

Sermon: Home by Another Road
Rev. Anita Peebles
January 6, 2019: Epiphany Sunday

Today is Epiphany Sunday, the 12th day of Christmas, when we consider those famous travelers of old, the “wise men” or “magi” or even “kings.” The word “magi” refers to astrologers who made it their business to interpret the cosmos. It was common in ancient times, and still is among some today, to look to the stars for portents of cosmically significant events in the lives of humans. And can we blame the ancients for placing so much store in the stars? Throughout the season of advent, *we* have looked to the stars. You may have noticed the covers of our bulletins and the advent booklet Jim Segaar wrote included a photo from the NASA Hubble telescope, a rare moment of witnessing a star being born. You may have noticed this Moravian-style star hanging over Bethlehem in our baptistry. You may have noticed our advent theme of already/not yet applied to the stars that shine above us, already burning for millions of years and yet some of their light has not reached us. Though today we do not follow in the tradition of those who look for the star of Jesus in the astronomical record, we can understand how these magi must have felt their intuition tingle when they saw the bright star heading towards Judea.

As we gather today, we celebrate that these foreign visitors, these astrologers, these people who trusted more in horoscopes than in the God of the Hebrews, set aside their wealth and knowledge and superstitions and homeland to follow the star that ultimately led them toward the Christ child. Throughout history, many traditions have developed around the magi and their gifts. When I was a child, my favorite story in a collection of “A Story a Day ‘til Christmas” was O. Henry’s *The Gift of the Magi*, recalling a poor young couple who sell their only treasures in order to supply a meaningful present for their partner. Or perhaps you are more familiar with *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, wherein the three wise ones stop to rest with a young boy and his mother on their way to the Christ child. At times, Matthew’s magi have been read in amazement that Gentiles from afar would recognize the royalty, divinity and salvific death of Jesus, symbolized by the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, respectively. In all these stories, what remains the same is the risk of seeking and giving as a response to meeting Jesus.

In many places around the world, from Mexico to Ethiopia, Epiphany is a bigger holiday than Christmas because it marks the beginning of adoration of the

Christ child. Last night, particularly throughout Latin America, children set their shoes outside of their homes filled with grass or straw, hoping that as the wise ones passed by, they would appreciate the snack for their animals and leave a gift in return. In the late 1950s, my grandparents moved to Puerto Rico so grandpa could continue his work combatting agricultural pests. My dad and uncle were born in San Juan during their stay there. As children in Puerto Rico for the first five years of their life, they learned how to celebrate El Dia de Reyes, or Three Kings Day, alongside their friends, stuffing shoes with straw on the eve of the magi's visitation. After returning to the mainland, my family kept this tradition alive, and my dad passed it on to my brother and me. Each year we would wake up on Epiphany to find the magi had left some treasure for us on their journey to the Christ child: a book or some warm socks or another wise, practical gift.

As Pastor Tim reminded us last week, by the time December 26 rolls around we are plumb tuckered out of Christmas and so want to put the decorations away and move on, even though the season of Christmas just began. But over time, as I have learned more about various nativity traditions, I have come to appreciate the tradition of celebrating the 12 days of Christmas as a way of embracing the fullness of the season. As I have turned my mind from the manger to the magi this year, I have wondered if I, too, would take the risk of following the star. Following in the magi's tradition of gift-giving, I contemplate what gifts I would bring to Jesus, Mary and Joseph. What is my heart's response to the grace of incarnation in Emmanuel, God-with-us?

Though the magi were knowledgeable about cosmic subjects and practiced in spiritual rituals, their real wisdom was knowing what they didn't know and going out to find it. Each of us in our own ways understands how easy it is to remain observant yet unruffled, aware yet complacent, as we notice something bright shining in the sky overhead. It is easy to be satisfied that we have all we need right where we are, that things should just remain how they have always been because that's what we are used to, that we know all we need to know, that there is no more learning to do. It is much riskier to seek out that which we do not know, to grow into The New and prepare ourselves to respond to it.

I've often talked about how the children in Godly Play ask "wonder" questions. This is an important part of their spiritual development. Wondering can be a risk...and it is a faithful task that the magi undertake. They had no certainty of where they would go or what they would find in the course of their journey. This story sticks with us because, as Rev. Kathryn M. Matthews writes,

“It's deeply moving to hear of three foreigners traveling a long, hard way because they had an inkling – just an inkling – of something very important unfolding in a distant land. Something inside them must have been restless, or upset, or hungry for understanding; despite the reputation of "the East" as the place of wisdom and learning, there was something they still needed to find.”¹

I wonder if they packed their gifts feeling somewhat silly, sensing that something bigger was going on but not knowing what would be asked of them. I wonder what it was like for them to have every kind of knowledge...and yet have their hearts pulled towards a humble home where Jesus was playing with Mary. And I wonder if they sensed the danger as they neared Jerusalem and decided to ask King Herod where the King of the Jews was. I mean, really, how wise was that?

As some of you might remember from Pastor Tim's sermon last week, Herod was the puppet governor of Judea, placed there by the Roman Empire to control the region...in a sense, *Herod* was King of the Jews, as he governed people of Jewish descent, descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel. And the magi want to ask this guy where *a different king* was?

