Sunday, December 27, 1992
THE WISE MEN'S JOURNEY
Matthew 2:1-12

Most of us, when we start on a journey, have a specific destination in mind. For example, maybe you are planning a trip to Colorado to ski, or perhaps a family is planning a trip to Disney World in Orlando, Florida. Maybe you're already thinking about a vacation next summer and have a particular place you want to visit.

Almost all of the journeys surrounding the Christmas event fit this pattern. After Mary's vision of the angel telling her that she would be the mother of the Savior, and when she was pregnant, she took a trip to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. She knew where she was going. Later, Mary and Joseph traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town of Joseph's ancestors. They had a definite destination. The shepherds had been told by an angelic vision that they would find the baby, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. They were told exactly where to go.

The Wise Men's Christmas journey was different. They began their trip not knowing where it would lead. Their destination remained a mystery. They had no idea they would end up in Bethlehem. It was a journey of faith.

Being students of astronomy, they had seen a new star and decided to follow it. It was a journey motivated by a search. It was based on a theory that a new star in the heavens signified the birth of a new king somewhere. We do not know how many miles or how many days, weeks, or months the Wise Men traveled.

These ancient travelers go by different names: Kings, Wise Men, Magi. We do not know how many Wise Men there were. We assume there were three because of the three gifts given — gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Incidentally, we usually associate the Wise Men with the manger scene, whereas the Gospel of Matthew, which tells the story, says, "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage."

We do not know where the journey of the Wise Men began. Though there is much that we do not know, there are some things we do know about this journey and much that we can celebrate. The story of the Wise Men's journey was remembered and written down because of what it symbolizes and teaches, and that's what we want to rediscover. What does the story tell us about the birth of Jesus and his later ministry, and what does the Wise Men's journey tell us about our own life's journey and where we will find Jesus?

First, what does this story tell us about the meaning of Jesus' birth?
Throughout the history of the Christian faith and on our Christian calendars, the visit of the Wise Men has always been associated with Epiphany, which is celebrated on January 6, twelve days after Christmas.

While Christmas celebrates the birth of the Savior, God's entering into the world as a human being, the visit of the Wise Men, Epiphany, carries the event one big step further. It reminds us that even though Christ was born in Bethlehem of Jewish parents, and as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, he came as Savior for the whole world, for all people and all nations.

Christmas by itself has a local setting — a small town, a stable, peasant parents, a baby born to fulfill a long line of Hebrew prophecy and to be the glory of his people Israel. Only a few nearby shepherds in the hills near Bethlehem are told of his birth.

But now comes Epiphany, symbolized by a new star in the heavens and the visit of the Wise Men from another country. These things together take the birth of Jesus out of a purely local setting. The Wise Men symbolize all people and nations everywhere. They are not of Hebrew heritage. They do not know the God of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and the prophets, but that does not exclude them from God's revelation or God's love. The light of the star which the Wise Men followed shines over the whole world, not just Palestine. It proclaims that Jesus is the light of the world.

The journey of the Wise Men reminds us that God's love as revealed in Jesus is for all people everywhere and is not the private property of any one group, religion, race, or nation. God's love is shockingly indiscriminate.

Secondly, what does the Wise Men's journey tell us about our own journeys in life? In this sermon series, we've been using a journey as a metaphor. Each one of our individual lives can be thought of as a journey.
Some of our life's journeys are carefully planned with a specific destination in mind. Other life journeys are more like that of the Wise Men. We follow a star, a dream, a vision, but are not sure where it will lead us, yet we believe it will lead us to where God wants us to go. It becomes a journey of faith. For example, from the time I was in high school, my dream was to become a minister; however, I had no idea where following that dream would one day lead me. I never had a particular destination in mind. Even in my wildest dreams, I never imagined that one day I would be a minister of a church in Lincoln, Nebraska, and spend most of my active working life here.

In fulfilling my vision, I did have a certain seminary in mind, but it was not the seminary I ended up attending. The star led me to a different place, a school I never dreamed of attending.

Aren't many of your life journeys like that? When you pursue a dream and follow a star, you can end up in some surprising places if you remain open to new possibilities and trust in God. Some of life's most exciting journeys and destinations come about that way.

That's what I especially admire about the Wise Men. They were open to new possibilities. They did not think they knew all there was to know. For them, there was always more truth to be sought. Searching and learning was a lifelong process.

They studied the stars and the heavens, which is to say they pursued truth in every direction they could. They must have sensed what the Psalmist wrote: "When I look at the heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars which thou hast established, what are human beings that thou art mindful of them?"

They looked beyond this world, beyond normal everyday affairs, and could not help but sense the majesty of God. Their searching and studying the stars symbolized all this. Wisdom is in knowing that there is always more truth yet to be discovered. We never know all there is to know about anything.

Wisdom is knowing that we never know all there is to know about God. We are on a continual pilgrimage, a continuing journey in our religious knowledge, growth, and experience.

