

**Message Delivered at Christ Church
Saturday & Sunday, January 1st & 2nd, 2011
TEXT: Matthew 2:1-12
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson**

There once was a man named Louisa Agassiz. He was born in Switzerland in 1807, and there he began his studies. First, his interest was medicine. Later, under the influence of the great naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt, he began his studies of the natural order. He studied and taught in Paris, and there he was the first to put forward the hypothesis that in the not too distant past there had once been a great ice age that left Europe and much of the northern hemisphere covered by glaciers.

But his first love was fish.

In 1846, for all sorts of reasons—some noble, some not so noble at all—he came to the United States to continue his studies. He learned English on his way across the Atlantic, memorizing entire sentences. His reputation preceded him, and so he found no shortage of eminent thinkers who were willing to engage with him in conversation, and no shortage of lecture opportunities. He was in financial trouble, so the fees he received for his lectures were no small blessing to him.

He had not intended on staying in the United States very long, but the year after he arrived he was offered the Chair of Natural History at Harvard. He lived for twenty-six more years, continuing his studies. Not all of his scientific conclusions are well-respected today. He put forward some questionable theories on the origins of the different races which are disregarded today and which sinister minds of later generations used to their own evil purposes. In fact, his greatest individual scientific accomplishments all happened before he came over here.

Over here, his greatest accomplishment was as a teacher.

He thought the way of teaching science in the United States unimaginative and boring. So on his own, he began a revolution. He cut quite a figure at Harvard, boldly smoking a cigar in Harvard Yard when the practice was frowned upon. He accepted students into his classes who would never have passed the entrance exams; and unlike many of his colleagues, saw no reason to exclude women from the classroom.

His method of teaching was unorthodox. He put the burden of learning squarely on the student. If one wanted to be in his class, one interviewed with him. After the pleasantries of the interview were finished, and if the student indicated that they truly wanted to study with him, Agassiz would walk over to his shelf and take out of a jar the smelliest, ugliest, dead fish he could find and place it in a pan in front of the student. He'd then walk out of the room, and say "look at the fish."

One of his students was named Samuel Scudder, who described what it was like to have the fish experience. Here's a paraphrase of what he later wrote...

In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, he wrote. Half an hour passed, then an hour, then another hour. That fish began to look utterly loathsome. I couldn't use a magnifying glass, or any other instrument. Just my two hands, my two eyes, and that fish. I pushed my finger down the fish's throat to feel the teeth, and I counted the scales until I got tired of it.

Agassiz came back, and Scudder told him what he had seen, and Agassiz said “Look again.” Scudder writes...*I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another. The afternoon passed quickly; and when, toward its close, the professor inquired “Do you see it yet?”*

“No,” I replied, “I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before.”

Scudder thought about that fish all night, and reported in to Agassiz the next day with what he had discovered. He then asked what he should do next, and in effect Agassiz replied “keep looking.”

There’s an old novel called Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance. It’s one of those novels that used to be popular on college campuses. Maybe it still is. One of the characters has aspirations to be an artist. Convinced of his own aptitude, he is startled and stunned and a bit frustrated that the first assignment his teacher gives him is to draw his thumbnail. Over and over again, his thumbnail. “You have to learn to look for things,” is what his teacher tells him, “even in thumbnails.”

Three kings, or wise men, or magi; or maybe there were more than three. How many there were, we don’t really know for sure. The story doesn’t say, and that’s just one of its many mysteries. But for the sake of today, we’ll assume there were three.

Like so many characters in scripture, we don’t know much about them. We aren’t given their background; we aren’t given their lineage; we aren’t given their names. We know they’re from the east, which means possibly present day Iran; or even present day Iraq. Matthew calls them “magoi,” which is most literally best translated as “magi.” It’s the source word for our word “magician.” It’s used one other place in the New Testament, and not at all in a complimentary fashion. But we can let that drop here. Clearly, these are noble characters...which is why, I would suggest, over the years we have taken to calling them kings or wise men.

They were learned persons. Some have called them astrologers. Back then, to be an astrologer meant that one was also an astronomer, and a mathematician, and an observer of the natural order.

And here, at what is for us the end of the Christmas story, they pop in and they pop out. Theirs is a cameo appearance.

There are broad purposes to this story. It’s significant, I think, that Matthew—who’s presentation of the Gospel is the most laden with Jewish subtexts—tells almost at the very beginning such a compelling story of God reaching out to the Gentiles. It’s a bold way Matthew declares what we’ve also been learning in our study of Luke...that the God we worship is a very big God. They don’t know the scriptures; they don’t know the stories; they don’t even go to church. But God reaches out to them, in a language they could understand. That’s how big and generous God is. And I think we’re supposed to pick up on the bitter irony that the ones who did know the scriptures and who should have understood, didn’t; while the ones who didn’t know the scriptures and shouldn’t have understood, did. May this story inspire us to humility.

