

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

For me, preparing to preach this text was related to the last couple of sermons that I've preached in recent weeks.

A few weeks ago, back in the fall I had a new experience: I got to preach on a text that I had preached about before. And that was the first time that it happened to me. I've done this enough times now over enough years and the lectionary has cycled through enough times that I got a text twice.

I've had that experience teaching before, because there are plenty of things that I've taught over and over and over again. I have taught John 15 to many Quito Quest teams over nine years, there are some scriptures that I teach every year in UMYF or at Beach Retreat or every couple of years in Confirmation. But that was the first time that it happened for a sermon to the congregation. And I imagine that pretty soon I'll have to stop keeping track of that because it will be more and more common that whole preach on text that I have preached before, but today is the second time that this is happened. I preached on Epiphany Sunday three years ago when this scripture came up in the lectionary, and I get to do it again today. And Pastor Joe talked about this phenomenon during Christmas Eve. He's definitely on the other end of the spectrum from me, because he talked about how he's preached the Christmas Eve texts thirty times over thirty years, but how you can always approach the text with wonder, because there's always something fresh from God's Word. So, hearing him say that last week, I made sure to be intentional about my sense of wonder as I looked at this story this week.

And this sermon is also related to me to a couple of weeks ago when I preached about Joseph. Those of you who were here at 8:30 got to hear that one, and I talked about how we know very little about Joseph because he pretty much disappears from scripture after Jesus is a child. We assume he died because he doesn't appear even when Mary does during Jesus' adult life and ministry. We even *assume* that he was a carpenter, although he might well have been a stone worker and not a woodworker.

I point that out because today we were talking about the magi or the wise men and there are a lot of things that we *assume* about them as well. But they are things that we don't *know*. Everything we know 100% for sure about these guys is in the text that we just read. This is their only appearance in scripture and there are a lot of things that we assume about them from this text.

In some Christian traditions they are given names, but we don't have those here in the Bible. We even assume the number of them. There were three wise men, right? If you look at the manger scene that we have here in the sanctuary, there's three wise men. And that's how they've been depicted in art and stories and tradition throughout the centuries. But we only assume that there were three of them because there are three gifts: gold and frankincense and myrrh. And so we assume that:

- each one of the wise men brought a different gift
- that each one of the wise men brought only one gift and
- that each gift was only brought by one wise man

and so those three assumptions together give us the number 3. But if any of those assumptions are off, then there might have only been two wise men or there might have been many. We don't know for sure.

And we make assumptions about the way that they follow the star and how that star functioned. Sometimes the science about the star is what preachers will focus their message on for this Sunday. The Reverend Taylor Burton-Edwards wrote a really great resource about the star and how we know that's not how stars behave, but that even 2000 years ago the Zoroastrians knew that that's not how stars behaved either. So I'm not getting into all that this morning, but if that's what peaks your interest, I'll point you toward that article. But that's another one of the assumptions that we make about them.

So with all these assumptions, I want to talk about one of the things that we know for sure about the wise men, and the things that they can teach us.

This morning as we are celebrating epiphany Sunday and next Sunday as we celebrate Baptism of the Lord Sunday and the following Sunday as we move into the beginning of the season of epiphany proper, we're going to be doing a three-week series on growing together: in growing in worship, growing in fellowship, and growing in discipleship. But we start with worship today because these guys show us how they lived a *life* of worship.

For us as United Methodist we are very familiar with the concept of worship. The front section of our hymnal is worship services, and we even have a Book of Worship that tells us how to lay out services in general and ones for certain special days. Most of us in this room have habits that we associate with worship services. And we're all doing something different than we're used to this morning by being here at a different time and maybe in a different place and definitely in a different order. But worship happens outside this time a space that we've set aside. Whether we recognize it or not, we say to ourselves, each other,

and God that we're going to live a life of worship when we become members of the church, and every time someone else does.

When somebody joins the United Methodist Church, or joins a local church, or becomes a member through baptism or confirmation, we ask them if they **vow to-** and we ask the congregation if they **renew their vows to-** faithfully participate in the ministries of the church by our prayers our presence our, gifts our service and our witness. Our tendency is to think of these things as individual responsibilities. Individual spiritual disciplines. A list of individual things that we have to accomplish or check off to fulfill our duties as a members. But all of them are woven together if we think of them as acts of the worship of God in which we continually participate.

The wise men were men of prayer. How do I know that? There's not a record in the scripture of them saying "Dear God... yadda, yadda, yadda... Amen." That's not there. But prayer is a conversation: more than talking at God but also listening to him. A couple of weeks ago Joseph heard God. He hears the angel of the Lord in his dream. But he listened. He listened to what God wanted him to do and he did it. He acted on it. Our prayers aren't completed just because we have talked at God. Our prayers are completed when we allow God to complete his work in and/or through us. The wise men got a message from God too. But that state of prayer, that state of worship through prayer wasn't done just because God got done talking either. It was completed through their response, to get up and go. "We saw the star at its rising." That's verse 2. We've still got ten more verses to go. We've got this story of faithfulness that started with a message but is brought to completion by action.

So they go. They spend who knows how many days or weeks or months on the road to worship him through their presence. And that presence doesn't start just when they arrive. They are present with each other in fellowship for all that time as they travel. Now I won't get ahead of myself because fellowship is next week. But our reading from Isaiah this morning talked about being gathered together to proclaim the praise of the Lord. Jesus says later on in Matthew that "...where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." So that's your preview for next week.

