

Encountering Jesus

[Read Matthew 2:1-12 NIV]

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, ***they returned to their country by another route.***

Journey

How many of us like to travel? Travel can be fun, but it can also be challenging. Many of us have camped in trailers at the beach or the mountains. Many of us have stayed in nice hotel rooms around the country. When was the last time you camped out in a tent and slept on the ground?

Appalachian Trail

I have a friend who took hiking and camping very seriously. He loved doing both and decided he would do the entire Appalachian Trail or (AT) as he called it over the course of several months. The Appalachian Trail covers over 1000 miles of rugged terrain from Georgia to Maine. It is quite a journey on foot especially alone.

My friend put in a lot of research to figure out the best way to accomplish this goal. Part of the planning was deciding when to send himself meals along the way. He took over his parents' basement and laid out food and supplies to be mailed by them on certain days to particular post offices, so he could stop along the journey and resupply.

He also exercised to prepare for the journey. He was very focused and committed to completing the journey in 3 months before it got too cold in Maine.

I remember driving him with his fully loaded back pack to the start of the AT in Georgia. He did not have a cellphone or a GPS. He relied on a paper map and a compass. He had a small one-man tent and a sleeping bag and not much else.

He completed the journey just as he had planned but he encountered many things along the way that were not planned. He told me that this trip definitely changed him.

Spiritual Health

Friends, I have not come here today to ask you about camping in the wilderness. Instead, I have come here today to talk about your spiritual journey.

Do you feel alone or lost in the wilderness of everyday life? What are you doing to grow stronger spiritually? Do you continue to seek Jesus daily? What does the Bible say about the Magi and their journey to find Jesus?

Narrative Intro

Our scripture lesson today is about the Magi and their journey to find Jesus but also what happened after they found Jesus. They think they are on a quest to find the new King of the Jews. In reality they are on a journey to meet God in the flesh.

Their journey begins when they see a special star in the sky. The Magi were astrologers in the royal courts of Persia. They were not kings, but they were advisers to kings. Their job was to study the stars and interpret the signs. Their journey began when they spotted a star of great beauty—a new star indicating that a new king was born in the land of Judea.

The magi follow the star for 900 miles. It is a journey that takes several months to find the new king. They travel to Jerusalem thinking that the king will be born in a royal palace in the holy city.

Jerusalem

When the Magi arrive in Jerusalem, they ask the current king, Herod, and his attendants where they can find the one born "King of the Jews." The king and his attendants were greatly disturbed. The chief priests and teachers of the law are summoned by Herod who asked them, "Where will the Messiah be born?"

Prophets Interpret Holy Scripture

The chief priests and teachers of the law turned to the Holy Scriptures for direction and said, "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel'" (Mt 2:5-6).

Secret Meeting

After hearing this, Herod called the Magi and met with them secretly. He met with them secretly because he did not want anyone to know that the long-awaited Messiah had been born. Herod had other plans for Jesus. He cynically asked the Magi to search for the child and report back to him, so he could worship the King.

Star

The Magi departed Jerusalem and continued to follow the star. The star stopped in Bethlehem over a house where the child was.

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. They were at the end of their long journey. They found the treasure that they were looking for. They found Jesus with his mother Mary.

Finding Jesus

When the Magi found Jesus, they honored the Son of God by bowing down and worshipping him. They opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh.

Gold signified that Jesus was indeed a king. **Incense** signified that Jesus was God and was worthy of worship. **Myrrh** signified that Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice to save us from our sins.

When the Magi finished greeting the new king, they were warned in a dream to avoid Herod and they took a different route to return home.

Transformation

When these Gentile wise men started on their journey, they were looking for a king in a palace in the royal city of Jerusalem. What they encountered was a mother and child in a modest house in Bethlehem. What they found was life changing.

So, what about you? Are you ready for spiritual transformation? How many of us gathered here today like things in our lives the way they are now? How many would prefer to see changes in their lives?

Change can be good, but it can also be difficult. Many of us would like to change things about our lives but change requires time and energy. Change requires sacrifice.

Duke Health Initiative

About 4 years ago I received a letter asking me if I was willing to volunteer to be part of a study about clergy and health. I was asked if I would be willing to do several things on a quarterly basis like having my blood drawn, having my blood pressure checked, having my weight checked, having my BMI checked, wearing a step counter, and submitting to psychological questions. I said yes, and I have been in the study from its beginning.

