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First UMC

Springboro, Ohio

January 3, 2016

Message: “Following with Faith”

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

Happy New Year! It’s always a nice feeling to open your new calendar and turn to that fresh clean page of January, saying goodbye to the previous year. And yet there as you look at the preprinted dates, is a remnant of last year, lingering, crossing over into the new year…Epiphany. It’s a reminder we are still in the season of Christmas…the 12 days of Christmas that end with Epiphany.

Epiphany is the time when we remember the arrival of the wise men at the cradle of the Christ child. It is an amazing story of prophecy, mystery, astrology, and desert travel. As I started picturing it in my head, I thought it might make for a really good Indiana Jones movie. Harrison Ford came back to do one more Star Wars movie…maybe he has one more Indy Jones movie in him too—“Indiana Jones and the Search for the Holy Cradle.”

This part of the story is brought to us by the gospel writer Matthew. He wants us to know that the appearance of the Christ child, the very Incarnation of God, was a gift not just for the people of Israel, but for the Gentiles as well—that means for all people. As the wise men arrive to worship, they are fulfilling the prophecies in Psalms 72:10-11 that say that “The kings of Tarshis and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him” and in Isaiah 60:3 that says, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

As commentator Stephen Hultgren reflects on this story, he describes the Magi as important because they “stand for all of the nations, including us, who would come to worship Jesus, the Messiah of Israel.”

As I look at the story, the truth of this statement strikes me. The magi are so human, are filled with such a mix of qualities, just like us—

We’re in awe that they found their way there…but they were late. We’d prefer if they would have made it in on Christmas Eve rather than January.

They found their way as far as Jerusalem, but then made that very human assumption that a new king would live in a palace. And so they tipped off Herod and jump started his fear and paranoia that led to the tragic killing of many young children. But, on the other hand, they did listen to their hearts and their dreams and they didn’t go back to the palace to let me know where the child was as they had promised.

They brought gifts, but they weren’t very appropriate. It was like showing up at a baby shower with a roadside emergency kit, a wedding gift, and a funeral suit. But in the end, the gifts were exactly what was needed. They were symbols of a deep reality of who this child was, and they didn’t hold back in giving them out of embarrassment or social custom. They just gave.

They had great faith that got them further in many ways than those who were religious insiders. But then, the closer they got, the more help they needed from those who had given their life to studying and practicing this faith, even if they were in a rut.

They used a combination of faith, scholarship, science, nature, and consulting experts to find their way, reminding us that each of these is important and can be a tool to lead us to Jesus.

They remind us that sometimes the journey to Jesus and the life of faith can get long. We can get tired and lose sight of the star. Yet the light is always there, and we will find what we’re looking for if we persevere.

We often begin new things in a flurry of energy and enthusiasm, whether it’s a new year, new resolutions, a new hobby or job, or faith. We approach it like a sprint. But often when we do this, we use up all of our quick energy and then give up. Long distance runners, or travelers, will tell us to push through that tiredness and it will lead to a change in gears. Soon we’ll settle in and find a deeper passion and pace that will keep us going for the long haul.

There is a legend about the wise men that describes them setting off on their journey full of focus, energy, faith, and excitement as they follow this brilliant new star. “Together they rode the trackless miles and in their hearts beat the excitement and enchantment of a noble experience.”

But over time they grew tired of the routine, of the miles of sand, the heat. They ran out of conversation. And then they began to quarrel: “Who would give the first gift? Whose gift would be the most useful? Who would speak first?”

As they began to quarrel, their purpose and their expectations began to fade. Their egos and self-justification began to grow. And as they looked up that night, suddenly they realized that the star they had been following had also faded from view. “They wandered aimlessly, arguing frequently, filled with despair. Not only had the star disappeared, but their hope and their enthusiasm” too.

But one night, they stumbled on an oasis in the wilderness. There were other travelers there too, gathered around the shallow well. But they were also full of despair because it had run dry.

“The wise men, without arguing or debating, poured water into the well so that all could drink. And suddenly this bleak camp of despair became a place of hope, hospitality, and happiness. Most miraculous, as the wise men emptied their water bags into the well, they looked down into the water. And there, in the water, they saw a reflection of the star. Once again they had found their way.”

Often in the journey of faith, in the journey of life, we get tired and we encounter obstacles and we lose sight of the star—we lose our focus. What do we do? How do we keep or regain our focus?

The wise men, being much like us, can help us.

First, they keep going on their journey. They don’t give up and turn around and go home. Even when they were tired of sand and tent, even when the star seemed faint or just a memory, even when they didn’t find the one they were looking for in Jerusalem, they kept going.

They remind us to keep taking the next steps of faith, even when it seems routine, even when we’re not sure, even when it isn’t exactly the way we thought it would be.

And don’t be afraid to ask for help. They didn’t let their egos stop them from asking Herod and the religious scholars questions, or from listening to their answers, or from listening to God’s direction in a dream.

They were willing to learn new things from others and from God. They remind us to look and listen for God speaking to us in both expected and surprising places.

They remember their true purpose. They don’t forget why they made the journey in the first place. Though they are sophisticated, educated royalty, they fall on their knees and worship. They don’t let their tiredness or their egos or the fact that nothing is like they expected or an interesting conversation with the innkeeper keep them from their main purpose, which is to worship Jesus, this newborn King.

They remind us of our true purpose in life. They show us what it looks like to have humble hearts that don’t care what others think, that move us to fall on our knees and worship Jesus with joy.

They remind us that there are lots of distractions and roadblocks in life to our worship, but that when we keep it as our focus, it fills our hearts and our lives with joy and peace.

And they remind us that at the very heart of worship is giving. As they kneel, they give their very best. They give themselves. They give their time and their passion. They give of their spiritual gifts of knowledge, discernment, joy, and witness. They give of their material gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

They remind us to give our ourselves, beyond ourselves, as part of our worship, trusting that when we do so, we are worshiping Jesus and that the star that guides us then shines even more brightly, reflected in our lives.