Epiphany
The Journey of Faith

Today let’s look at the Magi, and Matthew and Luke’s Infancy Narratives through the lens of discipleship, and how folks come to be disciples.

We’ll start with the journey of discipleship, but you’ll need to use your imagination. Suppose, rather than a Catholic coming to church to celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, you are a non-believer in the checkout line at the grocery store. In line behind you is a friend who happens to be Catholic. You have a conversation as you wait, and the friend mentions just coming from church; it is the Feast of Epiphany. ‘What's that all about?’ In the short conversation, your friend speaks about Jesus, invites you to have coffee, and ends up introducing you to Jesus.

This friend is someone you trust. So you think about the conversation, and it makes you spiritually curious. Just what is this Christian thing all about?

With time, you move from being spiritually curious to being spiritually open. In other words, rather than putting up a wall, since what you are learning might lead to a need to change, you take it all in with an open mind, open to the possibility this might indeed change the way you look at the world.

Now, you start genuinely seeking: I want to know this Jesus. I’ll try this prayer thing. I’m not sure how to have a relationship with someone who lived so long ago, but I’ll give it a try.

Finally, you understand that this Jesus may have lived long ago, but he rose from the dead, is the Son of God, and is calling you to be a disciple right now. You are ready to say yes.

You turn your life over to the Lord, you keep learning more and more, growing, changing; Christian community becomes more and more important to you.

Naturally, so blessed, so fulfilled, you want to share the terrific change in your life with others, introduce them to Jesus. How do you go about it?

Better yet, you want to write a Gospel. How do you start to tell the story?

That’s the question Luke and Matthew faced. Their communities had the Gospel of Mark, but there were many other traditions as well not found in Mark. I have no
doubt Luke and Matthew prayed for guidance from the Holy Spirit. They also thought through how they came to believe.

But a perspective in the final result of their work that I want to point out today: they both used one of Stephen Covey’s 7 habits of highly effective people, long before Stephen Covey was born. Matthew and Luke both started with the end in mind. The passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, the paschal mystery, and knowing the risen Christ gave shape to all they would write, even their including an infancy narrative in their Gospels.

Matthew & Luke each presented a genealogy, helping answer ‘Where did this Jesus come from?’ But in each case, their understanding of the resurrected Christ shaped which ancestors to focus on, and how to organize the genealogy.

Writing of Jesus’ conception, they each knew there had been divine intervention. The incarnation was an important concept in understanding Jesus. Luke communicated God’s involvement through Gabriel’s appearance to Mary, Matthew through God speaking to Joseph in a dream.

Isaiah also helped them both tell the story. His writings were well known and respected, and helped to flesh out the Good News. Here’s how.

But first: one little bit of background. Manger may immediate lead one to think ‘Manger Scene’: that’s where the baby Jesus is placed. But what is a manger first? It is the feeding trough in a stable, where the food is placed for the animals. Isaiah found is a great symbol, and so did Luke.

Beginning with the end in mind, Luke recalled the sad story Isaiah told regarding Israel: Even an ox knows its master, and a donkey its owner’s manger, but Israel doesn’t know, and doesn’t understand. In other words, they just didn’t act as if they understood that God was their master, feeding and providing for them.

With the end in mind, Luke knows that Jesus will give himself to us as food. Through the manger, Luke draws a straight line for us, from Isaiah, to Bethlehem, to the Eucharist. ‘By the time folks finish reading my Gospel, they realize Jesus was born to be food for the world.’ Who is our master? Who feeds us? Almighty God, with the bread of life, his son.
Matthew saw Gentiles streaming into the church, as the churches Paul founded through Asia Minor kept growing and growing – an important development in the story. Memories of the Isaiah passage we just heard this morning lit up in his mind. The Gentiles will be brought into the faith, will come with gifts and proclaiming the praises of the Lord. Matthew’s Gentiles are the magi, right at the beginning of the story. He also adds myrrh to the gold and frankincense Isaiah mentions. This child will grow, draw many to the Lord, but will experience rejection by some, suffering and death. The myrrh for burial is a foreshadowing, right at the beginning.

