

STAR-STRUCK AND TRAVEL-READY

Matthew 2:1-12

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First
Presbyterian Church of Portland, Indiana on January 4, 2015]

I

A baseball player once said, "You can't steal second base until you take your foot off first."

It is a lesson we are taught throughout our lives.

To live the way God intends is to risk leaving one base of security while we stretch toward another.

Always God calls us to grow in our faith,
to stretch our minds,
our spirits,
our imaginations,
beyond what we ever thought possible.

As we answer God's call we encounter risk—
the risk of failure,
disappointment,
loss,
and pain.

II

This element of risk is seen in the experience of many of the great scientists, inventors, and innovators throughout history.

Robert Fulton was told that steam would never drive an engine. He was laughed at when he launched a steamboat on the river.

Thomas Edison was told that the light bulb would never work—
that the filament would soon be burned up.

But, after trying over 1000 different combinations,
he found the one that worked.

Mark Twain refused to invest in the telephone because he said that it had no future...the idea of talking to someone over a wire was ridiculous.

Walt Disney told of taking a friend to an orange grove in Anaheim, California and sharing his dream of building an amusement park for people of all ages. He would invest everything he had, and he wanted his friend to buy land and build hotels.

But the friend said the idea had no merit. So he left the orange grove that day, but years later said that with every step he took he lost over a million dollars.

In 1876 a man in the U.S. Patent Office said that everything that could be invented had already been invented, and that was that.

Then there was the stockbroker who said the Dow Jones would never break a thousand.

Neils Bohr, the father of the atom, said no smaller particle would ever be found.

Thomas Watson, founder of IBM, said there couldn't possibly be a use for more than six or seven computers in the entire world.

Each of these examples illustrates the risk of a closed mind and a stubborn heart.

To have a closed mind is to stand still,
to wither on the vine,
to experience no adventure, no growth.

To risk, however, is to move forward.

It is to unlock the secrets of creation.

It is to live the way God intends us to live...
for it is God who places the stars before us to follow.

III

No where in the Bible is this better illustrated than in the story of the Wise Men.

which are quickly and glibly made and just as quickly broken.

I'm talking about a vision that is so profoundly compelling
that you will pay any price to make it come to pass.

You may have the vision, but not the gumption needed to achieve it.

Remember good old Abraham?

"By faith," says the writer of Hebrews, "Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8).

Abraham went in response to God's call.

God used the pseudo-science of astrology,
it would appear,
to call these Magi from the East to the house where Jesus dwelt.

They "traversed afar" to worship Jesus with extravagant gifts
to remind you and me that he is not only the King of the Jews;
he is the King of all nations and peoples.

The Magi were more than **star-struck**...
they were **travel-ready**.

They traveled to the West with no idea what lay ahead.

Why? Because they believed in the reality of a new future,
a new promise,
a new kind of "king."

The Magi caught a vision and then kept going until they found it.

The King James Bible says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish."

Therefore, where there is vision, people can thrive.

Abraham proved it before the Wise Men, and they proved it even more.

It is still the need in 2015.

Catch the vision for your life,
for our church,
then follow it!

IV

Having caught the vision, next we are told—
the Wise Men took the risk of seeking the Messiah.

Do we understand the extent of the risk undertaken by these Wise Men?

They left behind their homes and families,
their safety and security,
and ventured out toward an unknown destination.

They went forth on a journey of some 1200 miles in search of the answer to a puzzling cosmic event.

It would be a journey like that of Abraham and Sarah,
who at the call of God departed their native land
and traveled toward the land of promise.

Like any journey, the Magi would endure rough spots along the way,
negotiate a curve or two,
climb some hills,
cross the desert,
pass in and out of dark valleys.

The t.s. elliot poem “Journey of the Magi” vividly describes their hardships:

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.*

*There were times when we regretted
 The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
 And the silken girls bringing sherbet.
 Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
 And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
 And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
 And the cities dirty and the towns unfriendly
 And the villages dirty and charging high prices:
 A hard time we had of it.*

Surely they knew of the perils they would encounter on their long journey—
 threats of robbery and bloodshed along the caravan route from the east;
 dangers from windstorms, flash floods, and desert heat;
 difficulties dealing with national and religious authorities.

They would face the duplicity of Herod and the unbelief of the religious leaders.

But still they persisted.

