

Sermon "A Significant Journey"

Scripture: Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

Epiphany Sunday, January 7, 2018

Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

The prophet Isaiah is well respected and loved for bringing home God's message of inclusivity in surprising and enlightening ways. On this Epiphany Sunday, our first scripture reading in Isaiah 60:1-6 is especially poignant. Not only does he compare the coming of God into the world as a brilliant light, this light will transform those outside of Israel as well as those within. Listen to the Word of God.

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

² For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and God's glory will appear over you.³ Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.⁴ Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD. Amen.

Our second scripture reading, Matthew 2:1-12, recalls the story of the Magi following the Star to the Christ Child. With the arrival of these wise ones from the East, the meaning of the Christmas story continues to unfold. God made God's self known not only to the poor, the broken and the marginal Israelite but God reveals God's self and welcomes all people including the Gentile, represented by these who were guided by the light of a star on a sincere and persistent search for meaning in their lives. This is the word of God.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.' ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵ They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

*⁶ "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^[d] my people Israel."'*

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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.' ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "A Significant Journey"

Text: ...wise men from the East came to Jerusalem...

Matthew 2:1b

Let us pray. Holy and loving God, teach us the significance of the journey of the magi and shed new light on our individual journeys. May the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Youth Specialties, an organization that provides resources for working with youth, put together a group of questions related to Christmas as recorded in Scripture and calls it the Christmas IQ Test. I have fond memories of giving this "IQ" test to the youth I led during my first call in Belleville, Illinois where I served for twelve years.

It sounds like a cinch, right? Wrong! Oh, there are some trick questions, no doubt, however the most telling aspect is how much of what we know of the Christmas story has been colored with legends in the retelling over the years.

You know something else...this was an upsetting experience for these young people. Nobody likes to flunk an IQ test but they expressed being upset for another reason. In fact, one young person said, "You're ruining our Christmas." They didn't want to hear that we don't know how many wise men came from the East or that they were astrologers and not kings. After all, we just sung, "We Three Kings of Orient Are." They didn't want to hear that the wise men found Jesus in a house...wasn't he still in the manger? And they certainly didn't want to hear that these wise men probably didn't arrive on Christmas Day. Traveling on foot from the East makes this logistically a little difficult.

This morning I would like to offer some background on the magi from the East...and the significance of this journey in light of the Christian Season of Epiphany we celebrate today: The Festival of Light.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem there were wise men from the East known as magi. These magi were originally a priestly class among the Persians according to the Greek historian Herodotus. Later this word magi refers to all kinds of magicians and sorcerers. Here the term refers to astrologers from East of Jordan. There is no indication these men were kings, which became a part of Christian tradition because of Old Testament verses such as Isaiah 60:3.

"And nations shall come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn."

The idea of three magi developed to correspond with the triple gift they presented: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Still later legend gave the three kings names and descriptions. Although we don't know the names of the magi or exactly how many traveled this journey, we do know some things about them.

We know that they were expecting a Messiah. It was their sincere search for the semi divine hero-ruler which brought them on this journey. Messianic hopes are expressed in Virgil's Fourth Epilogue about the Golden Age to come. During this time in history there was a powerful expectancy for the coming of a Messiah throughout the world. Likewise, it was inconceivable

that the birth of an important person, namely a Messianic King would go unattended by a stellar harbinger. The Messiah's birth must be hailed by a star!

We also know it was not uncommon for the magi to travel from Babylon to the west. Kings requested their consultation on the meaning of the stars and they were well respected. When Herod got word that the magi were in town to seek a king, of course, he would request to see them. Herod was obsessed with real or imagined usurpers.

In a poignant way Jesus was both a real and imagined usurper of Herod. Real in the sense that Jesus was indeed the Messianic King for which the world had been waiting; imagined because he had no intention of usurping Herod's rule over his kingdom.

Yes, Jesus was "the man born to be king" yet his reign was to be by integrity and love, not by control and force; and his rule was to be from a cross, not a throne. As the journey of the magi confirms: All people are included and welcome in this kingdom. When it comes to the love of God. *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus."*

The significance of the magi's journey is not the presents they brought. The significance is the miracle of their presence in the story. Today we celebrate Epiphany, the manifestation of God, and the magi who followed the light of the star to greet the Light of the world. If Christmas celebrates God's embrace of humanity, then Epiphany announces that God embraces all of humanity.

Our individual journeys have brought us together in this place to worship the One born in Bethlehem. Just as the wise men didn't make their journey in one day, you and I are at different places in our individual journeys of a lifetime. Sometimes the star seems clearer and brighter than other times. We are not alone in this experience.

In as much as we like to neatly package the Christmas story when we tell it to our children, the danger is that it begins to lose the reality of life and the ambiguity that is often a part of our reality. As with our personal memories, the journey of the wise men was not as simple and neatly packaged as it begins to sound after years of retelling. Therefore, we need not feel overwhelmed or a sense of guilt and awkwardness if everything in our lives is not in perfect order or if we find ourselves living with a sense of uncertainty.

Today we celebrate the God who is the light of the world, who joined us in our humanity and who came for all humanity. Today, we ordain and install church officers who have accepted the call to lead us in the spirit of Epiphany; to shine the light of Christ in the dark and broken places of our world, and when that light is not as bright and clear for us, to encourage one another on our faith journeys, and to welcome all who seek a Savior and who long for respect, acceptance and love. Amen.