

FEARLESS FOLLOWING
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Text: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

According to sociologists, most of us approach New Year's resolutions the wrong way. We look at areas of our lives we want to improve, and we try really, really hard to make specific changes in our behavior, and we almost always fail. We abandon the new diet. We quit going to the gym. We fall back on old habits.

What we should do instead, if we want to stick to our resolutions and be successful, is confront the fears that keep us from achieving our goals—confront them, figure out what they're based on, and take steps to overcome them. *That's* what puts us on the path to *meaningful* change, according to the experts, and in the gospel story today, the magi are a great example.

Let's start with a little background. The magi came from Persia, in what is today Iran, and we call them "wise men" because of their function. In a number of ancient sources, Persian and Greek, they're shown advising kings, performing religious rituals, watching the stars, and interpreting dreams. They were astronomers and alchemists, and they possessed all kinds of knowledge.

But in the gospel, their defining characteristic isn't wisdom. It's their ability to fearlessly follow the sacred, and the holy, and the divine. And we see that fearlessness at several points in the story, when they're facing scary situations, and rather than stay put or turn back, they keep going forward.

The first situation they face is right at the beginning. They see a star rising in the sky, and they interpret it as a sign that a new king has been born in Jerusalem, and they decide to go see for themselves. And why was that so scary? Because it was a long way from Persia to Palestine, and the route was difficult and dangerous. There were mountains and deserts they'd have to cross. There were predators and bandits they'd have to avoid. This was no vacation. This was a perilous journey that would have taken weeks, if not months. Which is why, when the magi finally get to Bethlehem, they enter a house and not a stable—because Christmas, at this point, is over, and Mary and Joseph have long since found a permanent place to live.

So the magi don't let the fear of hardship and discomfort hold them back. They hop on their camels and ride off into the sunset.

The next situation the magi face isn't life-threatening, but it's still worth mentioning. When they get to Jerusalem, it's a big place, and they have no idea where to find this baby they're looking for. So they start asking around, "Where's the child who's been born king of the Jews?" So they're not afraid to show their ignorance and admit that they need help. And you might think, *Big deal, I've asked for directions before*, but look at it from their perspective. These are highly learned men, and they're used to having other people ask them for help. These are royal advisors, and they're used to having emperors come to them for counsel and guidance. They're in the business of being in the know and having all the answers.

So it must have been hard for them to walk up to random people on the street and ask for directions. It must have made them feel vulnerable in a way they aren't used to. But they don't let the fear of looking foolish become an obstacle. They open themselves up to the needs of the moment and continue on their quest.

The third situation the magi face is definitely terrifying. Herod, who was known for being not only brutal but paranoid, hears about these strangers in town who are going around asking about a newborn king, and he immediately starts worrying about a potential rival. So he consults his own advisors, and they tell him the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem. Then he summons the magi and sends them on a secret mission to

find the child and report back his location. And he claims he only wants to know so he can go and pay his respects, but the magi aren't stupid. They know what he's really up to. So they go to Bethlehem, they find Jesus, and then they make a truly courageous decision. Instead of reporting back to Herod, who will undoubtedly have the child murdered, they skip town and hightail it back to Persia, with no doubt in their minds that as soon as Herod finds out what they did, he'll send his soldiers after them.

So they must be looking over their shoulders the whole way home. But they don't let the fear of being captured by a tyrant and probably put to death keep them from protecting this baby they recognize as someone who will one day be very important.

The last situation the magi face is different from the rest, and it's possibly the most challenging even though there's no threat to life and limb. The challenge is spiritual. The magi have their own beliefs and practices, and where they come from they're seen as religious authorities. Their whole identity is wrapped up in that. And yet they're able to recognize that God is doing something outside the bounds of their faith tradition, beyond their understanding and control. And not only are they able to recognize it, they're able to embrace it. Not that they become disciples or anything, but they kneel down in front of Jesus and offer him their gifts. They don't let the fear of losing their status get in the way of seeing that, whoever God is, God is bigger than they ever dreamed.

The magi are fearless followers of the sacred, and the holy, and the divine, every step of the way, from the moment they see the star in the sky, to the moment they stroll through the gates of Jerusalem, to the moment they enter the house of Mary and Joseph, to the moment they leave for their own country "by another road," as Matthew puts it.

Now, that's a really interesting way to end the story, with the magi going back to Persia by a different road than the one that brought them. On a literal level, they're simply trying to stay out of sight so Herod won't find them. But on a deeper level, a spiritual level, it's as if they can't go back the same way because they're not the same people. They've been on this journey, and they've had this encounter, and they've been changed by it. And now they're on a different path, they're following a different course, all because they confronted their fears and kept going forward.

So I guess Matthew would agree with those sociologists about what's the best way to keep our New Year's resolutions. Fear can be a very useful thing. It can keep us out of danger. But it can also make us hunker down in life and keep us from ever changing or growing or experiencing anything new. But if there's one thing I've learned on my own journey over the past couple of years, it's that we don't have to live like that. We can be fearless followers of the sacred, and the holy, and the divine just like the magi. Because even as we're looking for God, God has already found us. And whatever situations we run into, no matter how scary, God will see us through them.

So my prayer for the new year is that together, as a church, we'll continue to fearlessly follow where God is leading us. Amen.