The purpose of the study was to help clergy take charge of their health. It turns out that most clergy do not take good care of themselves. The Duke Clergy Health Initiative wanted to educate us and ***change our ways of living.***

Over the past four years I have been to lectures and seminars about how I should eat right, exercise, and take time off to relax. Some of the lectures focused on eating grilled meat, fruits and vegetables instead of eating bread, fast food, fried food, potato chips, French fries, and desserts. They also focused on eating smaller portions. One person told us that we should get rid of our dinner

plates and use smaller plates. No getting second servings either.

Doing all of these things requires change.

If I wanted to have a better life I was going to have to change.
If I wanted to have a better future I was going to have to change. If I
was going to serve God I was going to have to change. Are we willing
to change?"

Magi Changed

The Magi focused on their goal of finding Jesus by doing something about their lives. They did not just read about Jesus. They made an effort to find him. They undertook a long and arduous journey and sacrificed many things to find Jesus. They had faith and listened for God and God's word in the middle of the wilderness.

When they found Jesus, they were transformed. They did not go back to Herod. They did not go back the way they came. They returned home by a different way. When they found God as a child their lives were forever changed. Are you ready to change?

Baptism

We are all on a spiritual journey looking for God to change us. We begin our journey at the baptismal font. When we are baptized, we enter the church and are forever changed. We are changed knowing that Jesus died for our sins. We are children of God instead of children of the world. We have a new family. We renounce evil.

We commit to vows. God gives us signs at the beginning of our journey. **Look for God** in the waters of baptism and know that you are forever changed.

Prayer

We continue our journey with God at the altar rail. The altar rail is where we speak to God through prayer. Prayer time is not only a time to speak but also to listen. We do not change God through prayer rather we hope to be changed by God through prayer. **Look for God** in your prayers and know that you are forever changed.

Holy Communion

Finally, we are sustained on the journey with God at the Lord's Table. The Lord's Table is where God feeds our bodies, minds, and souls with the body and blood of Christ who died for our sins. God changes us through the gift of eternal life at the Lord's Table. **Look for God** in the bread and wine and know that you are forever changed.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Selected Bibliography

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Travelling Companions

The Magi, unlike my friend, travel with numerous other family members, friends, and traders. They know they cannot reach their destination on their own. They follow familiar trade routes. They stop many times on the way to rest. Sometimes they run into other traders and buy supplies that they need.

Bariatric Surgery

One of my longtime friends was lamenting to me about having to make a lifestyle change. He, like many of us, was focused for years on eating anything he wanted and as much as he wanted, working long hours, taking care of family but not self, and attending church when possible. He forgot about self-care, eating right, and exercising.

Each year his doctor told him that he needed to change his diet and exercise more. Each year went by without making lifestyle changes except for adding a few pounds.

Now my friend is admittedly overweight and facing some real health challenges. His doctors suggested that he attend a lecture about bariatric surgery.

This surgery is not for everyone. It comes with risks and side effects. One thing that stood out was the fact that you have to commit to permanent lifestyle changes. You cannot eat the things you used to eat like bread, cake, ice cream, potato chips, French

fries, fried foods, etc. You cannot have anything with tannins such as sweet tea, soft drinks, and wine. You eat 6 times a day but with smaller portions. It is a permanent life style change. He knows that he needs to do this but it is hard to change.

Your First Encounter with Jesus

Remember for a moment your first encounter with Jesus. Your first encounter with Jesus was probably very exciting. It was probably very emotional. But most importantly it was life changing. Jesus has always been right here with us but sometimes it takes a journey of our own making to see Jesus.

Magi

The Magi made a concerted effort to find Jesus. They searched scripture, followed a star, listened to Biblical Interpretation, and took directions from a dream. All of these things led to a personal encounter with Jesus. The Magi were filled with joy when they found Jesus and responded by returning home changed. How do we respond to this Good News?

Our Response

Our response is to continue to follow God's signs, the scriptures, and visions given by God to find Jesus in our lives. We do not need a treasure map with an "X" or a GPS to find God. The Magi found God by hearing the words of the prophets, reading scripture, and following

the signs. They were obedient to God's word and embarked on a long journey to find Jesus. When they reached their goal, they were overwhelmed with joy.