

Sunday of the Epiphany – January 5, 2020 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony
Isaiah 60:1-6, Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14, Ephesians 3:1-12

I want to speak today of Matthew's story of the Magi. The story is simple in its telling but has much to teach us in its symbolism. The story has all the elements of a good tale. Adventure, courage, challenge, determination and the unknown. But this is much more than simply an ancient travelogue. It is not coincidental that the word Magi reminds us of other words, among them magic and mystery. Over the centuries we have come to call these visitors wisemen, alluding to their spiritual depth and we have called them kings, alluding to their power and wealth.

Wise men and powerful they may have been but their most important attributes for us are still held in the name Magi, magic, mystery, "other" and ones totally outside common experience. What does their coming to seek the newly born child in Bethlehem reveal to us? What makes this a story of faith and hope rather than only a story about a journey?

One of the things revealed is in the very nature of the Magi themselves. They were Gentiles seeking the King of the Jews. They were the one's through whom God revealed to the world that the promise of peace and hope was not only to the children of Israel but to the whole world and to the whole of creation. The Magi represent the assurance to us and all who are "other", foreign and not quite like us that God loves and cares for each and all. The Magi brought gifts but they were also a gift to humankind. They enabled human beings to see the holiness of the child at Bethlehem and the potential for holiness that exists within us all. And it all began with a star which appeared in the sky and was unexplained. The star represents for us, God's gift of revelation. For without God's choosing to reveal God's self in scripture, in the prophets, in the star and ultimately in Jesus, we would not know God. We would not have the possibility of relationship with God. Our world would be very different. The thing most noticeable about stars is that they give off light. This star was very bright, giving off a good deal of light. It was new light, and new light changes the way we see things around us. New light gives the possibility of seeing in a new way.

The sky, the planets and the stars were objects of intense study because it was thought that they influenced earthly events. The Magi were astronomers and astrologers studying the heavens to understand their world. The two studies were companions. Astronomy outlined the physical sky and astrology brought meaning to what was seen.

The star that appeared in the heavens seemed to be brighter, more constant, more compelling than any that had been seen before. And so, a group of Magi determined to investigate, to go on a journey to discover the meaning of this new, bright astronomical event. That is where the story begins. It is a story full of mystery, adventure, challenge, determination, courage and wealth. Legend has it that there were three who journeyed from the far away land to Bethlehem. But that is a notion brought about by the three gifts that were given to the baby in Bethlehem. To undertake a journey from home to the far place and return involved many people. There was the planning, the provisioning, the support staff, the beasts of burden, the

route planning. This was the ancient equivalent to NASA launch to the moon. It was most probably a company of many more than three. It would have been easier by far to simply turn a blind eye and ignore the star in the heaven. Had they done so, I have no doubt that the star would have eventually dimmed and gone away. God is like that, God invites us to come to know God more fully, to explore the mystery, to take part in the adventure that is faith. But, if we turn a blind eye, God will allow us to do so. The adventure of faith awaits us, just as the star awaited the Magi, but the choice to accept the challenge, to begin the journey is always ours. The Magi were not deterred by the challenge, the difficulty of what they were about to undertake. They were determined to find the answers to their questions. Their long experience in seeking the keys of knowledge held by the heavens had taught them that seeking understanding was the only way to quiet the desire for God that was within them. They also had learned that the seeking might lead to some temporary stillness, but that seeking begets more seeking when we speak of God and human beings.

We call the story of the journey of the Magi the Feast of the Epiphany. It is one of the major feasts of the church, a feast that is often lost between Christmas and Lent. It is an important memory to hold because in many ways the story of the Magi and their Epiphany is the story of our faith journey and our own epiphanies. What the Magi sought, ultimately, was hope, the hope that they found in a house in the person of a child who was more than a child, who was the Messiah.

This story with all the elements of a good tale is the story of exploration. The exploration of faith is what caused the Magi to set out on what can only be described as an arduous and harrowing journey. We are reminded in the celebration of Epiphany that we are all invited to undertake an exploration of faith in our own lives. Most of us will never set out across the desert as did those men from the East so long ago, but we do set out again and again in the adventure, the challenge and the hope of our relationship with God.

The Epiphany is more than a good story, although it is that. The Epiphany speaks to us of our own personal journey into the desert of our faith. The desert is often seen as a dry and inhospitable place. It can be such. But the desert also is the place of space, of room, of uncluttered vastness. It is the place where we can see beyond the immediate to the horizon. It is the place where we can seek and find, the place where we can confront that which we fear. The desert is the place of possibility and awe, it is the place of God.