But there are more specific lessons this story teaches and that touch our lives directly, which may be why we love this story so much.

It’s compelling how they are willing to go even though they aren’t exactly sure where they’re going. They’ve got a star, but stars are notoriously imprecise as directional aids. Them following a star is like me saying to you, “Well, to get to my house, just head south.” To get to

my house you indeed need to head south; but you'd probably need a little bit more information than that to get to my front door.

So part of the grace and witness of these kings is that though they've only been given a hint, they get up and go; and they seek. There's a saying I know I've said before...maybe, even, in a Sunday message...but I think it's true, and it fits so many places, including here. I think it was Augustine who said without God, we can't; and without us, God won't. So God moves in them, and demonstrating the wisdom we have always ascribe to them, they get to work; saddle up their camels; and get moving; doing the best with what God has given them—incomplete as it might be—and trusting that God will reveal more when God wants to reveal more.

Which in the case of the magi happens, but not right away. The star doesn't take them to Bethlehem first. The first stop is Jerusalem. They know they're looking for a king. And the star takes them to a king. Just not the king they're looking for. Herod was a dastardly character. A tyrant and a murderer, he did not hesitate to remove anyone he thought was challenging his power. He had his wife killed, three of his sons, his mother-in-law, his brother-in-law, his uncle...and that's just a start. Nobody liked him very much. He's cunning, and vicious, and violent, and treacherous...and he's king. The story of the magi ends with Matthew 2:12. But Herod's not done. In the next part of the story, he'll send his soldiers to Bethlehem, and horrible things will happen.

To be in his presence is a dangerous place to be, but it's where the magi end up.

But I also wonder whether we aren't supposed to wonder about what kind of dangerous stops we're supposed to make on our journeys. We're human beings, and that means there are things we're afraid of. Mostly, we keep them to ourselves. But I think we pretty much all got 'em. Sometimes they're external things. A lot of times they're internal things. But I'm not sure we ever really get beyond what causes us to fear without somehow going through it, first; standing, if you will, in the courts of what makes our knees shudder, and then allowing God to deliver us, so that maybe we learn that we don't really need to be afraid of what we're afraid of?

It's to a dangerous place that the star takes them first; and so I wonder what that means for you, and for me, and for us?

But before all this happens...and, in fact, the human action that makes it all possible...is that these three kings open their eyes; and look; and see that the heavens which had always been the same, are suddenly different; and so they see them differently. You know, there are all sorts of people who do all sorts of astronomical studies to try to explain what, exactly, the star was...an alignment of the planets, or Halley's Comet, or something else. Frankly, all that leaves me a bit cold. I don't think the answer to that question is all that important. Because a star only means something if we've got eyes to see it. God made something new happen in the heavens...that's for sure. But just as surely, God made something new happen in them, and gave them eyes to see something new...first in the east, and then in the manger...that they never expected. They couldn't have been the only ones to see the star. But they were the only ones who thought it might mean something; who thought it worth following. Isn't it true that how things appear often depends very much on how we look at them; and on the eyes and vision we bring. A thumbnail can reveal a life; there's more mystery to a fish than we might think; a star isn't just a star, but a sign; and a baby isn't just a baby, but a King and Savior.

Happy New Year, everybody. God is more at work than I think we sometimes believe. In ourselves; here, in this people; in Short Pump and the Richmond area; and beyond. We sometimes want to box God in; make God fit how we expect God to work, and constrict God to our own limited vision and understanding. But this story declares how creative our God is; and

how far God will go to touch us; and that if there is a spiritual virtue worth praying for, it may be the virtue of eyes to see.

It's the start of a new year. Resolution time. Maybe, you've succeeded in keeping yours to this point. It's a time of promise, for us as individuals and for as us a Church. As you heard in the announcements, there's a lot for us to do together over the next little while...the Vibrant Stewardship work; the land sale; we've moving into the youth space in February; a mission to Sudan later in the year, and to Haiti; and all the other things that are part of our regular life.

But here's a prayer as we begin anew: that we be given eyes to see; to see the truth of God's work in ourselves, and our neighbors, and the world around us; to see the Lord going before us, and following as God's people, though we may not know precisely where; that when we arrive at school tomorrow, or drive by the mall, or get stuck in traffic, or are changing diapers or helping with homework or dealing with stuff that we deal with everyday, we see that God is as present as in all those places, and as busy in all those places, as God was in this star. May it be we remember intently that our neighbors need people of faith and hope in their neighborhood, who have eyes to see God at work in the world around us. These three wise men chose to look anew, and get up, and go, and seek. We are blessed and inspired by their witness. So I would suggest on this New Year's weekend that every time we choose to follow the same path, we will be surprised at how powerfully this year God makes us the same kind of witness and blessing...to those we know, and to those we don't know yet.