**The Gifts We Bring; the Light that Shines**

**Text: Matthew 2:1-12**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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All of my life, I’ve loved maps. I remember as a little kid, sitting between my parents in the front seat of our old Plymouth: Mom with the map on her lap and I’d say, “Show me where we are.” Fast forward maybe 5 years and now my big brother and I are fighting over the map and who’ll play navigator for our Dad. Tom usually won the fight, but I still think I was the better navigator. And today, before we start on a trip, I’ve got my maps spread out in the living room, I’m looking at the different routes and checking for mileage and scenery and travel times. I want to know the roads we’ll travel, the exits we’ll take, when we’ll start, when we’ll arrive, and how many rest stops we’ll make along the way. I’ve learned to factor Google into that process, and sometimes I’ll even listen to that irritating voice on my cell phone, but I still want the whole route planned in advance.

Not so the wise men. They just took off, following a star. No maps, no cell phones no AAA Trip-Tick; just a star, and a profound faith – an internal compass – that would lead them to the Christ Child.

It’s a pretty common pattern in the Bible: heading out on a journey with only a vague idea of where you’re going, or how you’ll get there, or where you’ll find food along the way. One thinks of Abraham setting out for the land that had been promised to him, “not knowing where he was going,” as scripture says (Hebrews 11:8). Or Moses and the Israelites, leaving Egypt on the run, and likewise not having a clue where they were headed (Exodus 12ff). Or Jesus’ disciples, sent out on a mission to preach the Gospel, with few directions and even fewer provisions (Luke 10:1-20).

Likewise the wise men: they have a vague idea that they’re supposed to follow this star – follow this shining light – but neither their route nor their destination is at all clear.

That’s the way it is on the journey of faith. There’s no precise map to follow, no interstate to speed us on our way. But there is a strong internal compass, planted by grace and powered by trust, that guides us on the journey.

That compass – that faith – is found in unexpected places. That’s the first thing that Matthew wants us to note in this story. The wise men are searching for the King of the Jews, yes; but they’re Gentiles From the perspective of good Jews like Mary and Joseph, they’re non-believers. Yet here they are in Bethlehem – because they finally did make it, even without maps – here they are in Bethlehem, worshipping the Messiah.

Faith is found in unexpected places. And Matthew reminds us of this, over and over again. The Messiah grows-up not in Judea, the land of the Jews, but in Galilee, which is Gentile territory (Matthew 2:19-23; 3:12-17). A Roman centurion – another Gentile – exhibits especially deep faith in Jesus’ power to heal (Mt. 8:5-13). A Canaanite woman likewise demonstrates faith far deeper than that of many believers (Mt. 15:21-28). The scribes and Pharisees – the Jewish leaders; the ones whom you’d expect to recognize the Messiah – they are especially critical of Jesus. So Jesus finds God’s presence instead among those at the margins of society, the ones whom he calls “the least of these” (Mt. 25:31-40).

Faith is found in unexpected places. I’m often reminded of this when I’m talking with our homeless neighbors. I’ve found more wisdom among homeless folks than I have in many a sermon; including some that I’ve preached! They’ve told me stories of faith and trust and forgiveness and compassion. Like the fellow who’d found a job and was doing well at it, but as soon as his boss found out that he’d done some time in jail; BOOM, he was out of there. Minor convictions, but jail time nevertheless, and the company refused to keep him. But he wasn’t bitter, he’d shaken the dust off of his feet and moved on, as Jesus would say, and he just knew that God was going to open-up another opportunity for him.

Faith is found in unexpected places. Something for us to remember as we launch Our Future Story. When you re-read our story – and I hope that you’ll do that from time to time, either on the website or in hard copy, because we’ll need to remind ourselves where we’ve been, where we’re headed and how much progress we’ve made – when you re-read Our Future Story, you’ll remember that we’ve committed ourselves to forming partnerships with community groups who will run programs out of our building. They may not be members of our church – they may not be members of any church – but if they propose to mentor young people, or help the unemployed find work, or strengthen families, or teach nutrition classes, or otherwise connect people with what we know to be God’s abundance, then we’ve said that we’ll reach out to them as potential partners; because faith is found in unexpected places. God’s light shines in unexpected places. And you never know for sure where it is going to guide you.

