



All I Really Need to Know I Learned From the Magi

Matthew 2:1-12

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Thank you for enduring a somewhat cheeky sermon title this week. It is, as I'm sure many of you recognize, a nod to Robert Fulghum's classic *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. The piece, originally published in 1988, has sold over eight million copies to date, and includes wisdom like: "Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody. Remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned — the biggest word of all — LOOK." And then he writes, "Everything you need to know is in there somewhere."¹

Twenty-five years later, he wrote a follow-up essay. Looking back, he said, he stands by everything he said the first time around. But, he says, "[What I wrote] is not simple. It is elemental. What we learn in kindergarten comes up again and again in our lives as long as we live. In far more complex, polysyllabic forms, to be sure. Life will examine us continually to see if we have understood and practiced what we were taught in the beginning. Of course it wasn't literally all you really needed to know. Certainly not. But if you didn't get the basic stuff to begin with, you and society will pay a heavy price. If you did learn and practice it, it becomes the foundation of everything else that follows."²

I wonder if the story of the wise men, the magi, can work the same way for us today

The fact of the matter is, we have to think about what we can learn from the wise men, because we learn precious little about them.

We assume there are three of them. The nativity scene from our Christmas Eve Family Service certainly had three. Poets as illustrious as William Butler Yeats and William Carlos Williams have written about them, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow went so far as to name them: Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthasar. James Taylor has written a song about them and the three travel through the covers of greeting cards all season long. Of course, that's all our imagination. Matthew never tells us how many there are. He tells us they carry three gifts — gold, frankincense, and myrrh — but all he has to say about the hands that carry them are that they are "wise men from the east." Presumably, there could have been two, with someone carrying a double load, or there could have been four, with someone carrying other provisions.

We assume they are kings, or at least we sing of that assumption. It's much more likely they were astrologers or astronomers. The gospel only says they were men who studied the stars.

We also assume they show up about five minutes after Jesus is born, since it certainly happens that way in every Christmas pageant I've ever seen. But Matthew simply says, "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born," and

¹ *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, 25th Anniversary Edition. Robert Fulghum, 2003, page 2.

² Fulghum, page 6.

some scholars suggest Jesus may well have been a toddler, somewhere around two years old, by the time the wise men arrive.

So much has been made of this story about which we actually know so little.

If I understand the text, if I understand what Matthew's doing here, he's much less interested in the facts, and much more interested in our faith. This story, which comes to us at the start of every new calendar year, when fresh starts seem within our grasp, has much to offer us in terms of how we live our lives. The wise men, they offered gifts to the newborn king; perhaps, if we let them, the wise men can offer us the gift of remembering what discipleship looks like.

Borrowing from Robert Fulghum again, "Of course it isn't literally all we really need to know. But it is the foundation of everything that follows."

First, **pay attention**. The wise men — it's their job to watch the stars. To observe what is happening in the heavens. And this star, their star, the star about which we sing — twice it is referred to as "the star they had seen at its rising." Not "the star they finally noticed once they stopped being distracted" or "the star that finally crashed down out the sky and landed in front of their feet." It's "the star they had seen at its rising."

The star in this story is a bright, shining manifestation of God's presence and guidance. The star would have been there, whether the wise men noticed it or not. Those who study the stars these days, they say if you study the sky, and the stars in the sky, each night, the patterns become entirely predictable. That's why we can set our courses by the stars. The stars are reliable and reasonable. So if something changes, it is immediately apparent.

Think of all the attention our star Betelgeuse has gotten in the past few weeks. Betelgeuse is part of the constellation of Orion's Belt. Usually one of the brightest in the entire

sky, it has dimmed noticeably lately. Perhaps, some say, it is headed toward explosion and demise. Everything I have heard about this, led me to believe all of this would happen fairly imminently. But, it turns out, that if this happens, it would happen perhaps sometimes in the next 100,000 years. Not in any of our lifetimes.³

Imagine if we paid attention to one another like that. Imagine if we noticed when any one of us first started to dim, even in the slightest. Imagine if we noticed when our planet, our ecosystem, our home, first started to dim, even the smallest bit. When stars change, those who are paying attention them notice right away. We're talking about a star that might have 100,000 years of life left in it, and astronomers are already thinking the impact and the result. Is it crazy to wonder what might happen if we paid such careful attention to the degree of light that dwells in everyone and everything around us?

Second, **follow the light**. This one sounds obvious. Everyone knows that the wise men followed the light. So just a brief word here: it takes courage to follow when you don't know where you are going. And I cannot count the number of times someone has said to me, "I don't know what to do." It's almost — not quite, but almost — as high as the number of times I've thought to myself, "I don't know what to do."

Uncertainty can make it hard to follow the light, even when it shines brightly. The very best wisdom I've heard in such moments is this: Just take the next step. Just do the next right thing. You don't have to chart the entire course, or know how to overcome every potential obstacle, or defeat every potential foe, or be able, at the beginning, to climb every mountain. Just take the next step. Just do the next right thing.