And yet, it is understandable that these wise ones, these privileged scholars of the stars, would seek royalty in the capitol city from someone wearing the seal of the empire. The magi looked for royalty in places they recognized as powerful: government institutions, even risking upsetting the powers-that-be. This seemingly-simple question, “Where is the King of the Jews?” becomes ironic when considering that Herod adopts the magi's title for Jesus. “King of the Jews,” is a name that is only used again when it is written on the cross bearing Jesus' body.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says that when the wise ones arrived in Jerusalem as they followed the star, they miscalculated from Jesus' location in Bethlehem by a mere nine miles. “What a long nine miles it is from the halls of power and glory...from the powers-that-be...or should we say, the powers-that-have-been, to what God is doing, out there on the margins... Even if it's only nine miles, then it's the longest nine miles we will ever travel, the longest nine miles this world, including the church, will ever travel.”² The gospel even says the magi lost sight of the star and did not see it again until they went toward Bethlehem where the true royalty, the true liberator, would be found. As we consider the magi's miscalculation, we must also notice that the clergy, the chief priests and legal

¹ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_january_6_2019

² "Missing by Nine Miles," *Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann*.

experts that Herod summoned to confirm the prophecy of the Messiah's birth, those folks did not follow the star. They did not even venture out of the palace to pay homage to the birth of the one foretold. As we rejoice in the magi's eventual arrival in Bethlehem, we remember how the magi show us that much of our faith is comprised of searching for truth and miscalculating, being drawn into discomfort, and stepping out into the wilds of uncertainty as we prepare ourselves to respond to whatever we find.

Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that the magi are notable not only for the prophetic dreams and glamorous gifts and discernment of Herod's will, but they are also the first Gentiles to recognize the coming of the Messiah in the gospel of Matthew. She said the Gentile magi "foreshadow the comprehensiveness of the coming kingdom [Jesus] will one day proclaim."³ This kingdom of beloved community is not one with walls and fences and a strict membership policy. In the Feasting on the Word commentary, Stephen Bauman writes of the type of seeking which Jesus calls us to, even from the moment of his birth: a radical departure from status-quo thinking. Bauman says,

"any seeker, whether by chance or authentic pursuit, can find [their] way to the manger. Certainly the church would not exist but for the determination or simple faith of seekers who stumbled into the hay surrounding Jesus' birthing trough...Yet among the various amateur spiritualists... may be some who are better able to kneel at the manger than those who have worshipped for a lifetime. Not every committed Christian in name has a taste for actually kneeling in the dust and muck of a barn in a backwater town with astonished recognition that this is where God prefers to make an entrance."⁴

And this is one of the miracles of the Christmas story: that at first, these traveling magi sought wisdom in the halls of power...but upon encountering the young Jesus with his mother, they experienced the incarnational God. They found, as one scholar writes, "an economically limited toddler, in modest surroundings, lying in a teen mother's arms...To the intellectually perceptive, this scene was not a scholar's formula for future success. Yet, by grace, the magi had the faith to experience unbridled joy."⁵ What then could they do but worship upon bended

³ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1

⁴ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 1

⁵ Shelley D.B. Copeland, Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol. 1

knee, in awe at the vulnerable child containing all the cosmos? During this visit, the magi soon realized Herod's power did not come from heavenly knowledge, but from concern for preserving his own status and the status quo of the empire. And so they disobeyed his wishes to report back to Jerusalem with the location of the Messiah. And when the time came to leave Jesus, they returned to their origin by another way. They could not help but be changed by the child they did not even know they were seeking, the one they risked all to find. The reward to their risk was the opportunity to respond to pure grace.

Again, Rev. Matthews:

“Don't we want to find ourselves in the story, too, to hear what happened so long ago, and to connect our own lives with it? We want to feel ourselves, strangers from a distant land and far-off time, kneeling with the wise ones from the East, in awe and joy for the gift before us. And we want to know how God is still at work in this world we live in now, how God is still speaking to us, today, as God spoke through the prophets, through dreams and angels and a bright, shining star, so long ago.”⁶

Perhaps the answer is in the circular grammar of Matthew's gospel that begins and ends with a diverse group of people paying homage to Jesus Christ. Perhaps we find ourselves as we seek alongside the wise ones, brush against then confront power and privilege each in our own way, and wonder what we have to offer as we kneel manger-side. William J. Danaher, Jr. writes in *Feasting on the Word* that the gift of Christ Jesus is an expression of God's infinite generosity... to this,

“there is no way to enter the economy established by the Christ child as equals or to offer anything in return that can match the gift that has been given. Rather, the gifts of the magi are symbolic, even sacramental, offerings signaling that disciples of Jesus are called to participate in this infinite generosity by giving themselves to God and others freely.”

And so as we transition to welcoming the epiphany, the divine revelation which the wise ones sought so long ago, the magi's quest calls to us. I pray that our encounter with Jesus the child draws us in and empowers us to take risks to seek

⁶ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_january_6_2019

what we do not know. I pray witnessing the star in the sky and the star in the form of a vulnerable baby leaves us passionate to reflect the abundance of God to the world. I pray the generosity of the magi opens our hearts to discern between the powers of the empire and the grace of the Holy One.

When we, like the wise ones, meet the infant Jesus, the toddler, the child of compassion and grace, we are given the opportunity to respond to Emmanuel. In our responding, we return to ourselves and our communities by another road, a well-traveled road paved by those who find our home in God-with-us. As we sang earlier, “As with joyful steps they sped, to that lowly manger bed, here to bend the knee before One whom heaven and earth adore, so may we with willing feet ever seek your mercy-seat!” Rejoice, Emmanuel has come. All shall be well.