

“I Believe”

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The reason we gather weekly at church is because we need a booster shot of faith.

Matthew 2:1-12

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Boys in the cave

It's been a whirlwind for me the past month or so, and maybe for you. Our wheels (literal and figurative) are finally slowing down after a month-plus of preparation, family, and travel. Earlier this week, Linda and I were with her mom and family in Pennsylvania, and I took time to do something I haven't done in a while – read a book, just for fun. My sister had recommended this book when she visited us on Christmas weekend, and both of our daughters picked it up and read all 300 pages in a day or two Christmas week. I did the same on New Year's Eve and Day.

It's a mark of a great story and a terrific writer when you know how a story's going to end but you still can't put the book down because you're in such suspense. *The Boys in the Cave*, by ABC News reporter Matt Gutman who was writing his first book, is about the 12 boys in Thailand and their soccer coach who were trapped deep inside a cave for more than two weeks last summer while the entire world was gripped with their plight. I knew all thirteen were eventually rescued, but as I read the book, I kept thinking, "There's no way they all emerge alive. It can't happen."

The media could not and did not record many aspects of this story, especially what happened behind the scenes with diverse rescue teams from all over the world seeking approval of Thailand's government at the highest level. Something else I didn't know: the boys not only were anesthetized into unconsciousness as they were brought through various chambers, but every 30 minutes or so the divers had to re-inject the sedative to keep them asleep. If they woke up during the 2 ½ hours they were being escorted out of the cave, they would have panicked and flailed and ripped off the mask and died. Those who devised the rescue plan said the best-case scenario was probably

that one in four boys would make it out alive. In the end, all of the boys survived. This was a modern miracle. The impossible happened.

Derek Anderson of the U.S. Air Force, who drew up the final rescue plan and is the son of Christian missionaries in Ecuador, spoke for everyone involved in the rescue as well as the millions around the world captivated by the story, “We thought, whether you believe in God or not, that something supernatural, something bigger was at work here.” I can be more specific than Derek Anderson. I claim this “miracle rescue” as evidence, not just of “something supernatural” or “something bigger,” but of the God of the Bible. It’s not proof, but definitely evidence, that helps me say, “I believe.”

I believe

We all believe some things about God, about ourselves, about the world we live in. The questions I want you pondering as we begin 2019 together are (1) What do you believe? (2) Why do you believe? and (3) What difference does it make?

More precisely, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” This means that I believe in one eternal, self-sufficient Sovereign (God) who is personal and interactive (Father), whose power is unlimited (Almighty), and who is the source of everything that exists (Maker of heaven and earth).

That language comes from the Apostles’ Creed, a statement of Christian belief that has its origin among the apostles of Jesus in the Bible itself but developed over the first several centuries of church history. We’re going to look at these articles of belief in about two-thirds of our sermons during the first half of 2019.

We start with the first two words: “I believe.” I believe that God was personally involved in the rescue of those boys, even though I know that raises a lot of questions. For example, how does that story give evidence of the *Christian* understanding of God? One of the twelve boys was a refugee from Myanmar (Burma) who attended Grace Baptist Church with his family, but the others were all Buddhist. Doesn’t the story ratify Buddhist prayers and faith as much as Christian? It does if you’re Buddhist. Why would I use such a story dominated by non-Christians to introduce a sermon about believing in the God of the Bible? Because Matthew does the same thing.

Certainty or commitment

The story of the wise men, aka Magi, is rather well-known among not only Christians but the culture at large. Everybody knows that both shepherds and wise men came to see the baby Jesus. It’s depicted in nativity scenes and Christmas songs. We sophisticated insiders know that much of what people think they know about this story is not in the Bible. The wise men probably arrived a year or two after the stable birth. “We Three Kings of Orient Are” is a pretty good song, except that the Bible doesn’t say there were three, that they were kings, or that they were from the Orient.

Let's set all that aside for a moment. I want you to ponder this story in light of the confession, "I believe." Matthew, one of Jesus' original twelve disciples and the author of the first gospel, wants this story to bolster and perhaps deepen your faith. So what does this story teach us about what it means to say, "I believe"?

