

“Recognition”

Series: *Follow Me*

Scripture: *Matthew 1:1-12*

Rev. Pen Peery

January 5, 2025



First Presbyterian
Church of Charlotte

In my opinion, one of the best, and most maddening, things about faith...and believing in Jesus Christ...is that it doesn't come with an instruction manual.

Before you protest, yes, I am familiar with the Bible – and, yes, the Bible does give us guidance on how to live a life of faith – but an instruction manual it is not...it's more a witness to just how faithful God is to God's people throughout the generations – and an affirmation of how God's promises can be trusted – both now and into the future.

There's a part of me that wishes that Jesus would have given those who wanted to believe in him an entrance exam – to lay out some expectations, talk about some pre-requisites...you know, make sure everyone was on the same page before they decided to affiliate with the Jesus movement.

But that's not what Jesus does.

There is no entrance exam. There is no quality control. There is no instruction manual. There's just a simple invitation: "Follow me."

Where? How? For how long? To what end?

We don't get those answers. We just the invitation to follow.

People sometimes ask me what they have to do to be a member of our church.

The answer is: "nothing." You don't have to **do** anything to be a member. You don't have to have a certain level of education, or employment history, or number of zeros in your bank account. You don't have to make a pledge or a gift to the 2025 budget (I mean, I hope you have or you will...but it's not required). You don't have to be able to name the 66 books of the Bible (or even the four gospels).

The only requirement for being a member of our church is to believe in Jesus Christ and commit to do your best to trust him.

And, true – that is no small thing (because you'd be surprised how many other things compete for our trust when it comes right down to it) – but do you know how you figure out what it means to trust in Jesus? You have to follow – and walk the road of faith.

This month in worship we are going to talk about what it means to follow Jesus.

Today, we are going to start with a story that I bet you have heard before: the story of the Three Wise Men.

A few Sundays ago – when this room was full of wreaths and poinsettias – one of our younger theologians (an eight-year-old) found me sitting on the front pew before worship and asked me a question: "Pen – how long did it take the Wise Men to show up on Christmas? Because I know they came from a LONG WAY AWAY and they were following that star..."

It was a great question. And the answer is – it took the Wise Men a while. We don't know how long exactly, but it's safe to say that when the Wise Men did show up, the shepherds who had been there at Jesus's birth

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were likely tending at least the next generation of sheep, Jesus had probably long outgrown his swaddling clothes, and Mary and Joseph would have been a little bit worse for the wear (as parents of toddlers often are).

I know most of us have probably moved on from Christmas in our minds, but the Wise Men are showing up today...better late than never.

I'll be reading from the second chapter of Matthew. Before we hear God's word, please join me in prayer...

Holy God – as we prepare to read and hear your word in Scripture, give us fresh ears and open spirits. Surprise us – even with this familiar story – so that we might gain insight into how you want us to learn...and follow Jesus on our own path. We ask it in faith and in Jesus's name. Amen.

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In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, '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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"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." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then 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.'

When 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. 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. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

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I don't know about you, but after a fun a frenetic lead up to Christmas – and that deliciously slow and sleepy week after Christmas – it can be a little jarring to wake up in the first week of January and realize that life is about to launch again. Work, school, activities, routines...BOOM.

Sometimes it takes a little bit to knock the rust off the brain.

Maybe it's because I'm a rusty preacher coming out of the gate this new year. Maybe it's because I imagine you might be a rusty listener. Maybe it's because we have communion today – which means the sermons are short (and because I've kind of already talked for a while), but when I sat down to shape this sermon around this morning's Scripture, I decided to frame it a little differently than others.

What I want to simply do is ask you to think about three questions that can sometimes get lost in favor of the things that often catch our attention (like, the always popular: “what do these gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh represent???”).

The three questions I want you to consider are:

1. Why the Wise Men?
2. Why did it take them so long?
3. What happened to them after they left Bethlehem?

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So, first, why the Wise Men?

