

20/20 Vision

Who were the magi and what did they see? Those are two questions that Bible scholars have argued about for centuries. Matthew doesn't tell us very much beyond the fact that they were "magi from the East". Most seem to believe that they were Zoroastrian priests from Persia. Zoroastrianism is one of the oldest religions still active in the world today. They trace their history to a founding prophet, Zoroaster, who was supposed to have been born to a 15 year old virgin. He predicted that other divinely appointed prophets would be born as history unfolded, and that the news of their birth could be read by watching the stars for signs. All of this is important because Zoroastrianism has its roots in Persia, which is modern Iran. The odds are good that that magi who followed the star and came to worship Jesus were Iranian. In a time when it is easy to demonize and dehumanize those we perceive to be our enemies, it strikes me as important to remember that Iranian people of faith, even if it wasn't the same faith we share, are part of our own faith story. More than that, they are held up in the Bible as examples of what faithful vision and faithful action can look like in the face of a powerful empire.

With that being said, let's see where these magi and their star can lead us as we enter this new year of 2020.

If you've ever been for an eye-exam, you know the goal is to have 20/20 vision. That means that you can see what you're supposed to see when you're standing 20 feet away. Without our glasses on, that goal is a distant dream for some of us. With one of my eyes, I passed 20/200 long ago. That means things that are 20 feet away look like they're 200 feet away to a person with normal vision. I squint, maneuver to see better, and still have a blurry view of what I'm looking at. It's only when I have my glasses on that my vision is corrected and I can see clearly – 2020 vision.

Some of us, though, who have spent thinking and planning about what the future might bring, have been using the tagline "2020 Vision" to help ourselves and others envision what the future might bring. Well friends, 2020 is no

longer in the distant future. It's here. But it's no easier to see the future than it was a month or a year ago. In fact, it might be harder, because in order to see any distance at all, you need light, and from where I stand on this gloomy morning, the light is hard to find.

Where will we find the light to see by, the light to steer by, the light that shines in our darkness? How will we find our 2020 vision, our vision as people of faith for the year ahead?

It starts with the eyes and the faith to see. "Lift up your eyes and look around!" the prophet Isaiah encourages his people. That's what the magi did, as they searched the skies for a sign. We don't usually use stars these days, but there are other ways to see what God is doing. Look around. See where there are those working for peace, those speaking for justice, those acting in love to lift up the weak and the vulnerable. That's where God is. That's where, to start with, you can see God's grace and glory. And like the sign the magi saw, it may not be a spectacular sign that everyone notices. It may just be a single star that stands out for you because you're paying attention and looking with the eyes of faith.

A few of you will remember the music director we had here for a year a while ago, Sharon Hershey, but I don't know if you know her whole story. While she was in grad school working on her doctorate in musical composition at the University of Pennsylvania, Sharon was a pretty typical secular grad student with no particular religious convictions or practice. Then a friend invited her to come and help out at the lunch program her Episcopal church ran for the homeless and hungry. There Sharon saw for the first time the star that would lead her on a long pilgrimage toward faith, toward Jesus. In that community that offered care to the vulnerable in Christ's name, she looked up and found her 2020 vision. It's been a long journey for Sharon as she followed that star, but now she is a discalced Carmelite nun in Colorado, directing the music program in the

church, and still writing music. Seeing a sign of Christ in the world has transformed her life.

For Sharon and for the magi, the initial sighting of the star was not sufficient to give them 2020 vision. The vision was still blurry, not yet clear or complete. It would have been possible to say, "huh, that's interesting" and go back to normal life. There had to be a movement within them, a movement of the Holy Spirit, to recognize what they saw, and then a further commitment to take a step of action that would lead them further.

It was as the wisemen traveled that their vision became clearer. At first they headed for the wrong destination. They went to Jerusalem, assuming that in the seat of power they would find the newborn king, but when they got there, they found no sign of him. Instead they found the devious Herod and his religious scholars who set them in the right direction, toward Bethlehem. Sometimes it is our mistakes and failures that help clarify our vision. We try something and it doesn't work, or we go a distance along a certain path and reach an unmistakable dead end. The magi could have headed home when they found no holy baby in Jerusalem. Instead, they learned from what they found there. They accepted new information from an unexpected source with expert knowledge and acted on it, both in terms of where the one they were looking for could be found, and in terms of who Herod was and how to respond to him. Our mistakes and failures help refine our vision if we let them.

At Princeton Presbyterian, the predecessor congregation to Tree of Life, we learned that. We experimented and reached dead ends a number of times, with an early version of a coffeehouse, with the shared ministry with Chambers, and even with our community garden which continues to be a loose end. But every time something didn't work, we'd pray and ask what we learned and what we had gained and try again to see God's vision for us. When an answer did come, it was from an unexpected source, our neighbor Jim Wurster

who helped us redirect our vision to a new and truer course, a place where our gifts and the world's needs met.

Finally the magi did find the one they had been searching for, and in him they found their vision was complete. In Jesus, the child in the little village of Bethlehem, they saw the one who was the son of God, the one who was filled with God's light and glory, the one who answers all the quests and questions of humankind. In that moment, they understood God's vision for their lives and for the world. And there was nothing else they could do but fall on their faces and worship.

God's 2020 vision is just a little bit different for each one of us and for all of us together, but for all of us it begins and ends with Jesus Christ. He is the one who bears the light into this gloomy and sometimes frightening world. He is the one who embodies all that we should be. He is the one who shows us what it is God desires of us – nothing less than obedience and self-giving love. He is the one who saves us and the world.

It will not be easy to be focused on that vision. There will be things, people, events that distract us, things that act against Christ's vision and draw us in other directions. Our task is to be faithful and stay focused. As long as we keep that Christ-light before us, our vision may sometimes be blurred, but it will never be lost. As we make our way through the days and year ahead, may we always be guided by his light, filled with his grace and act with his love in all that we do.

STAR GIFTS

To guide us on our way, we have a gift for you that may help you understand God's vision for you in the year ahead. These are star gifts, a star with a word written on it. The word may be something you already have and can share with others. It may be something you need to develop as you grow. It may be God's gift that you will need to make it through the year ahead. There's nothing magical about these words, but as we have done this over the years, we've

discovered that most words have meaning for those who receive them. I encourage you to keep your star gift in a place where you will be reminded of it often and can think about how it is taking shape in your life.

As we sing our next hymn, the ushers will pass plates with the stars in them. Take one for yourself and read it and think about what it might mean in the year ahead. No cheating – take the first star that comes to your hand! You don't get to pick and choose the word you want.

To help us think about these star-gifts, I share this poem by Ann Weems: