

The Reverend Marjo Anderson

A: Epiphany Sunday
Matthew 2:1-12

8 January 2023
Salem, Bridgeport

“Journey to Joy”

*“...after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
magi 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’.
...the chief priests and scribes...told him, “In Bethlehem...
[so] they set out;
and ...the star that they had seen at its rising...stopped over the place where the child was.
... overwhelmed with joy... they knelt down and paid him homage.
Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, & myrrh....”*

I just LOVE this strange story.

I say strange because despite its drama & beauty & truth, it only appears in 1 of the 4 gospels.
And I say strange because despite it being 1 of the 3 great festivals in the season of Epiphany,
most congregations in our denomination don't celebrate it –
unless its date of January 6 happens to fall on a Sunday.

To me, kicking off the season of Epiphany without celebrating the Epiphany of Our Lord,
is like kicking off the season of Easter without celebrating Easter Day.

And I also find this story strange because it tells us so much and yet at the same time so little.

Who were these magi?

How many were there?

Eastern tradition sets the number of Magi at 12,

but Western tradition sets their number at 3, probably based on the 3 gifts.

Where did they read about this prophecy

about how a certain star signified the birth of the king of the Jews?

Why were they interested in the birth of a Jewish king?

It's likely that it's exactly because we are given so little information about these magi
that so many traditions have grown up around them –

turning them from magi into kings, then into kings from 3 specific countries,
and then even giving them names of Balthazar, Melchior, and Casper.

But whether we take any of this literally or not,

the story has power because of the great truth it conveys –

because the story of the magi

is the story that every human being is called to live out.

What we imagine about these magi is that

because they are “from the East”

and because of their great interest in, knowledge of, & passion for astronomy & astrology,
they are likely very learned men from Persia.

Certainly they were scholars, and perhaps researchers and teachers as well.

Since there was no separation of religion and education and state in that culture

(as there wasn't in ancient Judaism), they may have been priests as well –

priests in the Zoroastrian faith, which was perhaps the first monotheistic religion.

Perhaps they may have also been, if not kings, at least government officials.

And, given the gifts they offer from their treasure chests, they obviously had wealth.

So, while we may not be certain of the details, these were certainly men of power and privilege.

And that's important to know.

Because despite their power and privilege, despite their great education,

despite their high position in society, despite their devotion to their own religion,
they are led to seek something more.

Despite all that they have in their lives, something happens that disrupts their status quo.

They are given a sign – a certain star –

and somehow, somehow, they are given a message with that sign –

that the star announces the birth of the king of the Jews.

We don't know if they found that prophecy in their own scriptures, or in some Jewish texts,

or whether they heard God speak it, or what.

All we know is that they understood that this star announced the birth of a Jewish king.

And something causes them to go and find that king.

So despite the fact that they are living great lives of power and privilege,

they are led to leave their country, their culture, and their comfort

and embark on a spiritual quest.

Despite all they had, there was something they couldn't find in their own country,

in their own culture, in their own knowledge, in their own religious traditions –

something they couldn't find where they were.

They were seeking something more.

And what they were seeking was an experience.

Their heart's desire was to encounter the living God and that's what they received.

If you think about it, this story is not unique to the magi.

It's a story that is repeated again and again throughout scripture and throughout history

and throughout our lives.

Like the magi, Saul was doing everything that he could within his own tradition to serve God
in the way he had been taught.

He couldn't have been better educated in Judaism, or more fervent in his beliefs,
or more committed to living out his faith.

But Jesus appeared to him in a divine revelation and said,

“Despite all of your training, all of your knowledge, all of your commitment,
there is something more than your religion, Saul.

There is that to which your religion is meant to point –

an encounter with the living God. And here I am.”

And after Saul encountered the risen Christ, he was a new person.

Like the magi, Martin Luther was doing everything that he could
within his own tradition to serve God in the way he had been taught.
But no matter how much he studied, no matter how much he served,
no matter how much he confessed, no matter how much he worshipped,
no matter how much he prayed, it wasn't enough –
until that day when God spoke to him through scripture
and Luther experienced the presence of the living God.

Even the disciples who had actually lived with Jesus for 3 years,
were left after his ascension with a longing to experience his presence again.
And so they stayed together, ate together, studied scripture together, and prayed together,
and God sent the Holy Spirit in a way that they could once again experience
the presence of the living God – and now in an even more powerful way.

The purpose of our lives here on earth is spiritual – not material.
We may have material goals & that's fine, and we may reach those goals & that's wonderful –
but if we don't see God's signs or hear God's messages,
if we're not willing to leave our comfort zone and follow where God leads,
if we don't have that encounter with the living God,
if we don't find our connection with God,
if we don't have that personal relationship with God,
if we don't find ourselves able to see and hear and feel God's presence in our lives,
then we are just like those magi before they saw the star,
we are just like Saul before his experience on the road to Damascus,
we are just like Martin Luther before the lightbulb went on and he came to know grace.
Each and every human being is put here on earth by God and given the purpose of finding God.
It's almost like a divine game of hide and seek,
as if we were once in some spiritual realm and God said to his children,
“Who wants to play a game of hide and seek?”
And we all said, “I do!”
And so God placed us here on earth and said,
“Ok! Close your eyes, count to 10 and then come and find me!”
And then we're off to play the game, to find our heavenly Father,
and when we do, we run and are caught up in his arms,
and there's no place else we'd rather be.

Each of us is like Martin Luther or Saul or the magi.
We worship, we learn, we serve, we pray,
but none of those things gives us what we truly seek.
but when we are willing to leave our comfortable world behind and follow where God leads, when
we're willing to let go of everything else that we hold dear,
then we will be led to the place where we find what we have always sought –
the place where we encounter the living God and find a joy beyond measure, a joy that
transforms who we are, a joy that never ends.

May you follow your star.

May you find Jesus.

May you offer him all that you are and all that you have.

And may you receive all the love and joy your heart can hold. Amen