

# January 8, 2023

## Following the (Real) Star

### Matthew 2:1-12

In many Christian traditions, we call January 6 “epiphany.” The word “epiphany” means “appearance.” Epiphany commemorates the visit of the Magi to see Jesus. This is Jesus’ first appearance to non-Jews, or Gentiles. Tradition says the Magi came 12 days AFTER Jesus’ birth (the 12 days of Christmas), who is now described as being in a house.

**Who are the Magi?** The Magi were the elite among the Medes and Persians, who ruled the Parthian Empire, covering most of what is now the Middle East and parts of Asia, right through to India. At the time they were Rome’s great rival in power and influence.

Specifically, the Magi were the inner cabinet of the kings of the Parthian Empire (roughly equivalent to the Roman Senate). They were lawyers, the ones who wrote and administered the laws of the Medes and Persians (from them we get our word “magistrate”). They were kingmakers (and occasionally) king-breakers. The Parthian throne did not necessarily pass from father to son; the Magi elected the best successor when a king died. They were also priests of the official religion in the Empire, Zoroastrianism, which including a healthy dose of stargazing and astrology. Our word “magic” also comes from them.

They are an interesting group of people to come and see Jesus.

We can understand why Herod and everyone else in Jerusalem is “deeply troubled” by their visit. These are the Senators of an enemy empire, arriving unannounced in their capital city. It’s a bit like the Iranian cabinet arriving unannounced in Jerusalem in 2023, Benjamin Netanyahu, current Prime Minister of Israel, would be a bit troubled.

These Magi are looking for “the newborn king of the Jews.” Herod calls himself the king of the Jews. If there is another claimant to the throne, he wants to know about it. Again, if those Iranian cabinet ministers arrived today asking Mr. Netanyahu where they can find the newly appointed leader of Israel, implying it isn’t him. That would be alarming.

Herod sends the Magi on their way. As we read further, his plan seems to be to let the Magi find this mysterious child, then send a hit squad to assassinate him (Matthew 2:14-18). That’s another story for another time ...

Today I want us to think about these Magi. They have travelled 1200 km across the desert. At the pace they could have travelled, it would have taken at least a month to make the journey. They have risked the wrath of their own king, Phraates V. They risk arrest or even death by entering enemy territory, uninvited and unannounced.

**Why did the Magi make this journey?** We know the answer. They saw a star. There are lots of stars, of course. As people who had spent a lifetime studying the stars, they recognized this particular star was different.

Did everybody see the star? We assume everyone COULD HAVE seen the star ... if they had been looking.

However, even without the star, the leading priests and teachers of religious law knew where the Messiah, the King of the Jews, was to be born.

It's less than 10 km – a 2 hour walk – from the centre of Jerusalem to Bethlehem. But unlike the Magi, neither Herod, nor the religious leaders, nor the who's-who, nor the rank-and-file citizenry of Jerusalem even go for an afternoon stroll to check out this potentially amazing thing that might be happening, literally in their own backyard. Especially if they saw it as alarming or threatening, you'd think they'd make more of an effort.

In the end, it's these Zoroastrian priests and astrologers who bow down and worship Jesus, not the Jewish priests or teachers of religious law. It's not King Herod or any of the Jewish aristocracy from Jerusalem who open their treasure chests and give him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but these Arabic king-makers from Ctesiphon, capital of the Parthian Empire (near present-day Baghdad, Iraq).

**Why does this matter in 2023?** I find this story personally engaging because I resonate with some of the characters in it.

I did not grow up going to church, or Sunday School, or youth group. Instead, I enjoyed reading history, philosophy, and science (astronomy and the natural sciences, like geography). Like the Magi, I was relatively well-read and well-educated, but I didn't know anything about God or Jesus.

In fact, I would have described myself as a well-informed agnostic (at best). Probably more of a confirmed atheist.

And yet, in my teens, I sensed there was more to life than what I could see, touch, hear, and measure. I had a sense, especially when I was out in the natural world, that there was a real spiritual Presence in the world, which I would (later) come know as God. When we went to the Europe and visited some of the war cemeteries, there was a real sense of spiritual Presence there, too. And, when we went to the great churches and cathedrals, I began to wonder if there was something to the faith that built these amazing places of worship.

Like the Magi, I knew I needed to follow and see where this might lead. I began to read the Bible, one verse a day starting at Genesis 1:1. Then I graduated to a chapter a day. In my soul, I knew God was real. I began to pray. Simple prayers. Eventually I went to church. I discovered there were other people who also knew God was real.

Thankfully, the people of Trinity Baptist, Vancouver, encouraged asking questions and searching for answers. They could even roll with a bit of heresy. They encouraged me to move on from Ezekiel (where I bogged down in my daily reading) to the gospels. When I actually met Jesus, it felt like life, meaning, and everything just came together.