*"When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with
 joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and
 they knelt down and paid him homage." (Matt. 2:10-11)*

The risks did not dissuade them...
 the dangers of the journey did not discourage them.

Are you able to persist in the face of roadblocks and setbacks?

Are you able to keep on when others draw back and flounder in their own
 negativism?

Are you willing to take the risk of being misunderstood,
 misinterpreted,
 your ideals criticized,
 your motives questioned?

If so, then you will follow the vision and seek out the Messiah...
 and when you find him you too will kneel in adoration.

V

They caught a vision,
 they sought the Christ Child,
 and the third thing these Wise Men did is **they offered their gifts.**

Matthew says,

*"Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold,
 Frankincense, and myrrh." (v. 11)*

We have no idea how many Wise Men there were.

Matthew does not mention a number,
 although legend and Christmas carols and Christmas cards all depict three,
 perhaps because of the three gifts.

The gifts the Magi offered Jesus were ridiculous gifts for a “baby shower.”

They were, however, completely appropriate gifts for Jesus’ life-to-come.

The Magi’s gifts foretold the life of the new King whom they had come to worship,
 each gift revealing something about the life Jesus would live
 and the ministry he would carry out.

One brought nothing less than **pure gold**, which is never a bad choice.

Gold testified to the true royalty of this infant king,
 who was born not in a beautifully carved crib,
 but in a stable and laid in an animal’s wooden feeding box.

To leave a gift of gold for such a hapless child was a true testimony of faith.

The second wise man brought **frankincense**—
 a gift appropriate for a priest,
 for one who would serve God’s mission in the world.

The gift of frankincense would provide the aroma of an offering to an attentive God, and provide a sense of peace to those who made their sacrifice of the fragrant gift.

Did the baby Jesus look like a potentially powerful priest? Probably not.

Leaving an expensive gift of frankincense was truly an act of faith.

The third wise man brought **myrrh**.

This was perhaps the most insightful—
and unusual—
of the three gifts of the Magi.

Myrrh was used as an embalming spice and in burial rituals.

In fact, myrrh was a sign of death.

Here at the very beginning, death is already in attendance at the baby Jesus' bedside.

Think about it: these three gifts are an amazing foretelling of what Jesus' life would be on this earth—
as a King,
as the Great High Priest,
as the Messiah who suffered and died for the whole world.

Just as the Wise Men brought these precious gifts to the Christ Child,
so we are to follow their example in giving,
but giving something more than material gifts.

We are to give ourselves,
for that is what Jesus truly wants...
what our vision requires
what our seeking demands.

Bring your possessions, your valuables,
but also bring your heart, your faith.

they offered gifts that foretold his ministry and mission.

And then they did one thing more:

they took the risk of embarking on a new life for the future.

"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." (v. 12)

Bishop Fulton Sheen once observed: "No one whoever meets Christ with a good will returns the same way he came."

The Wise Men returned to their homeland by another route.

God warned them in a dream,
as God would warn Joseph to safeguard the Child in Egypt.

When you encounter the Christ of God, life changes.

Bitterness evaporates...
resentment melts...
hatreds dissolve.

What new route will you be called to follow in 2015?

What different way will you travel because God calls you to follow a star?

What risks will you face as you,
like the Wise Men,
are captured by God's vision,
as you seek after the Messiah,
as you offer him your whole self,
as you travel a different pathway?

It may not be free of pain or difficulty or heartache,
but it will be full of joy and satisfaction and peace in serving.

2015 can be a different year for us and our world,
for this congregation and this community...
if we are willing to take the risk of following a star...

if we, like the Wise Men, are not just **star-struck**,
 but **travel-ready**...
 ready to follow where God leads toward the goal
 of Christian love and service in this community and this world.

Begin now as you resolve to let God fashion a new life for you by going a new way in this New Year.

VII

On the night when Jesus was born a star was high above the earth so that all people could see it.

But only the Wise Men took the risk of following it.

Only wise men and women and young people still follow it.

In 2015 may we, like the Wise Men, be both **star-struck** and **travel-ready**.

In the words of James Whitcomb Riley:

*One song for thee, New Year,
 One universal prayer;
 Teach us—all other teachings far above
 To hide dark hate beneath the wings of love;
 To slay all hatred and strife,
 And live the larger life!
 To bind the wounds that bleed;
 To lift the fallen, lead the blind
 As only love can lead—
 To live for all humankind.*

Amen.