

“The Journey of Faith”

Matthew 2:1-12

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

Frankfort, Kentucky

December 29, 2013

This morning, our attention is drawn to the visit of the Wise Men to Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Only Matthew records this story, and he does so with great detail. This tells me it was important to his understanding of who Jesus was and what he came to do.

I am sure you are familiar with the story. Wise Men from the East traveled a great distance to find Jesus. In that culture, Wise Men were astrologers, advisors to the king or teachers skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science.

When the Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem, probably from the Orient or Persia, they began asking where they could find the child destined to become the King of the Jews.

When Herod heard of the Wise Men inquiring about a king, his paranoia kicked in, which was not unusual. It appears Herod was an insecure man who was surrounded by bodyguards and lived in fortresses. Because he was so addicted to power, he quickly had any rival to the throne killed, including some of his own family members.

Herod talked to the religious leaders to get more information for the Wise Men, and then he called for them. He sent them to Bethlehem, but he told them to return and report on what they found so he, too, could pay a visit to Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

The Wise Men left Herod and traveled to Bethlehem. Upon finding the home where Jesus was, they paid homage to him and presented him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went home by another route.

Why do you think Matthew included this story in his birth narrative? I pondered this question over Christmas cookies and coffee last week, which meant I had a lot of time to think. Once again, you lavished Jackie and me with a huge variety of sweets, which are almost gone by now.

The birth narrative in Matthew serves as an overture for the gospel, which is true also for Luke. All the major themes in Mt and Luke's gospels are found in the birth narratives.

One theme which runs throughout Matthew's gospel is that faith is a journey. It is an ongoing process of learning, growing, understanding and developing rather than a fixed condition or a set of beliefs.

For Matthew, faith is a process of discovering and pursuing what's important, genuine and permanent as opposed to what is trivial, counterfeit and temporal.

It is a process of maturing and becoming the person God wants you to be and your family, friends and community need you to be.

It is a process of discovering your talents, skills, abilities and passions so you can achieve the potential God has placed inside you.

Faith is a process of seeing the value in building bridges of respect, goodwill, understanding and reconciliation instead of walls of suspicion and hate.

It is a process of confessing your own sins and humbling asking God and others to forgive you.

It is a process of saying no to anything which is harmful and yes to all things good.

It is a process of sensing the needs of those around you and how you can make hope visible for those who are struggling.

Faith is a process of making room in your life for those who are lonely, confused, disturbed and struggling by walking alongside them, listening to their stories and responding to their needs.

It is a process, as the Wise Men discovered, of discerning who can be trusted and who cannot so you don't travel down the wrong roads and make debilitating mistakes.

It is a process of replacing cynicism and anger with hope and love; of replacing injustice and violence with justice and peace.

Faith is a process of turning enemies into friends by finding common ground to stand on.

It is a process of keeping promises and honoring commitments even when doing so demands sacrifices.

It is the process of becoming a faithful steward of the time, talents and resources God has given you by using them wisely and sharing them generously.

It is a process of becoming more Christ-like every day by being honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable, compassionate, generous and humble.

Yes, faith is a journey from where we are to where we can be with God's help and the encouragement of others. Just as we grow physically, so we should grow spiritually. The failure to do so is just as tragic and disappointing.

Who can join this journey of faith? Anyone. No one is to be excluded for any reason, which makes the journey even more meaningful as we share our experiences and learn from each other.

Why do you think Matthew insisted the Wise Men become a part of his birth narrative? I believe it was because they were Gentiles. He wanted his readers to understand what God was doing through the life of Jesus was not just for the Jews; it was for all people, even those from distant places and different cultures, including you and me.

When and where does a person start this faith journey? As with any journey, begin now and start where you are. Don't worry that others may be farther along on their journey and have a deeper understanding of faith than you. Lace up your shoes and start walking. Remember, the shepherds and Wise Men who came to see Jesus did not start at the same place or time, and neither will we.

How do you move forward on this journey of faith? Do what the Wise Men did.

Travel with others. Read and study together. Ask questions. Explore the mysteries of life and faith among friends whose minds and hearts are open and whose spirits are hungry to learn.

Become a good listener by suspending your understanding of truth so you can listen carefully to what others are learning from their study, experiences and struggles.

Observe what is going on around you. Discover where God is at work in the world and join Him.

Pray and ask God to use every encounter and experience to teach you about life and faith.

In other words, develop a holy curiosity. Keep your heart and mind open at all times so God can help you understand more about yourself and others.

“Faith grows when we are ready to leave the certainties and comforts of home to discover God,” Tom Ehrich writes in “On a Journey.” How true.

On this journey, be far less adamant about impressing others with what you know and more interested in learning what you need to know. Use everything you have learned about yourself and life as a stepping stone which will take you places you have never been, reveal truths you have been unable to see and help you to catch a glimpse of the “God beyond your God.”

When these new insights come, make changes in your life based upon what you are discovering about yourself and the world around you. “Return home a different way,” the Wise Men were warned in a dream, and so they did. Aren’t we glad? They saved Jesus’ life.

The changes you and I make as we grow in our faith can save lives, too.

Are you ready to begin this journey of faith? There is no better time than the beginning of a new year.

Will you take that first step today by opening your life to God and asking Him to lead you? Will you join hands with those around you who are also on this journey?

I hope so, and I offer you a wonderful church family who will embrace you and provide a safe place for you to explore the mysteries of life and faith.