Both evangelists, Matthew and Luke, give amazing insight into the meaning of Jesus, right in their first two chapters. Luke will move from Isaiah, to shepherds and a manger, to the Last Supper, to Jesus as the Bread of Life. Matthew leads us from Isaiah (and Numbers, but that’s another story) – star, magi, gifts, Jesus as God’s gift to us, and a light not just for Israel, but for the whole world.

How do we get from the hints, a manger to the last supper, the magi and myrrh to the Passion? If we want to truly know Jesus as our Redeemer, our Savior, our brother and friend, we do need more than just the hints we get in the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke. We need to watch Jesus in action as an adult. We’ll see how he reached out to folks, saw their needs and responded. That helps us know what he can do for us. We listen to him preach the kingdom, and see what life in the kingdom looks like. We watch how he keeps asking probing questions, leading his disciples, leading us into deeper insight. We see how totally he gives himself, body and blood, throughout his ministry, at the last supper, in the passion, at our Eucharist. The story will show how he faced death, and give us witness to his resurrection.

So back to starting with the end in mind.

While Matthew has the magi drawn to Jesus right at the beginning of the story, he can only bring them to the first three stages of discipleship. This birth, written in
the heavens, can launch them on a journey, but becoming a disciple requires the full story.

They trusted the stars, and what they read there – they were astrologers. Of course they would trust a sign in the heavens!

For non-astrologers, and people of our day, the trust that begins the journey can be in a trusted friend, trust in a community of believers, trust in some of the work that people in the church do for others.

Next, trust opened the magi to spiritual curiosity. What could this mean? Let’s go find out. A second step in becoming a disciple.

Today spiritual curiosity can mean asking questions, reading more about the faith, reading the Bible, spiritual books, checking out this Christian faith, this Jesus.

The magi were apparently genuinely open, a third vital step. They didn’t say – Oh, this is important for Jews, not for us! They made a huge trip, and consulted with leaders in Jerusalem. You don’t make that kind of trip without being open.

For us, being open can mean reading the Bible with an open mind, getting over our fear of change, acknowledging ‘my life could sure be better. Perhaps Jesus is the one to get me there.’

But Matthew couldn’t really have the magi take the next step – Spiritually seeking.

Spiritually seeking answers through Jesus requires his proclaiming the kingdom. We seek by seeing the possibilities of life in the kingdom through Jesus’ healings, how he forgave and forgives, his teaching, his driving out spirits that controlled people’s lives; setting people free. Spiritually seeking is about building a relationship with the risen Christ. Is this Christ the person I am ready to trust with my future and my eternal destiny? That question only makes sense after the paschal mystery, once the full story been told.

Finally, discipleship, turning one’s life over to the Lord is not about a baby, it’s about the risen Christ.
The magi’s trip in Matthew allowed them to witness an incredible thing: the incarnation, a tremendous blessing, just as Simeon and Anna gave witness last week. Curiosity, who will this child be is certainly stirred. Their openness is an inspiration. But to become disciples, that remains our journey. Where ever you may be right now, keep traveling with us!

From trust that this Christian thing really is worth a look, to spiritual curiosity – I need to know more about this Jesus: he intrigues me.
To spiritual openness – my life sure could be better, and if Jesus is the one who can show me how, I’m willing to change.
To spiritually seeking; getting to know Jesus, sharing ourselves with him. I’m not just willing to change, Lord, I want to. I put myself in your hands. Let me get to know you better, so you can lead the way.
To discipleship – like when Peter and Andrew dropped their nets, and said “Lord, we are following you. No going back. Where else can we find eternal life!

Let’s follow the magi through the first steps of discipleship, and rather than return home, let’s stay! Watch Jesus grow up. Watch him through his ministry. Get to know him better. Build a relationship. Truly embrace discipleship.

Then beyond wondering, being amazed and adoring, we can live the Christ life, be true disciples, be his presence to those around us, his light shining in the world today.