

Follow the Star

Matthew 2:1-12

Rev. Dan Schumacher

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine who is a lay leader in his church in North Carolina reached out to me by way of email. He said:

"I could use your expertise. (*Always good to butter somebody up before asking a favor.*) Got roped into serving a 3 year term leading our church's Spiritual Gifts Committee. (*Some of you know exactly how that rope feels.*) Traditionally, [the role is] little more than nominating for church committees, but want to do something a bit more meaningful. Looking for resources (articles, books, videos, etc) about spiritual gifts discernment to use and share. Thanks, (signed) Carson."

What I wrote back was something like this:

"Well, Carson, while I appreciate that you believe me to be an 'expert' in all things life-of-faith related, the spiritual gift of discernment is clearly not one of *your* spiritual gifts, because you could not have asked someone who possibly knows less about spiritual gifts inventories than me."

Well, that's what I was *thinking*, but it's not what I wrote. What I wrote back was, "Honestly don't have a lot of experience or background with spiritual gifts inventories." And then spent two paragraphs suggesting resources for topics he didn't ask about.

The truth is that I can only remember taking a spiritual gifts inventory once in my entire life — and it was back when Christen and I were still dating... so, it was when we were in youth group. I'm sure the book we used was put out by LifeWay, the Southern Baptist publishing house, and was based heavily on 1 Corinthians, chapter 12.

I won't read the whole thing for you. I'll just prooftext parts of it so we won't have to deal with the fact that the church Paul was writing to was a complete and utter mess, so he was forced to put boundaries on them all of the time. In others words, this passage is meant to *reign in* what people were doing and then were claiming were "gifts of the spirit:"

"Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed...Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit (*not many spirits, ok?*); and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord (*not many lords, ok?*); and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good (*not for your own self-benefit, ok?*). To one is given through the Spirit the (1) utterance of wisdom, and to another (2) the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another (3) faith by the same Spirit, to another (4) gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another (5) the working of miracles, to another (6) prophecy, to another (7) the discernment of spirits, to another (8) various kinds of tongues, to another (9) the interpretation of tongues."

And then he closes that chapter by saying:

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers; then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues.”

Do you know what’s not listed anywhere in that chapter? The spiritual gift of exhortation.

When I was in high school and took that spiritual gifts inventory, do you know what I got as my leading spiritual gift? The spiritual gift of exhortation. That’s like attending awards night for your basketball team and getting the award for being the “Most Encouraging Teammate.” What they’re really saying is, “You ride the bench better than anyone else on the team!”

So, in an effort to redeem myself, I found a new spiritual gifts inventory this week. It was on the United Methodist Church’s “Discipleship Ministries” website. So I took that inventory, and according to the Methodists, my top three spiritual gifts were: administration, shepherding, and discernment.

Further down the scale were wisdom and knowledge. The spiritual gift of “leadership” is a possibility, but apparently just not for me. And here I am preaching again this week, but none of the preaching-like gifts even registered in my top 6. So, I will understand if you decide to search for a pastor who’s more spiritually gifted in the area of preaching.

The thing is, I’ve always understood spiritual gifts to be those talents, those characteristics, those natural inclinations toward particular abilities that God has given us in hopes that we might use them for the betterment of God’s kingdom. “For the common good,” as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12.

You have a heart for those in need, and so you raise your hand when volunteers are recruited for when the Mobile Market distributes food in our parking lot.

You are naturally an extroverted, outgoing, or warm person, and so standing at the door greeting people as they come to church seems obvious.

You have an innate curiosity that compels you to ask good questions, and so teaching a Sunday School class just feels right.

Spiritual gifts inventories are meant not to tell us what we ought to do, but to help us ask ourselves what gifts we have to give to God.

Over the years, much has been made about the gifts the magi brought to baby Jesus – gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Some say they set Jesus' family up well, financially speaking. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh all held high value in the Ancient Near East. Others say that those gifts were about as impractical a set of gifts anyone could bring to a baby shower. Where's the stroller or diapers or baby bottles, for goodness' sake?

But according to some traditional interpretations, each of the gifts is a symbol pointing to some unique characteristic or attribute of Christ. That interpretation goes something like this:

Gold is a gift fit for royalty, and thus symbolizes that Jesus was of the royal line of David.

Frankincense is an expensive incense that was burned as a part of worship in the temple, and so signifies Jesus' divinity.

Myrrh is an expensive oil used for perfume. Specifically, myrrh was most commonly used among wealthy Jewish people as an anointing for the dead. Thus, the myrrh is seen as a symbol foreshadowing Jesus' death.

Theologically, such interpretations sure sound nice, but I'm not so sure that was their purpose in Matthew's telling. After all, no mention of any of the gifts is ever made again in Matthew's gospel — not even a mention of myrrh at Jesus' burial!

So what do we do with these gifts? Maybe to focus on the gifts, interesting thought they might be, is to miss the point. Maybe, the point isn't the gifts, but the *journey*.

The wise men or Magi are probably best understood as astrologers — as “star-readers.” They looked for signs in the things they could observe. In that day and time, “it was widely believed that stars heralded the birth of human beings, especially kings destined for greatness” (Ben Witherington III, *Matthew*, 58).

So what's compelling about this story is not that a star appeared, but that *they* were the ones to see it. Outsiders, pagans, idolators, non-Jewish people... yet *they* were the ones who noticed the star and realized its significance.

