to join, the hospitality at the heart of that invitation resonates.

I always love stories about people who follow a dream or a vision – single minded, passionate, and often facing a great deal of opposition from others. Former American president Jimmy Carter comes to mind, well into his 80s wearing his tool belt and wholeheartedly supporting Habitat for Humanity, a cause close to his heart. Young,

¹ Book of Daniel, chapter 1. <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Daniel+1&version=NIV>

² Wise Men, Magi, or Kings? It's Complicated. Chad Ashby, Christian Century, December 2016. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2016/december/magi-wise-men-or-kings-its-complicated.html>

bright leaders, like Autumn Pelletier, Sophia Mathur, and Greta Thunberg, who understand the damage that powerful politicians and corporations (and we consumers) are doing to Creation.³

When I think of a modern magi story, I think about Peter Higgs. You may not know that name without some context. If you read the article in Maclean's Magazine about "The God Particle", the discovery of the Higgs boson particle in 2012,⁴ the Higgs boson particle, more accurately is a field; it was deemed almost impossible to observe. Scientist Peter Higgs had formed the theory 50 years earlier. I am not a scientist, but by my best analogy, before the Big Bang, the beginning of particles, there was nothing... there had to be a superfast collision. Then, the theory said, that stuff had mass.

So, these two very expensive laboratories were built with enormous particle accelerators, in two different countries with two different 3,000 person-teams assembled to carry out the high-speed collision experiment at the same time – no communication between the two teams that could jeopardize the objective results. Decades of theorizing, billions of dollars invested, and there was Peter Higgs as the first set of results came in confirming the theory that he and five other scientists had formulated so long ago.

The one collider experiment was successful, but then the collider across the globe running the same experiment simultaneously had yet to report their results – and it was successful. *Some would have said it impossible*, or a waste of resources and the time and energy invested by thousands of scientists.

Back to those ancient magi, all we know of them is that they were from the East. They follow a star and find themselves being wined and dined by the despot King Herod. The risk is real. But, as Matthew's Gospel tells it, God taps those wise ones on the shoulder, telling them that Herod has evil plans, don't go back there. They re-focus on the star, and pay their homage to the infant king.

Here is the invitation given you and me by Epiphany, the revealing of the holy in our ordinary lives: May we dare to believe in holy visions, gifts given us in modern times just as they were granted to Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, the magi, and yes, again to Mary and Joseph, who were told that they must flee to Egypt, the place from which their ancestors fled millennia ago. Dare to believe that we are not alone, that God IS with you. Let US follow stars today. Amen.

³ CBC story about 15 year old climate activist, Sophia Mathur, "From COP27 to suing the Ontario government, this teen activist had a busy year" <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/sudbury/sophia-mathur-climate-activist-1.6696887>

⁴ Why the Higgs boson discovery changed everything. Kate Lunau and Katie Engelhart. Macleans archives, July 17, 2012. <https://www.macleans.ca/society/science/the-higgs-boson-discovery-changes-everything/>