

St. Paul's Congregational Church
January 6, 2019
Matthew 2:1-12; Epiphany Year C
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Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Today we celebrate *epiphany* – Three Kings Sunday – we remember that the word “epiphany” comes from a Greek word that means “to show or reveal.” The wise men, or magi, are our central characters - because they were “shown” something new and wonderful about God’s will and purpose. It’s generally accepted that these people were astrologers, people who studied the stars and then made predictions about the future of the world based on what they saw in the sky above them. The magi were wise ones in their time, recognized for their learning and they were very rich.

I came across a story of the Magi, the wise men, this week – a story of their journey, but written especially about one of them – his thoughts, his reflections, his insights. We often talk about our faith journeys – our shared journey both here at this church and in churches around the world. We know it’s a journey that lasts a lifetime as we nurture our relationship with God through worship, education, and service. Ours often began in our childhood as we encountered the great Bible stories that teach us about a loving and persistent God – as we grow, we make those stories our own as we begin to understand them in new ways – and there are the stories of Jesus that continue to teach us about God, about ways God wants us to live, teachings of Jesus that are timeless. They are words of comfort for us as well as words of challenge as we wrestle with our call to love and serve God, in the midst of all our daily distractions.

We come together to help one another – to walk with one another on our common journeys. How is it that we come to know God, to know Jesus – to discern our own call and then how to live it out? Most of us became Christian because gradually we were drawn in by the story of Christ and we have decided to follow him.

The story of the Magi is our story too. It’s not only the story of the very first Gentiles to whom God revealed Christ Jesus, but also there are parts of it that might be familiar, even parallel to our own stories, our own faith journeys.

So, as we enter into the story – let’s reflect on our own journey - and let Christ draw us in. Listen for the word of God .

He was tired, the journey had been long and very hard at times, and despite the companionship that he enjoyed on the way, he had often found himself feeling discouraged. But for all that - tonight was special; his journey was over and he felt a peace in his heart he had never felt before.

It had all begun months earlier - it seemed like years now - when he had noticed a new star in the heavens, a star that did not belong there; one that had never been there before.

At first he thought that he had made a mistake, that the charts that he had relied upon for years were in error, but night after night he saw that the star moved, that it was changing position against the familiar constellations.

Finally, certain of his discovery, but not sure what to make of it, he told another astrologer about what he had found.

Events followed fairly quickly then... at first anyway.

After his discovery was confirmed by his friend all the astrologers and soothsayers gathered to observe the star and to discuss what it meant.

After a few days of intense debate, after an incredible amount of work and confusion, they decided that the star signaled the birth of a new king, in fact of a great king - that this king had been born, or was about to be born, in a land somewhere to the west of them.

For another few weeks they tried to find out what king had been born in the western lands or what Queen was expecting a child, but there was no news from those far lands. And because they still had jobs - leaders still expected advice every day and couples still wanted charts drawn up when their children were born, and because business was very good among the merchants who wished to know the best time to buy and sell their goods - because of all these things, very soon most of the wise men in the land forgot about the new star and the excitement caused by its appearance.

But there were some who could not forget, and he and two others continued to discuss the star long after the news of its appearance had faded from the minds of the rest.

It seemed to him and two of his companions that the star was a sign of tremendous significance. Never had they heard of a new star appearing and never had they seen a star move in the heavens. They discussed how the star must be a sign from the gods that something very important was happening and that the king whom everyone had agreed the star heralded was no ordinary king.

The star was such a powerful sign, that he finally resolved to set forth and to find the king who lay beneath it. He knew that his life would be incomplete if he did not meet the king the star pointed to. His two friends,

who were equally excited by the star and in awe of the power it pointed to, agreed to go with him on his trip.

So it was that one night, leaving behind all that they held dear and knew so well, they set forth. They had travelled a long way since then, a very long way, and the way had been difficult. Often there had been delays and uncertainties, often there had been danger and confusion.

There were times when he and his friends could not move onward, because the sky would be obscured by clouds - they could not be sure if they were heading in the right direction so they would set up camp wherever they found themselves and wait.

Always when he had to wait, he lost some of his confidence. He was never sure if, when the clouds parted once again, that the star would still be in the sky. Perhaps it would disappear from view as suddenly as it had appeared; perhaps he was chasing a ghost star, a star with no real significance, a star that really didn't exist. He would wonder if he was a fool on a fool's errand.

But at other times - when the star shone brightly and the three of them could move onward their progress was impeded by terrain that even people travelling by day would have found difficult.

A leg of their journey that local residents told them would only take a day would take three, and the easy paths that other travelers told them about never seemed to be as easy as they expected.

It seemed at times that there had never been a easy night for them: always there was some anxiety or other to disturb them - even on the most level paths; sometimes, in fact, those paths worried him the most, for there others might be roaming, others with evil on their minds, others ready to kill or steal from passing strangers.

But the worst thing, the thing that made the journey the hardest, were the comments from others. Most of the people they met on their way could not understand why they were following a star. They thought they were crazy to travel by such an obscure light, crazy to have left behind the safety of their own land, and the security of their jobs in the court. People suggested, without actually saying so, that perhaps they were not as wise as those others who had seen the star, but had not followed it.

"So, a king has been born" they would say. "This happens every day - so what is so special about this king that you would undertake this journey. What possible difference can it make to you?"

And when he or one of the others replied that this king had a special star, a kind of star never seen before, they would laugh and say that life was

too good to go off chasing after a king that no one had ever seen, let alone heard about.

Even the other astrologers they consulted along the way thought that he and his friends were being foolish. Again, the question, "What difference can it make to you?" they would ask. "Right now you could be making a handsome profit casting charts for businessmen or telling your nation's generals when to make war and when to make peace, but instead here you are wandering the world looking for someone or something that may not even exist."