First, believing begins with asking (1-2). The first two verses of this story have been dissected almost to death by writers and preachers, including me. Let's get to the heart of Matthew's sentence: "Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and *asked*...."

We don't know a lot about these "wise men." I wonder if that's Matthew's intent. I doubt very much that his original readers knew much more than we do. They're sort of mysterious, the New Testament version of Melchizedek, who appears and disappears without much detail, leading the writer of Hebrews to see him as a forerunner of Jesus the Great High Priest.

What seems obvious is that not only are the Magi not "Christian" in the sense that we would define the term, they're not "Jewish" either. Those would be the two primary categories of *believers* that Matthew's readers – and we – would recognize. More likely than not, they were what we might call pagans, though they may have been influenced by diaspora Jews. They were astrologers, something the Bible discourages, but they were curious astrologers. One certain star had captured their fancy, and in their world view that star pointed to a king. They followed it and inquired about it.

Matthew wants you to see them as Gentiles. Where he's leading us in this Gospel is that Jesus' disciples are to make disciples of all nations. We don't start with the assumption that people of a different nation or world view are to be marginalized or ignored or sent packing. We like the idea that these pagan Magi have come with inquisitiveness seeking truth. Epiphany means "revealing," and Matthew's gospel starts with Jesus being revealed to Gentile astrologers. Aren't you glad?

The issue we're starting with on the first Sunday of the year is not what it means to have saving faith, or to believe in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Instead, we're asking "What does it mean to 'believe'?" Believing starts with asking. If you or someone you know is asking hard questions, like "Why is Jesus the only way?" or "Why do bad things happen?" or "Why is sex outside of marriage wrong?" don't immediately shut down the conversation by giving simple answers. Follow the Holy Spirit's prompt to engage them in a relationship, to further the conversation, to encourage the curiosity. Believing starts with asking.

Second, believing readily combines (3-8). I wish I had retained more from high school chemistry, but it's the only subject in which an F appeared on my report card. (That's a story too long for this sermon, but it was followed by an A the next term.) Even I, a chemistry flunkie, know that some atoms more easily combine with other atoms to form compounds. Carbon is one of those that readily accepts or donates electrons in its outer shell, which is why carbon is a basic building block of life.

Belief, I've noticed, is like carbon. Believing is essential, common, and life-giving, but believing truth in truth readily combines with other stuff, like pride or greed or non-belief or false belief. Beginning in verse 3, the wise men (whose world view, remember, was not shaped by God's self-revelation in Scripture) encounter a man who thinks of himself as a believer. After all, he builds the greatest Jewish temple ever. He keeps Jewish laws. But Herod's belief mixed with vanity, insecurity, self-importance, political desire, lust, and so much more. In terms of his starting point, Herod had so much more going for him than the star-gazing Magi. He was also so much further from the truth.

Herod gained and held a remarkable degree of power in Judea, but was always looking over his shoulder for anyone who might threaten his place. Caesar Augustus said, "It's better to be Herod's pig than his son," since he ate kosher food but murdered his own family. In this particular story, he pretends to sympathize with the Magi's quest to find "the king of the Jews," but we know he intends to kill, not to worship.

Herod is a vivid and graphic example of the dangers associated with believing. Unbelievers seem to know this better than professing Christians, for some reason. They recognize when our "believing" is self-serving – when it is mixed with ulterior motives.

That's why it's so important to ask why we believe. If I believe because believing makes my life more fulfilling or prosperous, then when life takes a downward turn I'll stop believing. If believing rests on pursuit of what is true, then my circumstances won't alter my beliefs.

Third, believing means commitment (9-12). Do you wonder what that journey was like for the wise men? Were they confident each step of the way? Did one or more of them raise doubts as they traveled from the east to Jerusalem, or from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, where ultimately they bowed down, presented their gifts, and worshiped the toddler Jesus? Don't you think there were times along the way when they thought, "This is crazy. Let's just go home. We probably didn't see what we thought we saw, and if we did, maybe it didn't mean what we thought it did."