Possibility and awe are what compelled the Magi to begin their journey to Bethlehem. Possibility held out by the star of a birth of one destined to be great and awe at what they discovered in the house in Bethlehem when they finally arrived. Possibility and awe, the fear and love of God are what the story of the Magi call us to recognize in our own seeking in faith. We can imagine what the journey must have been like, the journey of many miles and many months. The physical journey ignited within the Magi a journey that continued their whole life. They found what they sought, in the baby in Bethlehem but having found what they sought, they also found that it was only the beginning. They found that it was a conversion, a change a transformation of their lives. When we seek God in our own lives we are led to find what we

seek but in that finding is also a further impulse to continue the search, to seek more and more, to go deeper and deeper into the relationship and possibility that God has for us.

Finally, the Magi arrive, not in Bethlehem, but in Jerusalem. Could the star have been misguided after all? In Jerusalem they found Herod, the one with the title King of the Jews, but a false king for all that he held power. Herod was a puppet of the imperial Roman authority that occupied Judea and Jerusalem. Herod was caught in the middle, between human power and the power of God. What Herod sought to do was tame the mystery, control the magic and overpower the Magi with cunning. But he could not, he did not succeed against God.

As Matthew tells the story, the elements of the faith transformation experienced by the Magi, were not easy. In fact, they were in many ways dangerous. The star led these seekers first to Jerusalem, to the palace of Herod. When he heard the story that the Magi told, Herod was fearful that his power would be diminished. He feared that if he acknowledged the power of God in the birth of Jesus that God would ask of him things that he did not want to give. To acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah would be to let go of control and put himself under the power of God. It is an awesome step for anyone to take. When in faith we acknowledge the sovereignty of God in our lives, we relinquish human control in favor of a life under direction by God. There is a peace that comes with letting go that is the peace which passes understanding. And the good news is that with such peace, our power is changed but not diminished. This is not a stagnant peace, but one of action. A peace that lies under the ministry that God gives to each one of us. This is the peace that we were created by God to seek and have.

And so, the Magi, recognizing the treachery of Herod, continued on their way, continued to follow the guiding star until at last they found what they sought, in Bethlehem. And finding what they sought led them to worship, to present gifts and to reach what they thought was their journey's end. But it was not the end, it was only the beginning, a beginning of faith and transformation that would continue as they returned to the East and picked up their lives again. Lives that were the same yet also entirely different. Faith journeys faith transformations always have that effect. We continue in our lives as they have been at least on the surface, but our lives are entirely different, transformed.

The Magi were sent on their way by Herod with a false promise. Herod promised that he would come and worship the newly born Messiah in Bethlehem. But these were the Magi, the wisemen, and they recognized the falsehood in what Herod declared. They were not fooled and they continued to follow the star before them.

There are many false promises in our own journeys to a greater faith in God. Each of us faces our own unique set of false promises, false gifts, that attract away from the path set before us. The Magi were not fooled, they followed the star to Bethlehem, and we too have the capacity not to be fooled but to follow the star that God has set before us to lead us into deeper and deeper relationship with God.

Tradition says that when the Magi reached the house where Jesus was, they offered gifts. The number traditionally is three, gold, frankincense and myrrh. But this was not the first thing that

these wise men did when they approached Jesus. The scripture quaintly tells us that the Magi “paid him homage”. Homage, not a word we use routinely. Homage is an act of worship that entails submission, and the promise of loyalty and service. This act of homage that was given by the Magi was an act of transformation. Their lives were in this action committed to change forever. They recognized something so powerful in the encounter with the child that the act of homage was immediate and complete.

They were the first Gentiles to give their lives to Christ. After the worship, the homage, then came the tangible signs of who they recognized this child to be. Three tangible gifts, gold for the King they knew him to be, frankincense an aromatic used in the setting aside of a priest and myrrh, a spice used in embalming to foretell his death and also the great healing that Jesus would bring to humankind. King, priest and healer, God incarnate was what the Magi saw in the child, and what they saw they took away with them to ponder and treasure for the rest of their lives. They gave three gifts and left with one, the gift of the knowledge that in this child was the savior of the world. It was a gift they treasured and also a gift they shared as they returned home.

The phrase is that they “returned home by another way.” Another way, can mean a different route. It can also mean that they returned living out their lives in another way, the way that they had discovered at Bethlehem. This Epiphany as you ponder and treasure the story of the Magi, consider that you too have made the journey to Bethlehem to see the Christ Child, the Savior. And having made the journey and offered your own homage, consider too that you have been given a great gift, the gift of faith. What is the “other way” by which you will travel this year and beyond. What will God reveal to you on the journey? How will you see God in new and exciting ways?