The wise men followed the light of that star; and, they brought gifts. Gifts which seem more revelatory than practical in nature, but that’s okay because this is a story of revelation; a story that reveals where the Light is to be found and to whom our gifts should be brought. The Light is to be found in the midst of human life, in all of its messiness. The Light is to be found in the One who is Prophet, Priest and King. That’s what the wise men’s gifts are about: gold fit for a King, incense that might be offered to God by a Priest, and myrrh to be used to anoint the martyred body of a Prophet.

The wise men offered their gifts; and so do we. And our gifts, like those of the wise men, are a response to Christ’s presence in our midst; they are offered in gratitude for the Light that is shining among us.

Our building is a gift; a gift offered by God to us through all of the generations that have gone before us; and a gift that we, in turn, can offer to the community; through the work of our community partners.

Our Camp is a gift; one which God has blessed in so many ways; and a gift which we are now called to renew and expand and offer to a much wider circle of God’s children; a circle that will be made wider still through gifts that have still to be given to us; gifts of resources both financial and human that will help us revitalize the Camp; gifts whose origins we know nothing about yet; except that we know that ultimately they will come from God; and we do know that they will come!

The way in which children are surrounded by the love of this community; that’s a gift. We know that children flourish when they’re loved and encouraged and mentored by adults who believe in them. And that happens in this place; and it has for a long time: from some of you who are now adults, through all of our current youth and children, on down to Ellie and Ben and Jude and Luka. So when we offer this gift to others – through Holy Moly, and the Community Children’s Choir, and parenting classes, and Children Worship and Wonder, and giving clothing and back packs at back-to-school time, and who knows what else the Spirit might call us to do as we live fully into Our Future Story; as we offer our gifts and connect people with God’s abundance, we will invite people to the Light that is shining among us, and all around us.

Following the Light; even if we only vaguely know the way that it is leading us. Finding faith in unexpected places along the way. Offering the gifts that God has given us as we move forward. And, indeed, moving forward: letting go of things that are weighing us down and impeding our progress. Picking up new challenges once we’re free of that excess weight. Experimenting as we go. And trusting God to show us the way.

Carefully planning out the route may be a prudent way to travel by car, but you can’t always do that on the journey of faith. When you’re venturing into the unknown, when you’re trusting in things that cannot be seen, when you’re co-creating with God things that have never been, there simply isn’t a detailed map that’s going to do you much good. To be the Church following God into the future is something like Columbus setting sail into the Atlantic with maps that say only, “Here be dragons.” It’s something like the Founders declaring independence from Great Britain, and declaring war on Great Britain. How are you going to win a war against the most powerful military on the planet? They didn’t have a clue; but they did it. It’s something like the launch of Project Mercury. 60 years ago this month NASA started to select astronauts for the race to the moon. They didn’t yet know how they were going to get there, but they still started on the journey; and 10 years later, they arrived.

The wise men trusted the star to guide them. These non-believers who turned out to be profound believers; they followed the Light, and they walked by faith, and they offered their gifts in profound gratitude to the One whom they recognized as the Messiah. Others didn’t recognize him as the Messiah, those who should’ve known better didn’t recognize Jesus, there was little faith in the places where you might’ve expected there to be faith. But those who, unexpectedly, did have the faith followed the Light; wherever it might lead.

Someone once said, “Do not ask God to guide your footsteps if you’re not willing to move your feet.” The good news is that we who are Bedford-First Christian Church – we who are willing to move our feet – we can count on God to show us the way. Even when there seems to be no way. Even when we have to abandon the well-traveled routes, and return home by another road. Amen.