

Sermon Matthew 2:1-12 Epiphany Sunday January 3, 2016

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem village, Judah territory— this was during Herod’s kingship—a band of scholars arrived in Jerusalem from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We’re on pilgrimage to worship him. When word of their inquiry got to Herod, he was terrified—and not Herod alone, but most of Jerusalem as well. Herod lost no time. He gathered all the high priests and religion scholars in the city together and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” They told him, “Bethlehem, Judah territory. The prophet Micah wrote it plainly: It’s you, Bethlehem, in Judah’s land, no longer bringing up the rear. From you will come the leader who will shepherd-rule my people, my Israel.” Herod then arranged a secret meeting with the scholars from the East. Pretending to be as devout as they were, he got them to tell him exactly when the birth-announcement star appeared. Then he told them the prophecy about Bethlehem, and said, “Go find this child. Leave no stone unturned. As soon as you find him, send word and I’ll join you at once in your worship.” Instructed by the king, they set off. Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. It led them on until it hovered over the place of the child. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time! They entered the house and saw the child in the arms of Mary, his mother. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped him. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.

We started this journey towards Christmas, towards Bethlehem, with a suitcase that held this nativity scene. Every week we pulled out a new character and set her (Mary was first) or him (Joseph was next) it in the manger. We realized that some of the cast members in God’s drama to become one of us weren’t in the manger but are still important in the telling of God’s story, like Elizabeth and John.

We each begin our a journey with a suitcase that holds our newborn clothes and baby blankets and the oversized maternity shirts our mothers wore to the hospital that they planned to burn and never see again. We are a journeying people, just like our God, who journeyed from heaven to earth, from earth to the cross, and from the cross to the grave, and from the grave to the resurrected life.

The spiritual life is referred to as a journey and the suitcase our spiritual practices... those exercises we do that help us travel with Jesus. Today we celebrate the Magi who traveled, following the star, to the baby Jesus and who brought Him their best gifts, gifts suited for a newborn king. It’s important for the church to remember that the good news of God’s journey from heaven to earth was first told to outsiders: first to the shepherds (and if you were here on Christmas Eve you both saw our dog Zelda dressed as a lamb and you heard that shepherds were the least of the least. Smelling of sheep and dung, ritually unclean, of doubtful character, shepherds were outcasts.) When the shepherds had gone home, the good news of God’s journey from divinity to humanity was then told to the Magi, men who read and interpreted the stars for a living. They were outsiders, also considered heathen, outsiders, astrologers, and sorcerers.

From the very beginning of His journey to share our human life Jesus set the world on its head when His birth was announced to people who didn't have a pew to sit on. (In other words there wouldn't be a place for them – and they wouldn't expect there to be a welcome or an invitation - in the synagogue or the church.) Jesus would later identify His mission by saying, "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost."

The shepherds remind us of God's connection with the poor and humble people of earth, and that all of us share those humble origins, all of us formed from the dust of the earth. The Magi remind us that people in all times and places and ethnicities and beliefs yearn for and seek God. St. Augustine prayed the prayer of the Magi and of all "spiritual but not religious people" and of all humanity: "*Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in Thee.*"

Most of us in the church began our Christian journey as young children. We went to church and prayed and sang hymns and went to vacation bible school because it was what our families did. This was a wonderful gift our parents and grandparents gave to us... this familiarity we have with Jesus, and His star, and His story. But like all things we acquire in childhood, over time the story of God's journey from heaven into the human heart has lost some of its luster and shine.

And so today we turn to the Magi for help, for inspiration, to hear again about them following the star that led to Christ. We look inside their suitcases for what we can learn from them. The Magi brought gifts to honor the Christ-child and their gifts symbolize humanity's response to God's surprising, wondrous, impossible gift: God gave to the world God's very own self in the person of Jesus. The Magi brought gifts to symbolize the sacredness of giving the gift of our-selves back to God, and to others.

They journeyed to the manger to find and bring gifts to the Christ-child in response to God's gift of Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God-with-us. God is the first gift-giver and we give gifts because we are part of God's life... the always intertwined and interconnected life and gifts of love, of mercy, of community (that is, intimate human fellowship) and of God's presence. God has and does and will always continue to give God's self extravagantly and freely to us... only asking that we give in response... give ourselves generously and wholeheartedly to God and to others.

The Trinitarian God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - is pictured in Celtic art as intertwining circles, or three stands of thread knotted for durability and beauty. The life of the three-in-one-God is imagined by theologians as active, playful, dancing, independent and interconnected at the same time. God the gift-giver invites us into this relationship of mutual joy and gift-giving. The best gifts we give God are similar to the gifts the Magi gave to the Christ-child: curiosity, wonder, and adoration.

I gave up on New Year's resolutions long ago. I've never managed to keep a New Year's resolution past February 1st. I think a better Christian response to the New Year... to every year that follows God's generous gift of Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Baby born in the manger... is to live more generously, give more fully of ourselves in worship and love and service.

A couple of years ago I asked Diana Naldoza if she'd be a member of the Welcome and Evangelism team, and she hesitated and asked me if she'd have to wear a short-sleeved shirt and carry a bible and go door-to-door. I said no she didn't have to do those things. That's what we seem to imagine about being a witness to the angels

and the shepherds and the star and the Magi and all of God's story... that we'll have to change our wardrobe and participate in uncomfortable and off-putting behavior.