There has always been a lot of mystery behind these characters. We've assumed there are three of them because Matthew mentions three gifts – gold, frankincense, and myrrh – but we don't actually know many Wise Men there were. We don't really know where they were from. Matthew says they were from “the East.” There's a lot of “East” past Israel, but scholars think they were from what we now call Iraq.

There's a lot we don't know about the Wise Men. But one thing we do know is that they were not Jewish. And – in that time, if you were not Jewish in Israel – you were a Gentile...an outsider...someone who is not included in the covenant between God and God's people.

And yet, in the way Matthew tells the story (remember, there are no shepherds in Matthew's Christmas story), in the way Matthew tells the story, the Wise Men are the first people to recognize Jesus as someone special...a King...a Messiah.

It begs the question of why the “insiders” didn't recognize the Messiah for whom they were waiting?

I wonder if part of the reason why Matthew makes a point to highlight that “outsiders” were the ones to recognize how God fulfills God's promise is because it's important for God's people in every generation to remember that we can often be so sure, and certain, and righteous about what we believe...to the degree that we actually might **miss** what God is doing right under our nose because it doesn't fit our expectations or validate our beliefs.

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So, now, second: Why did it take the Wise Men so long?

The obvious answer is because it takes a while to walk (maybe with camels?) from Iraq to Bethlehem.

What might not be so obvious is just how long it took.

You probably remember the rest of the story – though we certainly don’t preach about it much (for obvious reasons) – but after the Wise Men returned to “the East” – bypassing King Herod who wanted them to come back and tell him where the child was (the child, by the way, who Herod thought would supplant him on the throne) – King Herod becomes furious and orders the murder of all children in an around Bethlehem who were two years old or younger. (Lucy and Anna – if you want to tackle that text one Sunday, you go right ahead...).

It’s always a little tough to figure out the math around dates in the Bible, but it doesn’t take two years to walk from Iraq to Israel. When the star appeared to the Wise Men...how long it took them to notice it...how long it took them to take action to follow it...how long it took them decipher that who they were looking for was the King of the Jews...the Messiah...none of that was instantaneous. It all took time.

And I wonder if part of the reason Matthew implies the length of time it took until the Wise Men (and everyone else) recognized God’s gift in the human flesh and blood of Jesus is because that’s what usually happens when it comes to faith: it takes time. It’s rarely instantaneous. It’s a slow and evolving process. And maybe having that affirmed by Scripture can feel like grace to any of us who are hard on ourselves when we realize we don’t have our faith worked all the way out like we think we should.

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Third question: What happened to the Wise Men after they left Bethlehem?

Well...we know they didn’t swing back by Jerusalem to report to Herod. And Matthew tells us that they “left for their country by another road.” And then...

Nothing. Nada. The Bible never mentions them again¹.

Were they changed by the experience of seeing Jesus?

Did they become believers?

Did their encounter with the Messiah re-order whatever their religious world-view was before they set out to follow the star at its rising?

¹ Full disclosure: 300 years after the gospel of Matthew was written, and extra-cannonical book called the *Chronicon of Dexter* makes a reference to the Wise Men become martyrs of the faith...but this is widely seen as a projection of Christian triumphalism and not reality.

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We don't know. I wonder why Matthew doesn't mention the Wise Men again after they leave the scene in Bethlehem.

And, maybe, an interesting question is: what makes us want to know? Is it just our natural curiosity? Or are we conditioned to need to think that people who recognize Jesus as the Messiah will end up believing and thinking the way we believe and think?

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Leave it to the preacher to stand in the pulpit at the beginning of the year and ask you questions instead of providing answers.

It's been my own experience of faith that deciding to embark on the journey of following Jesus is in its own way an answer of sorts...maybe not something that satisfies all the curiosities we might have...but satisfies us in an even deeper way; by helping us know to whom we belong – and how much we are loved – and that our role is reflect that love to others...regardless of who they are or what they believe.

I am glad to be with you on that journey – especially as we prepare to meet the energy and promise of another year.

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In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.