



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, ²asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'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.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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."

⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Star of Wonder

Let's get our facts straight: We don't know how many magi there were. Matthew never tells us. Tradition pointed assumed three, one for each gift, but that's purely a guess.

Later traditions ascribed names and identities to the wise men: Casper, Balthassar, and Melchoir, but that's purely legend.

We also have no word from Matthew that they rode into Bethlehem on the backs of camels. Perhaps they did, or maybe horses, or maybe they walked.

Also, it seems clear, if you take a literal reading of the scriptures, that magi and shepherds never crossed paths, exactly. Shepherds arrived first on the scene and then some days later, when the child was a bit older, came the magi. We have no idea how long the span of time was. The ancient church chose a period of 12 days. The Christmas season lasts those 12 days and ends with epiphany.

Also, they were not kings. Magi were astrologers, perhaps of Persian descent. They may have been of the priestly caste of Zoroaster, but we are only guessing, here.

Our story in the gospel of Matthew tells of a group of ancient astrologers investigating the night sky some 2,000 years ago. They had no knowledge of the grand scale of the universe. The stars were but mysterious points of light that moved across the sky with inerrant order and perfection. They believed they were looking at something akin to heaven where the gods lived. We don't know what they saw exactly—perhaps a comet or some wandering anomalous heavenly body, but according to Matthew, they interpreted the raising of this star as a sign that a new king was born, a king who was worthy of gifts and worship.

They traveled to Israel and discussed this matter with King Herod, who was distressed by the news, to say the least. The wise men were directed to Bethlehem, and so there they journeyed, and there that wandering heavenly body came to rest, right over the place where the child was. They entered and paid him homage bringing gifts fit for a king—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The wonderful three-fold actions of the magi—star gazing, journeying, and giving—provide us with a blueprint for our own experience of epiphany.

A friend of mine recently sent me a link to a website called Scale of the Universe. If you're a bit of nerd like me, you'll think it's one of the coolest websites, ever. The site greets you with some beautiful, albeit a little spooky instrumental New-Age music, but the magic of the site is that it puts the grand scale of the universe on your computer screen. You can scroll down to the smallest of the small. A tiny dot of space called the Planck length. At 10^{-35} meters, it is a length so tiny that space any smaller makes no physical sense. This tiny monadic point of space is named after the legendary physicist Max Planck, who first theorized about its existence. Some physicists humorously refer to it as "God's units," because it's the smallest block of space imaginable.

Many, many magnitudes larger, you scroll to the first big thing—the neutrino. It's a super tiny subatomic particle that is fantastically larger than a planck unit. Scroll through a few other subatomic particles and you can reach the nucleus of an atom, which itself is many, many magnitudes larger than a neutrino. But the nucleus of an atom is very tiny compared to the whole atom—amazingly, an atom is filled with massive amounts of empty space and yet unimaginable energy. Carbon atoms are pretty big compared to the tiny hydrogen atom. Wrap a bunch of carbon atoms in a circle and you've got a carbon nanotubes and buckyballs and all kinds of weird things. Just a tad bigger are proteins and DNA, the blueprints for life. Scroll out farther and you have basic biological cells—themselves unimaginably complex. Scroll out many magnitudes larger and you have the smallest thing the human eye can see, which happens to be just a tad smaller than the width of a human hair. Just a short scroll further and you have the size of a human being.

Now, I could go on like this for hours, so let me speed up a bit here. Next you have the size of our planet, a million of which could fit in our sun, and a million of our suns could fit in the biggest of the stars, but much, much larger is the galaxy, and much, much larger are super clusters of galaxies. It is thought that our galaxy is home to hundreds of billions of stars and that there are hundreds of billions of like sized galaxies. There are as many stars as there are grains of sand in all the world's beaches. But we're now reaching the size of the observable universe. We can only see things that are 14 billion years away, because the universe is about 14 billion years old and it would logically take the light 14 billion years to travel to our planet. But thanks to cosmic inflation, the universe is believed to be much larger. We can only see a fraction of our universe.

Some have felt their faith weaken in the face of science and astronomy; they feel tiny and insignificant, disconnected and isolated. They are filled with skepticism and doubt.

But when I consider the wonders of the heavens, the very reverse happens to me. To gaze up at the stars in the heavens fills me with a feeling of deep wonder and awe. It fills me with a sense of the infinite. I feel as if I'm observing the handiwork of God.

I think WONDER is the beginning of mature, adult faith. As a child, we believe because we're told to. But, no one can simply tell you to look at the universe and God's good creation and to be filled with a sense of awe. Wonder is an experience of faith.

My philosophy professor encouraged us to examine reality, not with a sense of shrewd skepticism and doubt, but with a sense of WONDER and AWE. He believed that if you began with skepticism and

started with doubt, your faith journey would end in unbelief, but if you began with a sense of WONDER and AWE, your faith journey would lead to a more authentic faith.

So, as modern day magi, true authentic faith may begin with a sense of supreme wonder and awe at the majesty of creation and beauty of human life and relationships. Faith begins, in other words, with a bit of star-gazing. But our Epiphany cannot end there.

Back in the early 20th century, there was much, much interest in what Einstein thought of the question of God. There were many who claimed him to believe in God and took solace and pride in the fact that the greatest scientific mind in many generations believed in the Judeo-Christian concept of God.

But, there were many others who claimed the opposite, that Einstein was an avowed atheist who saw no value in religion and did not believe in God.

Einstein tried to set the record straight numerous times, but never quite managed to clear up the controversy. He did not believe in a God of miracles and thus he did not believe in the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition. But, he wasn't an atheist either. He was as equally adamant about not being an atheist as he was about not being a believer in a God of miracles. In fact, he was much more critical of atheism than religiousness.

What he was was a man filled with a sense of wonder and awe. This is what he had to say:

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed-out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man.

He also went on to say:

Everyone who is seriously involved in the pursuit of science becomes convinced that a spirit is manifest in the laws of the Universe—a spirit vastly superior to that of man, and one in the face of which we with our modest powers must feel humble. In this way the pursuit of science leads to a religious feeling of a special sort, which is indeed quite different from the religiosity of someone more naïve.

Einstein embodied that very deep sense of wonder and awe, but never quite journeyed into faith. The magi could have simply noted the rising of a certain star and left well-enough alone, but they did not. They journeyed. They embarked on a pilgrimage. And this too is true for us. Star-gazing is not enough. Wonder and awe alone cannot bring us into a full and mature faith.

We have to journey, and faith is, my friends, a journey. It involves encounter: we journey into other people's lives, we journey into the scriptures, we journey into the sacraments, we journey into God's own heart.

Often, when we go on vacation, we only think about the destination. We pretty much detest the “getting-there” part. We grin-and-bear a long drive or give up and just take an airplane to get there as fast as possible. The “getting-there” just isn’t our thing; it’s the destination that counts.

Some people want faith to be that way, too. All that matters is heaven and salvation, the destination, and the “getting-there” is just a matter of waiting. Biblical faith, however, is about the journey and the destination.

In the journey of faith, we learn our most valuable and most important lesson, that of giving. In giving of ourselves, we embody true faith. We discover the revealed truth of Christ: that grace, compassion and kindness are the acts of God’s decisive victory over the powers of chaos, sin, and death that plague our world.

The Good news of Epiphany, the news that has been declared for all time to all the nations of the earth, is that God in Christ reconciles sinful humanity to one another and to God’s own self.

What could we do but rejoice and show our thanks by giving ourselves completely to the God who has given so completely to us in Christ Jesus?

This is our faith. It begins with wonder; it continues in journey; and it reaches its fullness in giving.

Amen.