Kevin Watkins shared a great insight about this passage and about believing this week, so I've asked him to share it with you now:

What did the wise men do when they doubted? What do we do when we doubt? Christmas Eve, my Grandma passed away. She lived her life on earth with Jesus, trusting Jesus and that is now continuing on in heaven. I know this and yet I am sitting in her funeral last weekend and the thought and feeling come over me, what if this isn't real? What if death is really the end? Doubt has crashed the funeral and now what do I do?

Well when talking about belief, I have learned (from John Ortberg mostly), it is important to talk about two different parts of belief: certainty and commitment. Certainty has to do with our minds and hearts – I am 80% certain or I don't feel

super sure about this. Commitment has to do with our will, the part of us that gets to choose. I will do something or I will not.

So in moments of doubt, where certainty is waning, because it will, certainty waxes and wanes, commitment is always an option. We can always choose to act as if what Jesus said is true. This is what Jesus invites his disciples and us to do, is to commit to following Him, living His way of life. What does not work in moments of doubt is to try really hard to generate the feeling of certainty and it can be enormously damaging if you try. Certainty instead comes over time through studying Jesus and doing life with Jesus, seeing the Father answer our prayers, and the Holy Spirit's work.

So when doubt showed up and my certainty wanes as it does, I remembered and renewed my commitment to Jesus and what that looked like is I told God that I was doubting. Because I am committed to the idea that God is a loving heavenly father, that hears prayers, and in Jesus, I am seen as holy and spotless, I told God that I doubted if He was real and I feared death was the end. And I sang songs about God's faithfulness in the service and overtime I began to feel more certain. But I and we do not live at the mercy of the feeling of certainty. We can commit to live with God even in our uncertainty.

All in

I told Kevin yesterday that he has energized me for ministry this year because as a new staff member at Corinth he's challenging me to remember and communicate why we do what we do. Why staff meetings? Why worship? Why preaching? Why Corinth?

One reason we gather here for an hour on Sunday morning is to offer a booster shot of faith. Just like those boys in the cave needed another injection to keep their bodies quiet during the rescue, we learn to be still and trust when with other believers we are reminded of what we believe, why, and what difference it makes. To say, "I believe in God the Father Almighty" changes everything.

As Kevin says, even in the moments where doubt trickles in, to say it again and to determine that I will seek to live out my life with that commitment even when I lack certainty, gives peace and joy. What's also important about the story of his grandmother's funeral is that he experienced this boost of faith in community with his family and others who believe, led by a pastor who proclaimed the truth. Worshiping with others in the body of Christ refines and deepens our commitment.

I'm wearing a necktie this morning personally autographed by Dabo Sweeney, football coach for Clemson University. The Tigers will play mighty Alabama tomorrow night, and most observers expect the Crimson Tide to roll over Clemson as they have every other team. My tie is signed, "To Pastor Bob. All in. Dabo Sweeney." Dabo doesn't need his players to admit or focus on the degree of their certainty that they can beat Alabama. He absolutely does expect them to be "All in," fully committed to giving their best effort. That's what it means to believe.

To plunge a little deeper into where we're going with the Apostles' Creed, Jesus also knew how easy it would be to forget the one fundamental truth of our uniquely Christian faith. God the Son entered our world and took on human flesh so that he might fully pay the cost for all human sin and reconcile us to God the Father. It changes everything to believe that I am of such infinite worth to God that he would sacrifice himself to save me. No truth is higher or greater for the Christian.

Jesus instituted our most regular and powerful visual aid in worship. I pick up a piece of broken bread and remember his body was broken for me. I drink a small serving of the fruit of the vine and remember his blood was shed for me. Why I do it is that I need this sedative to calm my fears and remember whose I am. Communion also helps me look down the pew at church or across my kitchen table at home, or on the TV or computer at anyone anywhere in the world and remember, "That's a person Christ died for." I will love as I have been loved. That's why we are here today. Amen.