

Text: [Matthew 2:1-12 \(CEB\)](#)
Date: January 5, 2025 – EPIPHANY SUNDAY
Title: “Focus”
Theme: There’s no progress in life without focus.

1

There is no progress in life without focus

Whatever it is you want to achieve in 2025 –
Whether health goals
Career advancement
Smarter financial discipline
Picking up that hobby you set down so long ago and want to
come back to
Or spiritual growth

Whatever it is, you don’t get anywhere without focus
Without commitment & dedication
And without the ability to continually return the main thing

2

I love word origins, and this week I learned
The word *focus* actually comes from a Latin root
Which meant “hearth” – like the fireplace that was once at the
center of every home

I really excited to learn that
Because it seems so natural & logical
The place where you find light and warmth
THAT’S the place that becomes the focus

I remember as a kid sitting for a long time in the dark
In front of our fireplace

I was drawn to it - watching the flames
Wondering what they were
What the colors meant

Just being continually drawn in to the warmth and the light
Focus

3

I've always been fascinated with the wise men
And their journey
Who they were and where they traveled from is still a mystery
All these centuries later

The biblical word for them – *magi* – implies they came from the
area now known as Iran

Magi were a class of court astrologers in Persia
Learned people who studied the heavens
And who believed that what they saw there gave clues about what
was happening here on earth

But the connection to Persia is not the whole story
Because scholars point out that their gifts speak to their home
being somewhere on the east coast of the Arabian Peninsula
That was one place in the ancient Near East where there was
significant production of gold, frankincense, and myrrh

But regardless of their origin, I want to make the point that the
journey was long
More than 500 miles, and perhaps closer to 1000

If we keep reading what happens next in the story, how Herod
gives orders to kill all the male children in Bethlehem under 2
years old

Based on the timing of the star's first appearance

It's clear that the journey – and planning and preparations leading up to it – took many months

So sorry, if you want to get really technical, the shepherds and wisemen probably don't belong together in the nativity scene
And we also don't know how many there actually were
The scripture describes three gifts, but is silent about the number of visitors

3A

But all that aside – think about this
The magi set out on an arduous, months-long journey
Based primarily on their curiosity
Simply wanting to know what this star meant

Drawn in by the light
Drawn in by the beauty of what they saw
Just like me sitting in front of the fire as a kid
The star was their focus

They were motivated by the desire to know what the star meant
That's what kept them moving forward
Even when – as I can only imagine – the journey got difficult
Even in the face of bad weather, bandits, sickness, loneliness –
whatever
They kept looking to the star

Focus is a hard thing to maintain today
There is so much to distract us
I know, even when I'm writing a sermon
I might pause "a moment" to look something up
And the next thing I know, I've sent Kate four reels to watch
And I have to force myself to even remember what I stopped to
look for in the first place

Focus is something we ALL need

4

Today, we're going to invite you to a spiritual exercise inspired by
the singular focus of the magi
And that's the practice of using a star-word to guide us
And help us with focus through our year

When you come forward for communion, we're going to invite you
to look over a table filled with stars, each with a single word
written on it

We'll invite you to approach the table prayerfully,
And then find the one that speaks to you and take it with you
Or take a blank one and ask God to reveal the word you need

Don't be afraid if the one you're drawn to – or the one you end up
with – doesn't seem to have an obvious connection to your
life at first

I feel certain the Spirit will reveal the logic to you in time

If you're online, we'll post some photos of the table in the
Facebook comments on this service so you can choose one

Then put your star some place you'll see it consistently
On your dresser, on your mirror, on your refrigerator or desk, in
your car or as the bookmark in your Bible

And allow that word to become your focus for the year
To keep drawing you back in

So, as an example, let's say you choose "patience"
Maybe Google some verses that have something to say about
"patience" and memorize them

You can ask God at the start of the day: How can I put “patience” into practice in the situations I face today?

Or ask God at the end of the day: What lesson are you trying to teach me about “patience” through my experiences today?

When you choose a single word as your focus, I think you’ll be surprised at how many experiences begin to stick to it
Like when you get a new car, and then you begin to notice all the people who drive cars like yours?

5

Now, as with any practice – any resolution we make, really
You may find after a time that it’s hard to stick with it
It may lose its power

I’d encourage you, though, to keep at it through the year
Even if you just check in with God about your word from time to time

To ask again: “What would you have me learn from this?”
Maybe consider using a journal to remember the insights God is giving you

Remember the idea is to have a focus
Like the fireplace we center our lives around

The wise men traveled hundreds of miles
Just to see what God was trying to tell them through a star

They didn’t veer from the track, they didn’t turn around, they didn’t quit and head home

They just kept going

Based on the direction God kept sharing with them

Trusting that it was leading them toward something – or rather someONE important!

What could God do in your life with your star word this year?
What wisdom, what insights will you receive?

There's no progress in life – including the spiritual life - without
focus

I look forward to hearing about yours!

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