

## **The Long and Winding Road, Matthew 2:1-12 - Rev. Emily Miller – December 28, 2015**

Today we hear the story of the magi, a story told long ago in the ancient verses of the Gospel of Matthew. It is a story so improbable, so far-fetched and yet so true, that it deserves to be heard again and again every year at this time. Today, we will convey the story in scripture, sermon and song, all interwoven together. The scripture will tell us what happened historically; the sermon will flesh out the characters a little bit; and the music will convey their thoughts and feelings. So, I invite you now to come along with us on this journey, a journey that carries us over a long and winding road, a journey that begins in the lands far to the east of Bethlehem, where some magi saw a light in the sky that alerted them to the birth of a king.

Read Matthew 2: 1-9

### **Macy sings: The Long & Winding Road**

A long and winding road carried the wise men from the east. Wise men, or better yet, “magi” in the Greek. They came a long way, hundreds of miles on foot and on camels, following a star that had appeared in the East, following it to find a new king. They themselves were not kings, as legend has them to be, but were “magi,” meaning astrologers or star gazers. Magi is an ancient name forming the root of our word magician. The ancient Jews would have looked down upon these men, as Jewish scriptures speak against the magic arts. They were not socially or religiously acceptable and were certainly not Jews. Yet, the apostle Matthew intentionally chose to tell us that magi from the east came looking for Jesus, called by God through a star, called down the long and winding road to see and to tell of the birth of the savior.

Let’s imagine their journey together for a moment. Let’s imagine the path they took. We are aided this morning in our imaginings by the novel “How Far to Bethlehem?” a book by Norah Lofts that fleshes out these characters and gives them histories and personalities, making them come alive as historical figures. She imagines that maybe they did not start out their journey together, but that God brought them together from 3 different lands, all called by the same star.

The first of the magi, Lofts imagines, may have come all the way from Asia, traveling some 1,600 miles alone with his camel, with barely enough provisions to survive. Church tradition has that his name was Melchior and he was an astrologer by trade. One night, while up in the tower he had built to aid his star gazing, he noticed the star of all stars. Lofts describes it in this way:

“He breathed in quick, shallow gasps and his heart thudded so heavily that the vibration shook his hands. He had been right; the sky had been pregnant and it had brought forth, not the comet that he had expected, nor an ordinary star to add to the existing myriads. He had foreseen and then had witnessed the birth of the star of stars. Now he must make certain adjustments to his chart and work out the full meaning of what even his cautious mind recognized as a **phenomenon.**” And so, off went Melchior, traveling by camel to follow that star.

Eventually, says Lofts, Melchior met Gaspar, a well to do man who was interested in an adventure. Gaspar met Melchior some 700 miles from Bethlehem, offered the weary traveler some food and heard of his quest. Gaspar, an adventurer at heart, felt called to join him to go and greet the new king. Gaspar provided funds for the trip and a camel of his own and they took off into the night.

Somewhere along the journey, upon reaching a small town in which to rest for the night, God told Balthazar, the third magi, of their arrival. According to Lofts, Balthazar was actually a slave, but he was bright and fluent in many languages and he offered himself as a translator, if only they would take him on their quest for the new king. So, Balthazar joined the journey and off they went. They traveled together, these three men, bound to one another by their common quest and a calling from a God they did not yet know, but were very soon to meet.

Let’s imagine together the scene as the magi arrived at their destination – Bethlehem- and found the baby Jesus. Let’s read it as it is described in Matthew 2:10-11.

**Macy sings: I Found You**

They found him! In her book, Norah Lofts' describes the scene in this way: "The dying star, hanging like a luminous apricot, was now so low that it was possible to pick out from the even huddle of roofs, exactly the one which they had crossed the field to find. The whole yard was awash in mellow light; and looking around they were inclined to hope that, despite all their fears, they might still be in time . . . . The end of the long journey appeared to be a shed or a stable; very low, built of clods and roofed with mud and boughs. That a journey planned at the top of a stone and glass tower which had cost a fortune should have ended in this humble place neither surprised nor troubled them." Indeed, when they arrived, the magi instinctively knew the importance of the child and they knelt down before Jesus and presented him with the gifts they had carried over so many miles: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar, now friends from their journey, spoke of the greatness of the child in the manger: "Kings will bow down before him," Melchior said, "He will rule an empire that will reach to the north, south, east and west . . . . People will know nothing of him but his NAME and they will hold it in awe."

Our final scripture for this morning is one simple sentence, the conclusion to the story of the magi. Matthew 2: 12. "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."

Can you imagine with me the road that they took? Of course, it was literally another road, a different road, as they did not want to go back to Jerusalem and tell Herod where Jesus was. They didn't want to bring any harm upon the newborn king.

But, in a more profound sense, they went home by a different road as well, because they were changed men. They had journeyed a long way, they had seen the new king, and they became different people after seeing the Christ child. Their hearts were softened, their vision expanded; their knowledge of the true meaning of life deepened.

Their names were Melchior, Gaspar and Balthazar, known throughout time as the magi from the east. But once they met Jesus, once they spent time with the Messiah, once they experienced the King of Kings, the Great I AM, the Lord Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, they not only went home via a different road, **they** went home with different names. They

went home not as Melchior, but as Redeemed. They went home not as Gaspar, but as Child of God; they went home not as Balthazar, but as Saved. They were never the same again.

And so we too, my friends, as we take that road to Bethlehem, as we look at the holy child face to face, as we take him into our hearts and into our lives, we become different people with different names. We travel a different road as well. We are no longer Pastor Emily, but are Redeemed; we are no longer \_\_\_\_\_, but are a Child of God; we are no longer \_\_\_\_\_, but are Saved. May our lives in the coming New Year reflect the names we have been given by the child in the manger. Thanks be to God. Amen.

**Macy sings: I Found the Answer**