

The Epiphany

Part 2:

God's Guidance To Us

Scripture: *Matthew 2:1-23.*

Exegetical Big Idea: God guides our Christian journey in a way that grows us up in our obedience to Him, our faith in Him, and our perseverance in the strength of His Holy Spirit.

Introduction

For the sake of those here this morning who were not with us last Sunday, last Sunday we began a series of three sermons in which we are reflecting on the story of the Magi in **Matthew 2**.

I explained last Sunday that traditionally, on the liturgical Calendar of the Christian Church, this past Monday, January 6th, is called **Epiphany**. I explained that the word *epiphany* comes from the Greek word, *epiphaneia*, which means *manifestation* or *appearance*. For this reason, throughout the Christian centuries, the church has used this word **Epiphany** to refer to the narrative in **Matthew 2** about the visit of the Magi, or the wise men, to the infant Jesus because it was Christ's first *manifestation* or *revelation* to the Gentiles. The Church has considered this event to be important enough to be commemorated twelve days after Christmas every year on 6th January.

I explained last Sunday that, in my own view, one of the reasons for the importance of the story of the Magi to Christians is that their story reminds us of how God *calls* us, how God *guides* us, and how God *provides* for our Christian journey. We are therefore meditating on the story of the Magi at this time trusting the Lord to provide to us from their story some encouragement about our own Christian journey in this New Year 2020.

Last Sunday the topic of our first sermon was: *God's Call To Us*. This morning our topic is: *God's Guidance To Us*. In this second sermon, from the story of the Magi, we are reflecting on what we discover concerning God's *plan* and *purpose* in the way He guides our walk with Him, as well as the *perseverance* He calls us to, in our walk with Him.

Our primary text, once again is **Matthew 2**. And once again, as we did last week, as we meditate on this passage, we shall try to be as faithful to the text as we can be, getting rid of the many myths that have developed about the Magi and their journey to worship the infant Christ in many stories and songs over the Christian centuries. *Read text.*

I. God's Plan

- 1) Last week we saw how the light of Christ appeared to the Magi to beckon them to undertake their journey to go and worship the infant Christ.

Well, after this light of Christ appeared to them, I imagine that the Magi undertook extensive research in their astronomy and astrology books to find out more about this light. I also imagine, however, that they found nothing in their books besides the Spirit-inspired understanding they had received that this light was announcing to them the birth of Christ. In obedience to this understanding therefore, the Magi decided to take action. They reasoned that, if the King of the Jews had been born, it was only natural that He would be born in the land of the Jews, so they set out and began their long journey to Jerusalem that may have lasted as long as two years.

- 2) We get this idea about the duration of the Magi's journey from **verses 7 and 16** of the passage. First, in **verse 7** we read that when Herod secretly called the Magi he asked them *when they saw the star in the East*. Second, **verse 16** tells us that Herod *killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men*. It is clear from these two verses that Herod decided to kill the infants of *two years and below* because the Magi informed him that they had seen the star, that bright light of Christ, almost two years earlier.
- 3) The Magi's journey to Jerusalem must therefore have been a long journey on slow-moving camels that is likely to have taken place mostly at night because the desert routes they used were very hot during the day but cool at night. Because of their study of the stars at night the Magi were people who were already comfortable with the night, anyway.
- 4) What kept the Magi going on this long and difficult journey was evidently their obedience to the revelation they had received from the appearance to them of the light of Christ. Which is all the more remarkable because the passage indicates that the light of Christ, the *star*, as the passage calls it, that the Magi had seen evidently appeared very briefly to them and then it disappeared. We know this because in **verse 2**, when they arrived in Jerusalem, the Magi said: *We saw* (past tense) *His star in the East*. This means that contrary to popular myths, the star had not guided them all the way from where they came; it had disappeared soon after they saw it!

This is confirmed in **verse 9** where we discover that after arriving in Jerusalem, as the Magi prepared to head for Bethlehem, suddenly, *the star appeared to them again!* **Verse 10** tells us that they were overjoyed to see the star. TLB renders this verse as: *Their joy knew no bounds!* Why would they be so overjoyed if the star had been with them all along during their long journey? They were obviously overjoyed because the light of Christ that they had seen in the East and had looked for in vain every night for almost two years during their long journey to Jerusalem had finally re-appeared to them!