And so the days and the weeks passed.

They pressed onward, but they couldn't help but wonder if anything would come of it, and always, even on those marvelous days when they had no doubts of their own, they had to contend with the doubts of others.

There had been days, when resting by the roadside in their camp, or casting charts in a village square to earn money to pay for their food and lodging, he had been tempted to give up his quest.

He would feel comfortable, money would be jingling in his purse, his belly would be full, and he would think about the hazards of their journey, and how good he it felt to do what everyone else did, and he would forget the new king for a while.

But then night would come and he and his companions would look up and they would see the star, and it would seem to outshine the others in the sky, and realizing just how special it was and how important the new king had to be, they would once again mount their camels and set forth to find him.

Yes, he was very tired, the journey had been long and very hard, but tonight was special, he had at last arrived at the place the star had led him.

The country he and the others were in that night was not a very important one. It lay under Roman rule - and it was primitive and backward.

They had heard rumors that a king was supposed to be born there and when they had gone to the capital city and asked about that king, the man who governed the nation had told them to go and check in a town called Bethlehem.

Earlier that night they had left the city. The star had shone brightly from the direction that Herod had indicated and they had followed it, until they entered the village of Bethlehem. When they had arrived there it seemed to him that the star was, for the very first time, directly above his head, and that it shone in a special way upon one house.

They dismounted and entered the house and saw a child in his mother's arms. For a moment he doubted that he had found the great king,

for though the star shone through the chimney hole so that its light seemed to rest upon the child's face - everything else seemed to be all wrong.

There was no sign of royal wealth in the house -
- there were no expensive oils to soothe the skin,
- no costly furs or linens upon the sleeping pads to bring easy sleep to the young child,
- there was nothing in fact to indicate that the babe was anything but the child of a poor peasant, of a man, who by the few tools and pieces of wood stacked in a corner seemed to be a carpenter.

Yet - there was a feeling in the room, a feeling that seemed to radiate from both the mother and the child, and the star light seemed to cast a halo around them.

He explained to the woman why he was there with the others and in return she had told him of a dream she had, a dream in which her God had told her she would bear a child to rule his people and to bring light to the gentiles.

Then her husband told them that the baby was special, and that when he had been born shepherds had seen angels and come to the stable where the baby had been born and worshipped the child.

And then he had looked again at the child, and at his mother, and he thought about the light she had mentioned, and how the star had brought him to this very place, and a feeling of joy overcame him, a feeling that he saw had overcome his friends as well.

Then, without a word to each other, they had knelt, and paid homage to the new king. They had prayed that God his father would bless him in all his days, and make him greater even than the star that had led them to him. Then they had given the child those things that they had brought to give to the new born king: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Now, outside the little house he thought about his long journey. He felt tired, but he felt too a peace that he had never felt before, and he realized that he would never feel incomplete again, for the king who had been born was not a king like all the other kings he had known. He was a king who would look after all those who were like him: the poor, the weak, and the humble.

He was a king who would conquer with love, and rule with compassion.

He realized that somehow the God that Mary spoke of was the only God that mattered, and that this God was in the child they had seen.

He prayed again that night: he prayed that he might be one of those loved by that child, one of those loved by that God, and that he might always see the light of his star inside his heart and follow his way.

And he knew even as he prayed - that his prayer would be answered. It had been a long journey, at times it had been a discouraging journey, but it had been a worthwhile journey, because not only had he found a great king, he had also found a God who cared so much for the world, that he had taken on flesh and dwelt among his people...

Our journeys may be long, sometimes hard, discouraging too – but know that ours too is worthwhile. May we always see the light of his star inside our hearts and follow his way. Amen.

Children's Moment – the Wise Men

Find in the Bible the names of the Wise Men?

You can look and look but never will find them – you won't even read that there are 3 of them – even if they were men or women – we only know that they brought 3 gifts to the child Jesus.

What were those gifts? gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

But the Wise Men have come to have names – and I wondered where those names came from. I did a little reading and learned something about that 500 years after Jesus was born in early Christian writings we find three names: Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. And tradition tells us they came from ancient Persia – today we know some of that area as Iran – they would

have travelled 800 – 900 miles to seek the Christ Child. Maybe they rode camels part of the way – maybe they walked!

These wise men were educated, wealthy, and influential – they knew the scriptures – they knew about the scripture that we call the Old Testament and had read prophecies about the coming of the Messiah – the man we know as Jesus.

On the night Jesus was born a mysterious light, the star, appeared in the western sky – some of the Old Testament writings predicted such a star and these magi wanted to follow the star to see if it led them to the Messiah. We know from the gospel of Matthew that they did just that and followed the star to Jesus.

And when you hear the story of the wise men – listen very carefully and you will hear where they found him. Not where you'd expect – but in a house with his mother, Mary – and if you think about it, walking 900 miles would take a long time – they probably met Jesus when he was around 2 years old!

The wise men have an important part in the Christmas story – we know that. We know that Jesus came for everyone – the shepherds who took care of sheep – probably not very well educated, certainly not rich - they learned of Jesus from an angel out in the fields at night. And Jesus came for the wise men as well – they had money, they'd been to school, they could read and write. They followed the star that they knew was a prophecy telling when the Messiah would come.

They were two very different types of people – and Jesus came for everyone, rich or poor, educated or not, it didn't matter what they did for a living – Jesus came to bless them – just as Jesus has come to bless each and every one of us.

That's the real gift of Christmas, isn't it. That God came to us as a human – just like us – in Jesus - so we could come to know God better.

Prayer: Thank you God, for coming to us in Jesus. We thank you that Jesus came for everyone – shepherds, wise men, and us! Help us to live as Jesus asks of us – loving you, loving our neighbors, and loving ourselves. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.