

**- Saint John's Pulpit (Jan. 1, Epiphany Sunday) –
"Hit the Road, not the Book!" Matthew 2:1-12**

² In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the east came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ '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.' "

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Why did they not go out?

Happy New Year! Among many characters to make up Jesus' nativity story, there is one group that requires our careful attention. Who were they? Matthew 2:3-4 tells us about them:

³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. Matthew 2:3-4 NRSV

All the chief priests and scribes of the people summoned by Herod! How much do we know about them? Were they government-patronized scholars? Presumably, King Herod must have needed a group of scholars undergirding his authority to reign. Personally, I believe that these scholars were the most miserable ones in the Bible. A big irony is this. Those who were good at the Bible never met the baby Jesus! Their professional knowledge and information never helped them meet the Lord!

In Matthew 2, we see a kind of academic battle between two groups of scholars. One is the magi from the East who were professional astrologists, and the other is those who were good at the Law mentioned above. For the magi, what initiated their long journey was the bright star. What about the law (Bible) scholars? They were professionals in Law and the Bible. But the story today leans toward the magi as a final winner. How? They could meet the baby Jesus.

Some are good at the Bible, theology, and prayer, but they do not meet the Lord personally. Others from whom we see no hope and possibility meet Jesus vividly. So, the story today might be our Faith 101. Faith is not a matter of how much we know. Rather, it is a matter of how much we practice and take an action to follow the Lord. A couple of good examples are here.

The only one who carried the cross for Jesus was Simon of Cyrene, not one of Jesus' disciples. The one highly praised by Jesus for good faith was the unnamed Roman centurion, not one of Jesus' disciples and priests or scribes of the people.

⁸ For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." ⁹ When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and, turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." Luke 7:8-9 NRSV

To see the Lord, we need to hit the road like the magi! Hitting the book (pedantic or dogmatic approach to the truth) limits our mobility which can be seen from the chief priests and scribes of the people.

Who moves us?

As we open this new year, here is one thing requiring our attention. It is the one who directs us. In the story today, from the magi and all law professionals, we see who directed each of the groups. It was the bright star that moved the magi. They took their journey as the star directed. But all the chief priests and scribes of the people were following Herod's direction. When King Herod asked them to double-check the birthplace of the Messiah in the Bible, they gave Herod a biblical ground for his inquiry.

4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 '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.' " Matthew 2:4-6 NRSV

What if no request from Herod? Of course, no opening the book (Bible)! The point is this. Do we see any sign from them to change their lives after this double-checking? Did they feel strongly that it is time to welcome the Messiah for whom they'd waited long? Did they open the window to see the star? Or did they ask for more details of this from the magi? Yes, they had no willingness to find the baby Jesus! Even after this event, no clue for them to try to meet the Lord in the Bible. They just stayed inside Herod's palace. What they knew never changed their life.

What about the magi? They could make it to adore the baby Jesus in person! A great privilege was given to them as the first gift-giver for Jesus! Lots of stories, hymns, and dramas have been created about the magi. Please look at your Christmas cards this year! You can see the magi easily! Given all these things, we come to understand what Apostle Paul taught about 'letter' and 'Spirit' in 2 Corinthians 3.

6 He has qualified us as ministers of a new covenant, not based on what is written but on the Spirit, because what is written kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2 Corinthians 3:6 CEB

De spiritu et littera! Yes, what makes us enliven is the Holy Spirit, not what we read from books. This is the reason why we should not repeat the mistake made by all law professionals in the story today.

New Year's Resolution

Our calendar says that today is Jan. 1, 2023. New Year's Day! At the same time, in a church calendar, it is Epiphany Sunday which is a Christian feast day that celebrates the revelation of God's incarnate as Jesus Christ. If so, our new year 2023 begins with the Light of Christ! In the fourth year of the pandemic, in what ways should we make this year more meaningful?

What about following the star like the magi in the story? To worship, adore, and meet the baby Jesus, they took a journey. Why don't we make an effort to meet the Lord with more passion and prayer? Making a room to pray, setting up a time to read the Bible, and joining small groups are good examples to follow the star. Please encourage one another to do this. The more, the merrier! Please don't stay inside the palace like the law professionals. What we really need is to hit the road to see the child!

As the magi presented their gifts to the baby Jesus, let's roll up our sleeves to serve our neighbors with our prayers and support. In that sense, the magi already did both worship and mission wonderfully. If they could do this, we also can do it!

For all United Methodists, this year 2023 would be a very important year in terms of pandemic recovery. But it appears that all about the postponed General Conference makes all Methodists hit the Book (of Discipline) without hitting the road to see the baby Jesus. When things look more complicated, we should choose the simplest truth. It is to see the baby Jesus! At the same time, we should pay attention to the Holy Spirit and try to understand what God wants to see from us. Just as the magi were directed by God in their dream to be saved, I am confident that we would be directed and guided by the Lord to move forward and save our denomination. May God bless your New Year's journey!

12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Matthew 2:12 NRSV