But then they do arrive. And they're overwhelmed with joy –not just justwhelmed- but they're overwhelmed with joy and they see the child with his mother and they kneel.

My friend Mason is a Baptist pastor and he had a Catholic friend visiting him. I promise I'm not setting up a joke. And so Mason was giving him a tour of the church that he was serving and it had a long, narrow sanctuary with a long narrow chancel that led up to the altar all the way at the back door. And like in many Baptist churches the altar is not the communion table. They'll bring out a separate table for the communion elements on weeks they are celebrating the Lord's Supper. And so the congregation wouldn't ever really approach the altar all the way at the back of that sanctuary and so there weren't kneelers like we have here at our chancel rail. We don't always necessarily take advantage of them, but when you receive communion in this room at least, you have the option to come to the chancel rail and kneel in prayer, as an act of worship.

So Mason's good catholic friend notices that there's no kneeler by the altar. And he looks behind the pews and he sees they don't have kneelers there either and so he asked "Where are your kneelers." And Mason said "well, we're Baptist,

we don't really use those," and his friend responded "Well then when do you kneel?"

He was told, not in so many words, but told nonetheless that to this man, kneeling was essential for worship. And lifelong Baptist that he was, Mason in telling this story would say, "You know, I couldn't really disagree with him."

What we think is essential for worship; what we think is not essential for worship; and all they ways we are probably wrong- that's another sermon. But to Mason's friend and to the wise men kneeling was essential. And it was the way they showed they were serious. That they were fully present. That they weren't just excited spectators and fanboys who were there to get their t-shirts and their autographed pictures and go home. They weren't there for an event. They knelt to show they were focused on worshipping the King.

And then they bust out the gifts. This one is easy because while we speak metaphorically about gifts all the time in church, in the abilities we have and all the ways we can give things to God, they really brought gifts. Something tangible and physical like the canned food downstairs or money that will go in this basket in a little while. But also something valuable.

I read this week that the world's naturally occurring supply of frankincense is in real danger of being permanently destroyed. This is something that is still rare and valuable. This wasn't their grudgingly written-out-of-duty check, this was the first and the best of what they had to offer and that's what makes it worship as they give it to God.

So after this is all over, they've searched, they've stopped for directions- guys stopped for directions, that I think is an act of worship- they found him,

they're overjoyed, they give him their gifts, now they're ready to roll. But they have this dream.

I said when I talked about Joseph and his dream the other week that I don't typically remember my dreams. But I've hosted many a short-term team and taken them to the Ecuadorian jungle over the last nine years. And one of the things you drink in the jungle is this tea made from a grass in the jungle and it's called Guayusa. It's pretty good, it's naturally caffeinated, and one of the side-effects of this drink is that it makes you remember your dreams. I cannot explain the science of this. But I can tell you it's real. It makes you remember your dreams.

Now one of the other things about jungle teams is that a lot of times as a precaution they will show up on malaria medicine. I've never taken malaria medicine, we've never had a case of a team member getting malaria because we don't typically take them that far into the jungle where it's a concern, but sometimes a group is super careful and they take their malaria medicine. And one of the side effects of malaria medicine is that it makes you have really crazy dreams.

So here's a team in the jungle and they're on malaria medicine and they're drinking Guayusa and they have these crazy dreams that they remember really vividly. So dreamless Danny over here my experience with dreams is that when you remember you had them they're crazy and drug-induced. So I see Joseph and I see the wise men having trippy dreams and then acting on them and where that might happen to me and I'd go "okay, that must have been the malaria medicine... that must have been the Guayusa..." especially if I'm having the same dream as two other dudes... they say instead "that was God."

What an act of service. What an act of faith and obedience to respond to God's Word that way. And the wise men act in service by being secret keepers. I'm not saying that God the Father couldn't have protected God the Son if they'd gone back and told Herod where he was. But in the words of Caedmon's Call, "He doesn't need us, but he lets us put our hands in." They got to "put their hands in" in service by taking the long way home, and by keeping the secret of the Son of God.

Now eventually they told *somebody*, because it made it into the book. And that is a huge witness on their part, even to us. Two thousand years later we get to experience their witness by reading this story. But now I'm gonna "Tarantino" this story and go back a little bit.

Because when they showed up, when they asked for directions, they told Herod and everybody else what they were doing. Now Herod was not a nice guy. His family were not nice people. His advisors were not nice people. They were beheading people. They were powerful. But they were not nice. And the wise men show up and they tell them all what they're there to do. "Hey, we're here to worship the king, but not you." That's a bold witness.

And witness isn't always words. They showed their faithfulness even when Herod started being sketchy and called them in secret and said "yeah, sure, you guys go on ahead and scout it out for me." They did. They went. And everyone around them knew that they were going to worship.

Worship isn't just the brief moment in this story when they kneel. Worship isn't just the hour of our week we're here. It's woven in to this story, it is exuded by all these guys do, and it's something about which we're to be intentional. So let us. Amen.



May you pray prayers of listening and let your actions be your amen.

May you be gathered and truly present all through your week.

May you give your best, serve your best, and witness always.

May you worship with your life.

Amen.