

The Second Sunday after Christmas – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 01.03.21

Jeremiah 31: 7-14, Psalm 84: 1-8, Ephesians 1:3-6,15-19a, Matthew 2: 1-12

It's the second Sunday after Christmas. Most of the world has moved on. Moved on from Santa Claus and Christmas trees, to the new year, 2021, moved on to January white sales and looking for the first crocus to peek out of the soil in our gardens. In the Church we are still talking about Bethlehem, Mary, Joseph and a Baby, angels, Shepherds and Magi. It feels a bit like a chapter out of one of the popular "left behind" novels.

For Christians Christmas is not a one-day event. It is a season and for good reason. If we try to pack all of the story into one day, it is too much, we experience sensory overload. We miss the best parts, the parts where we see something new each year. We miss the parts where we can take a few moments to ponder anew what the birth of Jesus means to us now. We miss that time when we can reflect and treasure in our hearts what God has done for humankind. Christmas is a season for good reason.

Over the centuries the story has gotten condensed, digested if you will. If the most current biblical scholars are correct in their understanding, the events surrounding the birth of Jesus which we know as the Christmas story took place over two or so years. It is easy to forget that because Jesus was born of a human mother, the time from the announcement of the angel Gabriel of the impending birth to the stable in Bethlehem was at least 9 months. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem on foot every step of the way, was 90 miles, probably a trip of a week or more. The birth and perhaps even the visit of the shepherds took place in a 24-hour period. If we read the gospel of Matthew closely we find that the star the Magi followed stopped over a house not a stable. They entered to find a child not a baby. It makes sense. Without jet planes or automobiles, the journey from the east across the desert must have taken awhile, even without the stop off in Jerusalem to meet with King Herod. The Magi had to travel something like 500 miles to see the Messiah that had been born. They traveled with camels, not the swiftest of beasts.

The season of Christmas is just 12 days from Christmas Day to Epiphany on January sixth. During that time we relive again the momentous events of Christmas. In these twelve days we experience it all, from the visit of the shepherds to the coming of the Magi. The Feast of the Epiphany remembers each year the journey of those Magi. On arriving those men of foreign birth and exotic faith recognized God in human flesh in the person of Jesus. They seemed to know this was God immediately on seeing Jesus. For us it often takes a bit longer. The recognition of God in human flesh, among us, in the person of Jesus is the essence of faith. That faith is a journey that takes all of our life long, a journey of coming to treasure the great gift God has given us. And like the Magi, when we receive the gift and treasure it, we find that nothing is ever the same. We, like the Magi return to the world by a different road. For each one of us that road is singular unlike anyone else's. We are called on to use all of our faith, all of our God given gifts to walk the road that is our life

The recognition and acceptance of such a powerful and overwhelming event as the birth of God into the world as a baby takes some time to get used to. We can only come to a deep understanding by living and reliving these events over time, year by year as they unfold again.

Think about the gifts brought by the Magi, gold, frankincense and myrrh. Much attention has been paid by preachers and scholars to the meaning of these specific gifts. Gold representing royalty, frankincense for priestly duties, and myrrh pointing to the death Jesus would die. Symbolic gifts, gifts that in some manner seem to foreshadow the life that awaited Jesus, the Messiah.

But, in a strange way, it was not the gifts themselves that were important for the Magi to give. “Then opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts...” the scripture says. *Their treasure chests* containing those things which the Magi most valued, those things which they had brought at great distance and with great difficulty across the desert to Bethlehem. But they brought something more. They had followed a star, not knowing where it would lead, not knowing what danger lay ahead of them, not even knowing if they would ever see home again. They brought the gift of faith against all human reason, they brought courage to face the unknown, they brought a willingness to see beyond their own culture, their own religion, their own learning to something more. These were the gifts that came from the treasure chest as well as gold, frankincense and myrrh. Not material gifts, but gifts that allowed the three Magi to come and see what God had done. And having seen, they were changed forever, going home by a different road, to share what they had learned and experienced.

The Magi brought what they had, gold, frankincense, myrrh, but also courage, faith and a willingness to embrace the gift that God had for them. The Magi brought gifts, but received a priceless gift in return, the gift of wisdom. They received the insight to enable them to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

The other visitors, who came on Christmas night, the shepherds also brought what they had, they brought the gift of themselves. They had no gold, no frankincense, no myrrh, not anything the world valued, but they brought what God values more. They brought themselves and they too brought the gifts of courage, faith, and a willingness to see God’s hand at work. And so, strange as it might seem, the shepherds received the same gift of wisdom that was given the Magi. They too returned to their sheep by a different road, returned to tell all who would listen of what they had experienced and seen. To tell all who would listen about the wonderful gift of God to them.

In God’s economy, it matters little whether we have material wealth or simply the means to simply live from one day to the next. We are valued, we are needed, we have a place. What matters is that we bring the gifts we have, whatever those gifts are, and most importantly we bring the gift of ourselves. When we do so, again in this Christmas season, we will find ourselves changed.

As we enter 2021, it will be a year of challenge, but it can also be a year of joy, a year of blessings if we are willing to receive the gift God offers to us. The gift of wisdom to see what God asks of us and the courage to respond. Whether we are Magi or shepherds, or simply people of faith on Whidbey Island, God calls us to walk a new road with courage. The months behind

us have been in many ways dark but the star continues to lead. We are moving into the season of Epiphany where we will see the unique light that God has for each one of us. Follow the star, travel the road and bring gifts for the journey, especially that greatest gift of all, the gift of ourselves as we were created by God to be. A happy, blessed and gifted New Year to you all.