I also made friends. Some were amazing mentors and teachers. Some ... well, let's say they were struggling to figure out this whole life-faith-church-Jesus-thing, too ...

At UBC, I continued to grow academically and spiritually. I had amazing professors who allowed me to learn, grow, and explore. Most never brought up religion at all. A few were a bit hostile to faith. Several, including both my Masters and Ph.D. supervisors, were wonderful Christians who modelled integrating their faith in Jesus with their academic studies in holistic, intellectually sound, and spiritually integrated ways. I honestly never saw any conflict between my Christian faith and any of my studies in the social sciences and natural sciences, thanks to their wonderful examples.

I was also blessed with a fantastic Christian community through the church and Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship group at UBC. The leadership and friends I made demonstrated an integrated, robust Christian faith that complemented, rather than competed with, my studies.

Here are a few key things I've learned in 40+ years walking with Jesus.

**I need to keep my eyes on the STAR – Jesus.** Jesus is always there. I need to keep my eyes on Jesus. There are a lot of things – good things – I can keep my eyes on. Some are professional goals. Personal goals. Family goals. Some even sound super religious and spiritual, like making sure my theology is sound, working through challenging doctrinal or ethical issues, reading great books and listening to fantastic podcasts.

But first and foremost, I need to keep my eyes on Jesus. The reading, the listening, the studying – even the Bible study, prayer, and conversations should lead me closer and closer to Jesus. If they become ends in themselves, and I'm not actually drawing closer to Him, then something is wrong. I need to refocus. And recentre.

**I need to FOLLOW the star – Jesus.** Like the Magi, I discovered that when you follow where the star (or in my case, the Holy Spirit) leads toward God, you genuinely find Jesus. But you have to follow where the Spirit is leading. Just keeping your eyes on the star isn't good enough. You have to step out in faith and actually follow.

The Magi travel for weeks across a desert and a military frontier. There would be plenty of distractions along the way. And difficult times. And expense. I'm sure there were times they wondered why? Is it worth it? They just felt like giving up.

I've never walked for a month straight. But there have been ups and downs.

- There have been times when I've been excited about Jesus, growing in my faith, learning all sorts of things, praying ...
- Sometimes I'm not even aware that I've kind of slipped into a complacency. I wonder if the Magi found a particularly nice oasis and just camped for a while.
- There have been times when it's been more of a slog. When I haven't wanted to pray. Or read. Or learn.

- There have even been times when I've wondered why? Do I really believe in Jesus? Do I have genuine faith, or has being "Christian" become more of a cultural identity? (You'll be pleased to know, these times have all actually strengthened my faith as I've wrestled through my struggles and questions).
- Sometimes I've been sidetracked down rabbit holes that just don't matter. Rather like the leading priest and teachers of the religious law, I can have all my facts, theology, and doctrine just right, and totally miss the message. My statement of faith can be perfect, but without passion or a practical putting it into practice. The Devil has an absolutely perfect statement of faith – he knows all the right truths about God. He just doesn't put it into practice. I can become that kind of person, too, if I'm not careful, with perfect theology and heart of stone. Our retiring Regional Minister, Dennis Stone, reflecting on the top 20 things he learned in 39 years of ministry, includes, "*Few people really practice 'love your enemy' – we prefer to demonize those we do not get along with*" and "*Doing right is more important than being right.*"

**I need to keep CENTERING in on Jesus.** One person wisely described life as a circle, with Jesus at the centre. Some of us are very close to Jesus, but we can always move closer. Others of us are quite a distance from Jesus. The distance we are from Jesus matters.

But my mentor also pointed out that what direction we're moving – or not – matters just as much or more.

- **Some of us are static.** We're not moving anywhere. Maybe we've just stalled. Maybe we're stuck. The challenge with that is that if we don't start moving, we'll become bored and lacklustre in our faith. A lot of us find ourselves there.
- **Some of us are moving away from Jesus.** We may be close to Jesus, but we're actually drifting further and further away. We aren't reading the Bible anymore. We aren't praying anymore. If we think of it in terms of the fruit of the Spirit, we're becoming less loving, joyful, peace-giving, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, or self-controlled. Because we're still close to God, rather like those priests and teachers of the law, we think we're all good. But we're moving further and further from a fulfilling, satisfying life with Jesus.
- **Some of us are moving toward Jesus.** We may just be getting to know Jesus, but we're eager to know Him better. We are trying to read Scripture. We are trying to pray. We want to be in a small group. We may have a ways to go, but we're becoming more loving, joyful, peace-giving, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled. Like the Magi, we may just be beginning our journey of faith with Jesus, but we're determined to keep following, wherever the star/the Spirit leads.

Where are you at in this circle of faith? Which direction are you moving in? What can you do to be moving closer to Jesus in 2023?