- 5) This pattern of God pointing us in a certain direction, and then seeming to disappear once we head out in that direction is something we see throughout the Bible. We see it in the ministry of Moses in Egypt, in the ministry of the OT Prophets, in the ministry of the Apostles in their church-building efforts in the book of Acts, in the ministry of Paul, and so on. And we see this also in our own Christian lives; in a new Christian ministry, a new marriage, a new business, etc.

As with the Magi in this passage, God seems to disappear at those times because He evidently wants us to proceed in whatever new direction He has pointed us, in complete obedience to the original revelation He so clearly gave to us when we first set out. Often, it is only after we demonstrate obedience to that original revelation that the Lord provides new guidance, as we see in the case of the Magi in this passage.

- 6) This is how the Prophet puts it **Isaiah 50:10**: *Who among you fears and obeys the Lord and yet walks in darkness with no light? Let Him continue to trust in the name of the Lord, and rely on his God.* The expression here, *the name of the Lord*, refers to God's revealed character of dependability and faithfulness.
- 7) So, we can summarize **our first P** by saying that, in our walk with Him, God's *plan*, in guiding us this way, seems to be to grow us up in our obedience to Him and His Word.

II. God's Purpose

- 1) I propose to you that what enabled the obedience of the Magi to the revelation of Christ they had originally received was what I consider to be a Spirit-empowered *faith* in this one true God who had called them to go and worship the infant Christ.
- 2) The faith response of the Magi was a group response inspired by the Holy Spirit just like the collective faith response of the 3000 people in **Acts 2:37-41** to whom Peter preached his powerful Spirit-led sermon on the Day of Pentecost. I say this because, although we do not know exactly how many the Magi were, they were obviously a large group of people. We know this from the fact that the Magi's study of the stars was not done in individual isolation but rather in the corporate context of a kind of university. **Daniel 2** gives us a picture of the organized and institutional training of the civil servants and advisers of the Persian kings, some of whom were Magi. We also know that the Magi must have traveled in a large entourage because the desert roads they used were often infested with bandits and were generally quite unsafe for solitary travellers.
- 3) The popular idea that there were *three* wise men is not supported by the passage, which speaks of *three kinds of gifts*, **not three wise men**. And please notice that the text says nothing about them being *kings*! The mistaken idea that the *Magi* were *Kings* is linked to Old Testament prophecies that have the Messiah being worshipped by kings in **Isaiah 60:3**, **Psalms 72:10**, and **Psalms 68:29**. Early Church teaching re-interpreted our Matthew passage inaccurately in light of these OT prophecies and elevated the Magi to Kings. By AD 500 most Bible commentators had adopted this idea that the Magi were *three kings*. This misinterpretation continued until the Protestant Reformation when serious exegesis by Protestant Bible scholars returned to the basic truth of what the passage actually says.
- 4) The popular Christmas carol, *We Three Kings*, which has helped to perpetuate this myth about the Magi, was written in 1857 by Rev. John Henry Hopkins, Jr. He wrote this carol as part of a Christmas pageant for his nephews and nieces who were performing the pageant at the General Theological Seminary in New York City. So, although this is a popular carol, it simply does not correspond with what is actually in the Bible.

- 5) After the Magi saw the bright light of Christ, however many they were, they evidently made a collective decision of faith to head out in the direction God had shown to them. In **John 6:44-45** Jesus said: *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent Me draws them.* The Father evidently drew the Magi to Christ. This is just like our own response of faith when God first called us to Himself through the light of Christ. Like the Magi, the Father drew us to Christ.
- 6) Having drawn them, the Lord gave to the Magi the faith they needed to embark on, and to continue, their long journey. **Heb. 11:6** tells us that *without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.* In this passage we see that the Magi earnestly set out to seek Him, and God rewarded their faith by bringing them safely to Jerusalem to worship the infant Christ.
- 7) So, we can summarize **our second P** by saying that something of God's *purpose* for guiding us the way He does, must be to grow us up in our faith in Him and in His Word to us.

