

Join the Celebration
Matthew 2:1-12
January 6, 2019 – Epiphany of the Lord

In those days, some two thousand year ago, wise men, astrologers, magi, came from the East in search of the “King of the Jews.” They came from the East to honor him, to bow to him, to bring him some very expensive presents. Who were these wise men? Tradition tells us that they were learned individuals, astrologers, people who studied the skies. They must have been men of means. First they had the time to observe the skies, to study and to contemplate. And they had the time and the means to travel. They also had the means to bring some very expensive gifts to the holy family.

But this year, as I thought about the wise men, I thought about their journey. The Bible simply says they were from the East. East of Bethlehem, there is a whole lot of desert. Thus, most scholars theorize that the magi came from Persia. Some have even suggested that they may have come from India. For sake of argument, let’s assume they came from Persia. Friends, it’s almost 9000 miles from Persia to Bethlehem. India is even further. What must their journey have been like? Think about it. . . They were traveling by camel. What’s the best mileage a camel can make? – Maybe 60 miles/day? At that rate it would take 150 days to get from Persia to Bethlehem. What was their trip like? What did they experience? What did they talk about on the way?

Modern day astronomers tell us some very special things happened in the sky at about the time that Jesus was born. Two planets, Jupiter (known to the ancients as the planet of the Jews) and Mars (known as the planet of Kings), moved in retrograde, that is they reversed direction in the sky, to come into conjunction, to come into perfect alignment, forming a very bright object. And this happened in the constellation of Pisces, (the constellation of the Jews). All of this is astronomical fact. It does not even consider that something even more miraculous might have happened. And so, astrologers, watching these planets reverse motion and begin coming ever closer together may well have predicted a special event.

This brings me to my first point for today. How much faith does it take for someone, based on the events of the night sky, to mount a camel and travel several thousand miles to bow before a mother and child? I’ve tried to imagine the conversations between the wise men, around their campfire in the evenings? One might ask, “Where will our journey lead?” Another might say, “I’ve read the Hebrew scriptures. Micah, the prophet of old, says that one who will rule Israel will come from Bethlehem of Ephrathah.” The third might comment, “Bethlehem – that’s a long way off.” The second might again comment, “Yes, but this may be

the biggest event of our lifetime. We can afford to spend a year going to witness, to honor, and to pray.” And so, in faith, they traveled on, traveled the old trade route, traveled from oasis to oasis across the desert. And, one of the things we can learn from the wise men is a model of total, unrelenting faith.

The wise men serve another function for us in this twenty-first century after the birth. I have sometimes suggested that we juxtapose the wise men with the shepherds. Now, the professor in me must remind you that the story of the wise men is in Matthew’s Gospel; and the story of the shepherds is in Luke. Still, every Christmas pageant and every nativity scene shows both gathered around the manger. And, while I want to keep Matthew and Luke separate, each telling their own story in their own right; I also like the juxtaposition of the shepherds and the wise men. The shepherds represent some of the poorest elements in first century society – humble watchmen, paid a few shekels to watch over a landowner’s sheep. And yes, that’s Luke’s story – the story of Jesus coming to the commoners. And, the wise men. . . Well we’ve already discussed how the wise men must have had very significant means. They were the wealthy, the aristocracy. And that’s in keeping with Matthew’s story. And history brings these two extreme segments of society together at the manger, because Jesus brings these two segments together. How often have I said that Christ is the Christ for all people. Christ brings the love of God to all people; and all means all – no exceptions. The baby came to the rich and the poor. The baby came to the Jew and the Gentile. The baby came to the Judean and the foreigner. The baby came to all people; and the baby came for you and for me.

And so, the wise men arrived at their destination, from wherever they came, for however long they traveled. The wise men arrived at their destination, they fell on their knees and they honored him; and opening their treasure chests, they offered gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Can you imagine the joy of having completed the journey, the joy of finally seeing the baby and the mother? (If you were in church last week, you heard me speak of the joy of Simeon and Anna when they first saw the baby at the temple in Jerusalem.) Today, we consider more joy brought by a humble child to all who would recognize the significance of the birth.

Some have pondered as to whether there is symbolic meaning to the gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the wise men brought. The common symbolism is that gold, of course, represents wealth, royalty, kingship. Frankincense was often burned as incense in worship of deities; and thus, it represented the godliness of the baby. And myrrh is a spice that was often used in burials, and it represented Jesus’ final fate. I recently read a different explanation that postulated that the gold was not really gold, but golden spice – what today we know as turmeric; and supposedly, in the first century, turmeric was more costly than gold itself. This theory then suggested that all three gifts were spices of healing, good health, and

longevity. Personally, I find that a bit of a stretch, but an interesting stretch for someone who both enjoys fine cooking and good, healthy food. Still, I tell you, I don't think the actual disposition of the gifts are as important as the gifts themselves.

Remember, the wise men are part of Matthew's story of Jesus; and immediately after the wise men leave, Joseph takes his family – Mary and the baby to Egypt to escape the terror of King Herod. Some have asked how this poor, young family could afford to travel to Egypt and to live there from some time. The answer is simple – they were able to live off the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. If this be the case, the gift of the wise men was more than money. In fact, the wise men enabled the family to survive Herod's reign of terror. How often have I said that the Holy Spirit works in strange ways?

So where does all this leave us on this day of Epiphany, 2019? What can we take away from the wise men? Number One: Faith, unending, unceasing faith. I go back to the journey. Did the wise men ever get tired of traveling? Did they ever contemplate simply turning around and going home? We don't know; but the fact is: they continued on, day after day, night after desert night, they traveled, following the star, seeking the king of the Jews. I pray for their faith. I pray for their faith in the good times, when sometimes it's easy to forget about God; and, I pray for their faith in the hard times, when it's easy to question God. I pray for their faith for myself; and I pray for their faith for you, our congregation; and I pray for their faith for our leaders that they might lead in a manner in keeping with the Gospel, the good news of God's Amazing Love.

But, the story of the wise men is not just a story of faith, it's also a story of the joy that arises out of that faith. Did you hear that in our reading for today: “. . . 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.” Indeed their faith had brought them great joy, overwhelming joy. Oh, by the way, do you remember the angel's pronouncement to the shepherds: “Behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all people.”

Friends, it's Epiphany. It's time to celebrate for we have a Savior. We have a Lord. And, we also have a loving friend and companion who will always be with us, who will accompany us on our journey wherever that journey may lead. And, yes, that companion will give us peace and hope, love and joy; if we only put our faith in him. Amen.

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