John Philip Newell says this:

“I am reminded of the story that my rabbi brother, Nahum, likes to tell. It is the story of the burning bush in the Hebrew Scriptures in which Moses sees a bush on fire, but the bush is not consumed. Nahum says that the important thing about this story is not that the bush is burning but that Moses notices, because every bush is burning, every bush is on fire with the divine presence, everything in the universe shines because God is at the heart of it” (“The Light Within All Life,” *Day1.org*, January 6, 2013).

Our magi are like that — they see what others don't or won't. They take note, because *they are looking*.

The truth is, our experience of God is not easy to discern. God has not chosen to lay out a media campaign designed to further God's "brand." No *Insta-* page or *Facebook* profile. No billboards by the highway. No logo that's recognized around the world. For most, the call of God comes by nudge and whisper, not by shove and shout.

And those who hear or see the Holy One tend to do so because *they are seeking*. The Magi saw the star *because they were looking*.

Fred Craddock tells this story:

"When I was a kid on the farm, my sister and my brothers and I would play hide-and-seek... You remember how it goes. One person is 'It.' Whoever is 'It' hides their eyes, counts to a hundred, and then says, 'Ready or not, here I come,' and you're supposed to be hidden. Then the person who's 'It' comes looking and tries to beat the first one found back to the base in order to touch the base time and say, 'You're It.' Then the other person is 'It.'

My sister was 'It.' When my sister was 'It,' she cheated. Well, she started off honestly enough; she would say, 'One, two three, four, five, six, seven, ninety-three, ninety-four.' But I had a place under the porch and under the steps of the porch. Because of my size, I could get under there and I knew she'd never find me.

'Ninety-nine, one hundred. Ready or not, here I come.'

Here she came, in the house, out of the house, in the weeds, in the trees, down to the corncrib, in the barn. She couldn't find me. I almost gave myself away, down under there just snickering to myself. *She'll never find me here, she'll never find me here*. Then it occurred to me... *she'll never find me here*.

So after awhile I would stick out a toe. When she came by and saw my toe, she said, 'Uh-oh, I see you,' and she'd run back and touch the base three times and say, 'Ha-ha, you're It, you're It.'

I would come out brushing myself off saying, 'Oh shoot, you found me.'

What did I want? What did I really want?" (*Craddock Stories*, 34-35).

In some small way, that's an image of our God, who wants to be found, too. And, it's an image of us, who may never find him if he didn't stick out that big toe and give us a sign.

My friend and mentor, Mike Clingenpeel says it like this: The story of the magi "helps us remember that our world is not bereft of God's presence. God leaves hints and signs,

a trail to be discovered by those who seek to pursue the Holy in the midst of this life” (“A Feast Worthy of Devout Celebration,” Center for Christian Ethics at *Baylor University*, 2011).

Too often we think of practicing our faith as an hour on Sunday mornings when we get our spiritual tanks filled for another week of work and family and errands and responsibilities. But time and again, the story of faith in scripture is of people who are called to leave on a journey before they ever know where they’re even headed.

In faith, Abraham and Sarah pack it all up and depart for a land that God *will* show them, not to one that God had already shown them.

In faith, Moses leads an entire people out of slavery, out of Egypt, across that parted sea, and into what?? The wilderness. Eventually they find their way to the promised land, but not because they knew where they were going when they set out.

And our Magi, who, after a lifetime of reading the stars, see a strange light. And it draws them out of their homes to places unknown. No GoogleMaps promising them the most direct route or telling them where to avoid Denver traffic. No Tesla navigation telling them where they need to charge their car and for how long. And no promise that they’ll actually find a thing! Just a sign and the hope that their journey would be worth it.

Little did they know when they set out that their willingness to follow the sign – even if they didn’t know the destination – would, in fact, bring them to Jesus.

Who cares what gifts they brought? The gifts don’t matter at all if they weren’t willing to make the journey.

Do you hear what I’m saying? The gifts don’t matter at all if *we* aren’t willing to make the journey.

And if you what you think I’m saying right now is that you ought to literally pack your bags and head west in search of Jesus, following only the guidance of the stars, then you’re still missing the point.

I’m reminded of the story shared by Carlo Caretto, who spent a decade in silence, prayer, and work at a Saharan monastery as part of his vows. He wrote:

“In our community the other day there wasn’t much coffee.

Coffee does me good down here in the desert... it helps me... I am old.

I was worried about not having any, about spending a few hours feeling dull and weak, and so – without perceiving the evil I was doing – I went into the kitchen before the others and drank up all that was left.

Afterwards, having suffered all day and made my confession, I thought in shame of my selfishness, of the ease with which I had excluded my two brothers from those black, bitter remains.

It seems a tiny thing, yet in that cup of coffee, taken and not shared with my brothers, is [nothing less than] the root of all evil...

The difference between me and Jesus is right here, in an affair that seems simple but isn't at all; after a whole life time it is still there to make you think. Jesus would have left the coffee for his brothers; I excluded my brothers."

"No," he concludes, "it isn't easy to live with hearts like ours: let us confess it" (*The God Who Comes*, 130).

Do you see what I mean? You can make the journey to God without even leaving your kitchen, if you're willing to look for the signs.

As Paula D'Arcy has said so well, "God comes to us disguised as our life."

The Christian faith is not an hour on Sunday mornings. And neither is it a set of beliefs, but rather it is a willingness to travel, to pursue God's gentle light. Christianity is not a place to stand, but a direction in which to move.

And God's invitation to us is to follow the star.

Amen.