All the cast of characters - most of them simple and humble, all of them willing to be used by God - all the people involved in God's journey from heaven to earth witness to us that who we are is enough.

Just be yourself: be a witness to the star, to the amazingly bright and persistent star in the night sky that led outcasts and foreigners to Jesus. The journey with the Christ-child will demand that you to be who you were meant to be, who you were created to be: a vessel of God's love and light to the whole world. You don't need to own a short-sleeved shirt or a crown or a camel to be a witness to the star, to the epiphany that happened, and that still happens, when people encounter Christ.

Lord, may we journey to the manger today with the innocence of our children, with the humility of the shepherds, and with the chutzpa of the Magi. We are more than witnesses to Your story... we have become included and intertwined in Your story, and it needs to be told through us.

...Otherwise our faith, our tradition, our experience of God, and love for God, will disappear just as surely as the Magi disappeared from the pages of scripture and were never heard of again. God used the angels and the shepherds and the Magi in telling God's story. And God uses us to continue to tell God's story.

The world is full of seekers, people on a journey seeking holiness and love and meaning... just as the Magi were seekers. The epiphany - the wondrous surprise! - of God's presence on earth was first given to outsiders and foreigners, and as we hear from the story of the Magi, the epiphany was given to seekers. All who seek God are invited to the manger to see the Christ-child, and to learn of God's endless love and mercy for all the world.

Today on Epiphany Sunday we journey with the Magi... and see through their eyes the bright star in the sky that tells all the world that God has journeyed from heaven to... us. Like the Magi let us bring our best gifts to the Christ-child... the love and mercy and kindness God has first given us.

This morning we journey from the manger to the Table of the Lord... and we remember that Jesus' journey was difficult and painful and led to the cross and the grave... and then surprise! God's story continued to unfold in the resurrection life, even as God's story continues to unfold today, through the lives of those who seek Jesus.

Please join me in our Communion liturgy found on the insert of the bulletin.

Pastor: The peace of Christ be with you all.

Everyone: And also with you.

Please turn to those near you and offer these words of blessing: "The peace of Christ to you!"

Pastor: The Lord is with us! Lift up your hearts!

Everyone: We lift them to the Lord!

Pastor: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

Everyone: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Worship Leader 1: Holy God, in the beginning was darkness, mystery, and You. By Your own Word, You shattered darkness with light. You set in the sky radiant beams of sunlight and punctured the night sky with sparkling jewels. You forever changed our darkness.

Worship Leader 2: Holy God, though there are shadows and worries, You have placed Your Word in us to be a lamp for our feet. You have given Your Spirit like a bright guiding star. You fill us with Your love as glorious as the sun. You place Your Truth like a crescent moon.

Everyone: Every darkness is overcome with Light and every Light contains shafts of Your Eternal light.

Worship Leader 1: God of the sun and stars, we praise You and with all the creatures of earth and all the company of heaven we join the unending hymn:

Everyone: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of Your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

Worship Leader 2: Ever persistent and ever loving God, You placed a star in the sky to guide people from far and near to Your child. Jesus became the Light of the World, drawing the lost and forgotten, the hurt and the wounded, the oppressed and depressed to the wellsprings of life. He changed water into wine, called unheralded workers to be disciples, preached good news to the poor, healed the sick and beckoned people to love their neighbor.

Everyone: By His baptism, suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus revealed the depths of Your love and the power of light over darkness.

Worship Leader 1: On night He was betrayed, Jesus gathered with His friends. He took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it to His followers saying, "Take, eat, this is My life broken for you."

Worship Leader 2: Likewise, Jesus took the cup, blessed it, gave it to His disciples saying, "Drink this, all of you, for this is My life poured out for you and for all for forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of Me."

Pastor: Therefore Holy God, grant that in praise and thanksgiving we may be a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable in your sight and that our lives may proclaim the mystery of faith.

Everyone: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

Pastor: Pour out Your Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts of bread and cup, that through Christ's presence we may become a beacon of holy light, a source of joy, and a witness for peace. By Your Spirit, make us one with Christ, one with each other, one

with seekers far and near, and one in ministry to all the world until we feast at the heavenly banquet.

Everyone: In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer *(sing responsively)* Led by Don Keeble

Our Father, (***Our Father***) Who art in Heaven, (***Who art in Heaven***) Hallowed be Thy name. (***Hallowed be Thy name.***) Thy kingdom come, (***Thy kingdom come***) Thy will be done (***Thy will be done***) On earth (***On earth***) As it is in heaven (***As it is in heaven.***) Give us this day (***Give us this day***) The food we need. (***The food we need.***) And forgive our sins (***And forgive our sins***) As we forgive those (***As we forgive those***) Who sin against us all. (***Who sin against us all.***) And lead us not (***And lead us not***) into temptation, (***into temptation***) but deliver us (***but deliver us***) From all evil. (***From all evil.***) For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. (***For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever.***) Our Father, (***Our Father***) Who art in Heaven, (***Who art in Heaven***) **Unison: Hallowed be Thy name.**

United Methodists practice an open table, which means that we recognize Jesus Christ as the Host of this meal. Christ welcomes to His Table all who desire to follow Him. Ushers will guide us to a Communion station in the front or back of the sanctuary; both offer a gluten-free option.