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January 9, 2022
Matthew 2:1-12
Close to Home: Home by Another Way

The Christmas narrative in scripture comes to a close this morning as we hear the story of the wise men or magi making their pilgrimage to meet the Christ child. Hear now these words from the gospel of Matthew, chapter 2.

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. This is the Word of the Lord.

Last Thursday, January 6 was notable for many reasons. Record-shattering numbers of COVID infections throughout the U.S. and the world. The one year anniversary of the insurrection at the U.S. Capital that threatened our democracy. And the celebration of the Epiphany. Epiphany sometimes gets lost in the after-Christmas frenzy of back-to-school, back-to-work, back-to-home after traveling ordeal. This year Epiphany was overshadowed a bit by other news stories, except in Louisiana, where a story about the first Mardi Gras parade of the season was on the front page of the New Orleans Time Picayune newspaper. It seems that January 6 is also the birthday of Joan of Arc (who would be 610 years old in case you are wondering). In New Orleans, the Joan of Arc parade is always the first parade of the Mardi Gras season. This year the parade featured doctors with crow-faced masks using brooms to sweep away the plague, carrying signs reading, "Be Gone Foul Plague." The news reported that the young woman posing as Joan of Arc received blessing from an actual priest at the door of St. Louis Cathedral, a brass band offered up a mournful rendition of Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah" in the midst of a double column of solemn angels, dancing heretics, and

banners that read “JUDGED” and “BURNED” (which according to reporter Doug Cash seemed to capture the social gestalt of both the 15th and 21st centuries pretty darned well).¹

You see Epiphany or the Feast of the Three Kings is the official start of the Mardi Gras season, something very apparent in the memories section of my FB feed this weekend from the 10 years we lived in Louisiana. While in other parts of the country, The Feast of the Three Kings may be subdued, if it happens at all, it is celebrated with passion and gusto in Louisiana. Accompanying the celebratory air is an important theological underpinning – the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, represented by the magi or kings who come to pay homage to the Christ child. And while it is called the Feast of the Three Kings – we don’t know actually how many kings there were, despite what we sing each year, and despite the tradition that their names were Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar.

. If you were paying close attention to the scripture this morning, you’ll note that it says “...wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” It doesn’t say how many wise men. We assume the number was three because three gifts were given. But it could be that there were just two magi and one was a bit overzealous and brought two gifts – got some good deals on Black Friday or maybe there were four magi and one forgot to place his order in time for it to arrive before they left – after all supply pipelines disruptions were a constant source of stress for gift-givers of this era – all of those looters and pillagers, not to mention the havoc wrecked by sandstorms.

If we go with tradition the magi wear specific colors to indicate their gift. Melchior, the eldest one in the gold cloak gave gold, a gift fit for a king. Balthasar, wearing the purple cloak, gave myrrh, a fragrance used both for anointing of kings and embalming the dead. And Gaspar, who wears a green cloak gave frankincense, an expensive incense and perfume. These gifts are thought to pay homage to a child who will be King; one who will die in the service of those he will rule; and one to whom prayers will ascend like the fragrant odors of perfume.²

These are memorable gifts – these gifts the magi brought to the infant Jesus. Scripture doesn’t tell us what Jesus and Mary and Joseph did with these gifts. Did they put them in a place of honor in their home? Did they sell them when times were lean? Did they tell the story when the family gathered about the remarkable strangers who gave them these gifts?

When I look back through my own life, I think about the memorable gifts I have received. The telescope I got when I was 7 or 8 that fed my love of astronomy. The set of tires for my car when I was in grad school (the moment I knew I was truly an adult) and the rubber racquetball Brian gave me the first year we were dating with a little note saying the gift was so that “No matter how bad my day was, I would always have a ball.” He is still making me laugh today.

In a recent New York Times column, opinion writer Esau McCauley wrote about a memorable gift he received one year. He recounts. “When I was growing up, one toy captured my imagination: a Power Wheels Jeep. It was the Christmas present that seemed out of reach of my family’s limited finances....every Christmas, I woke up to find that we were still, in fact, poor and I would not be driving my Power Wheels through the hood. Until the Christmas that

¹ https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/mardi_gras/article_0a2bba62-6fdc-11ec-a7f2-bb910862b0bb.html

² <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/holidays/do-we-know-the-three-wise-mens-names-in-the-bible.html>

changed everything. One year my mother, my siblings and I made our way to my grandmother's house to enjoy Christmas dinner with our extended family. As we approached the home, I saw a red and blue Power Wheels Jeep sitting in the driveway with a red bow attached."³

McCauley goes on to tell how his grandmother, who had a gambling addiction, won money through an illegal lotto and had used her winnings to buy many of her numerous grandkids the gifts of their dreams. McCauley says, "I have always considered that lottery a Christmas miracle...But as I have aged, I have been tempted to reconsider. Are these merely the pious memories of a naïve child looking for hope wherever he could find it?"

He continues, "When my doubts about my Christmas miracle surge within me, I am somewhat comforted by the story of the Magi, the wise men who visited Jesus sometime after he was born. Scholars [agree] that they were not Jews or worshipers of the God of Israel. They seemingly had no business anywhere near the holy child." McCauley ponders why some people get the gifts they wish for, while others do not. And why we expect Christmas to somehow even the playing field. He concludes that, "But Christmas, for the Christian, has never promised to soothe every pain or cure every ill. Unfortunately, life with God doesn't work that way. Instead, Christmas is the grand miracle that makes space for all the smaller miracles. It gives us enough hope to walk a little farther in the dark toward the glimmer of something that seems too distant to reach."

I really resonate with that last line, "Christmas gives us enough hope to walk a little farther in the dark toward the glimmer of something that seems too distant to reach." And I think about the magi so many years ago and the hope they must have had to walk a little (or ride their camel) a little farther and a little farther and a little farther in the dark toward the glimmer that must have seemed too distant to reach. But they kept going, following the light. And when they arrived they gave their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. And then they gave Jesus the greatest gift of all – their wisdom and their discernment. Our passage ends with these words, "And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."

The wise men were just that – wise. We don't know exactly what their professions were – maybe kings, maybe astrologers, maybe some kind of religious figures, but as people who interacted with other people and quite possibly people of power, they likely had pretty good radar for when someone was feeding them a line or playing fast and loose with the facts. So when Herod secretly called for them and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared and said to them, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage" I am guessing they thought it was a bit odd that Herod would need them to tell him where to go – after all he was the top Roman ruler of Judea, where Bethlehem was located. He certainly should have been in the know if a King of the Jewish people had just been born. So the magi were a bit suspicious to say the least.

And when they had a dream that told them to go home by another way, they listened to that dream. The magi – the wise men – had been given the gift of discernment – the gift of being able to judge well, to go beyond mere perception and the easiest thing to do, and to make a

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/23/opinion/christmas-is-weird.html>

more nuanced judgement. And exercising this gift of discernment saved Jesus and his family from the wrath of Herod, giving them the opportunity to go home to Nazareth via another route as well.

Each week during Advent and Christmas, we have been sharing a common benediction. We will share it again this morning. It includes a line you may have been curious about: “Be brave enough to go home by another way.” As we celebrate Epiphany, I invite you consider and pray about the ways you can travel that might be different in 2022; that might take you out of your comfort zones. What gifts can each of us bring to the Christ – to the church - Christ’s body here on earth? The most valuable gifts may not be what we society sees as the most valuable – shiny, expensive baubles. Rather those gifts that truly honor our Lord and Savior – like kindness, hospitality, patience, your time and energy. Can 2022 be a year where we discover gifts to be shared that we didn’t know we had; can we try going home via another route? Join me in prayer...