We don't know when the wise men left or how long it took them to get there. What the story tells us, the only part of their journey that tradition records, is that they got there. Just take the next step. Just do the next right thing.

³ <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/01/opinions/betelgeuse-star-dimming-supernova-opinion-lincoln/index.html>

Eventually, in its own time, the light will get you exactly where you need to be.

Third, **praise God**. This point could also be named, **remember your purpose**, because they are one and the same. Praising God is our purpose in life. Our purpose in life is praising God. The wise men are given the first words in Matthew's gospel, and they use them to ask, "Where is the child, the one who has been born king? We have come to pay him homage, to praise and worship him." What if that were the first question on our lips, or at least in our hearts, each day? "Where will I find Jesus? Where will I see him? I was given breath and life this morning so that I might worship him."

"Homage," though, as the Greek uses it, it means to praise and worship, to give respect, but it is nuanced this way: it is praise and worship and respect that is demonstrated by external action. In other words, praise and worship as the wise men teach it to us is not just about how we feel toward Jesus in our hearts, but about how that feeling translates into how we treat the friends and neighbors on our street, the strangers and aliens in our land, the children and widows and orphans in our midst.

Praising God, paying homage to the child born in the manger, is about giving him your heart, absolutely, yes — but make no mistake: once you have given your heart to God, once your heart beats in the very hand of God, it is first and foremost for God and God's work in this world

Fourth, **give generously**. When the wise men set out on their travels, even before they knew where they were going, or what it would be like, or even who, exactly, they would find, they knew what to bring with them. They filled their arms with gifts, gold, and frankincense, and myrrh, useless gifts for a baby, but perfect gifts for a king.

It's important to the larger gospel story that they bring proper offerings for a king, but I have to admit, part of me loves our more modern day sensibilities. Preacher Barbara

Brown Taylor wonders when, exactly, they realized they had brought the wrong things, that they should have brought milk, or a blanket, or a toy. But my favorite telling of this moment comes from a five year old in a church pageant, proudly dressed bathrobe and paper crown, who kneels at the manger and announces, "We are the three wise men, and we bring gifts of gold, common sense, and fur."

The larger point, I think, is this: the wise men would never have shown up empty-handed. There was so much they didn't know, but they knew this much: when worshipping a king, you bring an offering. An offering of whatever it is you have to offer.

It is a challenge to me and to us all: if we understand anything at all of who Jesus is, regardless of the circumstances surrounding him or surrounding ourselves, we will never show up without the very best we have to give.

Fifth, and finally, **choose the right roads**. The wise men, they traveled to Jesus one way, but then, scripture tells us, "they returned to their own country by another way." What is the right road in one circumstance may not be the right road in another. Life is complex, and we live in a constantly changing world. It is not a bad thing to realize the need to change course. In fact, it can be a tremendously faithful thing. It can mean traveling down the road of peace, rather than the road of violence. The road of building up, rather than the road of breaking down. It can mean choosing life, even when death is so readily available, or choosing justice, even when injustice is so much more convenient.

And choosing the right roads ... we are asked to choose the way we travel every day.

Pope Francis made the news a few days ago, but not in the way he normally does. On New Years Eve, in St. Peter's Square, as he was greeting crowds and shaking hands, a woman reached out, grabbed his hand, and pulled him toward her. And the pope slapped her. Twice. This is not the behavior we expect of the pope.

A Catholic journalist reported, "The pope kind of lost it."

But the very next day, in the middle of his New Year's homily, he said, "Love makes us patient. So many times we lose our patience. Me too. And I apologize for yesterday's bad example."⁴ He didn't justify his actions. He didn't place any blame on anyone else. In other words, the pope "returned home by another way."

It seems, that in the days and weeks to come, our country and other countries will choose the roads we travel by, as well. The road of war, or the road of peace. The road of death, or the road of dignity. The road of escalation, or the road of reconciliation.

It's more than that, of course. Especially on a global scale, nothing is ever simple. I don't mean to suggest that.

But today, I hope and I pray that we will all remember: even if we travel in by one road, sometimes we travel back by another way. It is never too late to change course, in our lives or in the life of the word.

After all, doing exactly that led the wise men home again, and it saved the one who now saves us all.

So there you have it: **Pay attention. Follow the light. Praise God. Give generously. Choose the right roads.** "None of it is simple, but it is elemental. Of course it's not literally all we really need to know. Certainly not. But it is the foundation of everything else that follows."

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/most-of-us-are-bad-at-apologizing-the-pope-just-showed-us-how-its-done/2020/01/02/711aea90-2d99-11ea-bcb3-ac6482c4a92f_story.html?utm_campaign=post_most&utm_medium=Email&utm_source=Newsletter&wpisrc=nl_most&wpmm=1