Third, there is one question that the Wise Men kept asking as they followed the star: “Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?” The star had led them as far as Jerusalem. Here they began to ask everyone they met. Herod the King heard about their inquiries and summoned the Jewish scholars from the temple and asked them that question. They told Herod the prophecies about Bethlehem. Then Herod secretly called the Wise Men to his palace and told them what he had discovered. 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.”
Where can one find Jesus? That was the Wise Men’s question. It’s also a good question for us. Where do you find Jesus in today’s world?

Walter Wangerin tells this story about his search for Jesus as a young boy. “I wanted to see Jesus,” he said, “his robe, his strong hands, the sandals on his feet. For me, it seemed that everyone else in my church must be seeing him on a regular basis. At least that’s the way they talked.”

“Sunday after Sunday, I looked for Jesus. I ransacked the rooms of a very large church. I acquainted myself with kitchens and closets and boiler rooms — checking for half-eaten sandwiches, a vagrant sandal, signs of the skulking Lord.”

“One Sunday,” said Wangerin, “I decided Jesus must be inside the altar. After the service, when everyone was gone, I popped round to the back of the altar and peered inside its hollow cavity and saw, not Jesus. I saw a broken chair, a very old hymnal, and dust, dust as thick as the centuries of human toil and misery.”

“For my restless soul, there was no peace. Either the Lord had decided to avoid me particularly, or else I was stupid, the only one who did not know in which room the dear Lord Jesus abided. There must be one holier than all the other rooms, one room so sacred and terrible that no one mentioned it, except in whispers and elders’ meetings. Not the preacher’s office. Dreadful as that room was, I’d already scouted it. Not the sacristy, nor the loft for the organ pipes, nor the choir room (which smelled of human sweat). There must be a holiest of holies.”

“All at once, I knew which room. My heart leaped into my throat with joy and fear at once. It was a room whose door I passed ever with a tingling hush, whose mysterious interior I had never seen. Horrified by my own bravery, but desperate to see my Jesus, I determined to venture the door of that room and to enter.”

“And so it came to pass, during a particular worship service, during a very long sermon, I left my mother in the pew and crept downstairs all by myself to the Forbidden Room, the only room where Jesus could be hiding: The Women’s Restroom.” “I lifted my hand and knocked. ‘Jesus? Are you in there?’ No answer. None. So I pulled my little courage together, sucked in a breath, and pushed on the door, and it actually opened. ‘Hello? Hello? Jesus?’”

“With deep funereal gloom, I returned to my mother. Jesus does not abide in women’s restrooms. Mirrors are there, surrounded by lights and suffused by incense. But not Jesus. Jesus was nowhere in the church for me. With grim, remorseful eyes, I watched the service proceed.”

“Then came Holy Communion. People began to rise and move forward. My mother got up. In marvelous docility, she walked forward down the aisle, away from me. My mother is a strong woman. She could haul me from the ground in one hand. This humility, then, was strange, and I stood up on the pew to watch her. She kneeled down. She bowed her head. She let the preacher feed her. This was my mother, who knew how to make me eat.”

“Then she stood, and almost as if on a cushion of air, my mother floated back to me. Oh, this was a different woman. My mighty mother seemed infinitely soft. And when she sat down beside me and lowered her head to pray, I actually smelled the difference too. She had returned in a cloud of sweetness. I tasted this exquisite scent deep in my throat and, like a puppy, found myself sniffing closer and closer to my mother’s face — for the odor was arising from her nostrils, from her breathing, from within her.”

“Suddenly, she looked up to see my face just inches from hers. ‘What’s the matter?’ she whispered, and a whole bouquet of the odor overwhelmed me. ‘Mama!’ I breathed in wonder. ‘What’s that? That smell. What do I smell?’ ‘What I drank,’ she said. ‘But what is it? What’s inside you?’ I asked.”

She began to flip for a hymn in the hymnal. ‘Oh, Wally,’ she said casually, ‘that’s Jesus. It’s Jesus inside of me.’”

“Jesus! My mother then joined the congregation in singing a hymn. But I kept standing on the pew beside her, grinning and grinning at her profile. Jesus! I put out my hand and rested it on my mother’s shoulder. She glanced up, saw that my face was exploding with grins, gave me a pat and a smile, and then went back to singing.”

“She told me where Jesus was. Not far away from me at all. Closer to me than I ever thought possible. In my mama! He never had been hiding. I’d been looking wrong. My mighty mother was his holy temple all along.”

“So I shocked her by throwing my arms around her neck and hugging her with the gladness of any disciple who has seen the Lord alive again. So she hauled my little self down to the pew beside her and commanded silliness to cease, but I didn’t mind. A boy can grin as silently as the sky.”

“Jesus gave two final commands to his disciples: ‘Do this in remembrance of me.’ My mother did it; she ate and drank; and her faith received her Savior truly, and I met him in her. And the second command was this: ‘Love one another.’ My mama did that too. And so there were two disciples side by side in the same pew. And one of them was grinning.” Amen.