III. Our Perseverance

- 1) In this passage, we see that the *obedience* and the *faith* of the Magi were underpinned by their remarkable *perseverance*.
- 2) The Magi chose to persevere on their faith journey even though, as we just explained, the original light they had seen failed to appear to them again throughout their long journey. The Magi were important government officials who counseled the kings of the East, yet here they were, persevering in their decision to leave behind all their commitments and personal ambitions to press on with this long journey of faith with great intention, moving resolutely from the known to the unknown.
- 3) Think of the hardships of the Magi's journey; the possible shortages of food and water, the hostility of alien tribes through whose lands they had to travel, the constant fear of bandit attacks, their physical weariness and the fatigue of their camels. Since the original light they had seen soon disappeared, think of their doubts, and the possible differences in their views about whether they should continue or return home! And yet, somehow, they persevered, refusing to turn back and return to the safety and the certainties of home.
- 4) Our Christian journey, like the journey of the Magi, I'm sure you'll agree with me, is not an easy one. It is a journey in which we face the hostility of friends, family, and colleagues who live by a different worldview. It is a journey in which we often have to persevere in our obedience to God, and in our faith in Him, in the face of hardships and frustrations that we often simply do not understand.

On the Christian journey, the Lord calls us away from trusting in our own strength and in our fallen desire to be in control of our plans and our lives, and to trust Him completely to guide us every step of the way. In **Jer. 10:23** the Prophet reminds us of this by writing that *it is not for man to direct his own steps.*

- 5) This is why the Bible emphasizes perseverance as being such an important part of our Christian journey. God expects us to exercise perseverance in the faith He gave us when we first responded to His call and began our Christian journey.
- 6) It is through our Spirit-enabled perseverance that God brings us to the maturing of our faith in Him, and our obedience to Him. **James 1:4** confirms this truth by telling us to *let perseverance finish its work so that we may be mature and complete.*
- 7) So, we can summarize **our third P** by saying that in the same way that the Magi persevered in their long journey to see and worship the infant Christ in Jerusalem, through the way He chooses to guide us, God calls us to *persevere* in our obedience to Him, and in our faith in Him, during our own current pilgrimage through this world to our final destination one day in the new Jerusalem.

Conclusion

So, if God guides us in a way that is aimed at getting us to persevere in our obedience to Him, and in our faith in Him, do we just go out and try harder to trust and obey, as we just sung?

The NT's answer to this question is found in **Heb. 12:1-3**. Here, the writer tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus who *persevered* with going to the cross for us in *obedience* to God the Father, and with *faith* in the Father's reward. This means that it is Christ, and what He did for us on the cross, and to whom we are now spiritually joined, who both motivates, and empowers us by His Spirit, to persevere in both our obedience and our faith in the Father.

And even when our obedience and our faith are saw-toothed, that is, up and down, we do not lose heart because the amazing good news of the gospel is that Christ fully obeyed the Father, and Christ fully trusted the Father, on our behalf, and therefore the Father will never reject us nor forsake us. This is why in **Heb. 12:1-3** the writer refers to Jesus as the author and the finisher of our faith.

At this particular time in your life, as this New Year begins, you may find yourself, like the Magi on their journey, looking for a sign and finding none. You look at the many challenges ahead of you in this New Year, and you wonder how you are going to make it, especially if you sense God calling you to a seemingly impossible task or assignment. Let the work of Christ on the cross for you encourage you this morning to persevere in your obedience to God, and in your faith in God, because He will never fail you.

Take courage in the fact that you didn't start this journey. God did, just as He started the Magi on their long and difficult journey of obedience and faith. No matter how difficult and discouraging your situation may look as this New Year begins, please remember this: He who began your journey will finish it. As Paul put it in **Phil. 1:6**, *He who began the good work in you will carry it to completion.*

Next Sunday, we shall conclude these three-sermon reflections on the story of the Magi by looking at how God *provides* for our Christian journey.

Let us pray!

Rev. Canon E. Kwasi Amofo, PhD, Tigoni, 8th January 2020.