1/5-6/19 Rev. Amy Haines

MT 2:1-12, IS 60:1-6 Drawn to the Light Promises Fulfilled Series

How many of you have no signs of Christmas left around your house? You have already put away the tree, taken down the lights, and boxed up all of your nativities? You have all of your Christmas gifts unwrapped, de-tagged, and put away in their proper places? And how many of you groaned inwardly when you saw the list of hymns for this day, tired of singing the songs of Christmas?

Personally I love the season of Christmas. While I do have many of our gifts de-tagged and put away, our tree is still lit, the outside lights are still on, the nativities are still out, and I am still playing Christmas music in the car.

Ken has learned over the years that I will not even consider putting away the tree, or even turning off the tree lights, until after January 6th. If I put my nativities away before that day then I feel like I am being unfair to the wise men, limiting their place and presence in the Christmas story.

For January 6th is their feast day, the wise men’s special day on the church calendar, the day of the Epiphany of the Lord. In some cultures, January 6th is the Day of the Kings; in other places January 6th is Twelfth Night, the final day of the twelve days of Christmas.

Regardless of whether your decorations are put away or still on display, today we are all invited to learn from the wise men as we celebrate Epiphany.

Yet how many of us are like Dolly, the daughter in the “Family Circus” cartoon, who honestly gets the Christmas story all mixed up between biblical fact and fantasy?

Dolly once told her younger brother PJ the Christmas story by using these words:

.."Jesus was born just in time for Christmas up at the North Pole surrounded by 8 tiny reindeer and the Virgin Mary. Then Santa Claus showed up with lots of toys and stuff and some swaddling clothes. The three wise men and elves all sang carols while the Little Drummer Boy and Scrooge helped Joseph trim the tree. In the meantime, Frosty the Snowman saw this star…"

--Billy Strayhorn, epulpit.net, 12-24-98, adapted

Like Dolly, and especially in the story of the wise men, it is often hard for us to sort out what is Biblical and what is fantasy, what details are true and what details are embellishments that have been added over the years.

The famous travelers in today’s Scripture have been called magi, wise men, kings, astrologers and scholars. They have been numbered by tradition anywhere from 3-12. History has even assigned them names: Melchior and Gaspar and Balthasar

The Bible, however, does not say where exactly they are from, or how many made the long journey, or what they are named. Our image of their arrival on camels comes more from the prophet Isaiah and an assumption on travel at that time than from the biblical narrative.

The Bible also does not have the wise men arriving at the same time as the shepherds.

Only the Gospel of Matthew tells their story, and Matthew has them arriving not at the manger, not beside the shepherds, but at a house in Bethlehem sometime in the weeks, months or even year following Jesus’ birth.

We combine the stories from Luke and Matthew in our plays and nativities for ease of telling the story. Who doesn’t like to see kids dressed in royal robes alongside the shepherds?

What we do know about these wise men are they are surprise visitors who come to pay the Christ child homage. They are foreigners, they are Gentiles, they are non-believers, yet they recognize the presence of God in their midst and worship the baby Jesus. Their presence in this story is scandalous, a shock to Matthew’s early Jewish hearers. Imagine, infidels worshiping the Christ child!

Yet, along with the shepherds in the Christmas story, God uses the wise men to declare that God’s good news is indeed for all people, just as the angels proclaimed.

And today, the wise men remind us, once again, of the importance of our faith journeys, the importance of our worship, and the importance of going home another way.

**Importance of our Faith Journeys**

Have you ever wanted to follow a rainbow to its end, or get up early to catch the view of a brilliant sunrise? When Ken and I spent our honeymoon in Hawaii, he convinced me to get up really early on our last day, drive up the side of a volcano in the dark, and watch the sun appear above the clouds. I will admit, I was drawn to the light of the sun breaking above the clouds.

When we lived in Ottawa, I could sit on my couch in winter and through our front window watch the sun set over the flat farm field across the road. It is the only house I have ever lived in with such a view. Even here I can only glimpse the changing colors of the sunset through the trees behind our house.

I am reminded of my yearning to view the brilliance of a sunrise or sunset when I ponder the journey of the wise men. Their journey began because they saw a new star appear on the horizon, and were drawn to follow the light of that star.

Their journey is part of their contribution to the Christmas story. These men were sky scientists, astrologers who studied and mapped the stars, men who took note when stars appeared and disappeared.

As was customary in that day, the appearance of a new star was understood to signify the birth of a new king or a great leader. Stars were said to have appeared at the births of Alexander the Great and Nero among other great kings and leaders.

So when the wise men recognized a new star on the horizon, they did more than just ooh and aah and wonder whose birth the star might signify. Instead of just noting down the star’s appearance in their logs and going back to their daily lives, these wise men were drawn to follow the light of the star, beginning a journey to personally find and worship the baby born as king of the Jews.

Unlike many of us today who won’t leave home without a detailed itinerary and a specific destination, the wise men left their homes, their home country and their comfort zones to follow the light of a star and trust that God would guide them to the place God wanted them to be.

Like the people of Israel who trusted God to bring them back home from exile,

like the wise men who trusted God’s light in a star to guide them to an infant king,

we are also called to trust the path set before us by Christ, following God’s light and love in our lives, trusting that Christ goes with us.

When we say yes to becoming a follower of Jesus none of us know what the road ahead will look like. We don’t know what potholes or detours or incredible road trips await us.

Do we know now what ministry God will call us to complete? Do we know the exact location where God will plant our feet for ministry, for worship, for witnessing? Do we know when we begin our faith journeys who will come alongside us or who will reject us as we share our faith?

Our faith journeys, like the journey of the wise men, involve a lot of trust. Yet we grow through the journey of living and loving and walking by faith, trusting God to guide our paths, trusting God with our present as well as our tomorrow.

When we live by such faith and trust, then we are following in the footsteps of the wise men.

**Importance of our Worship**

When the wise men followed the star into Judea, they stopped in Jerusalem to inquire about a royal birth and to state their journey’s purpose: to worship the newborn king.

When they arrived in Bethlehem and came to the house where Mary, Joseph and Jesus resided,

they were overwhelmed with joy and worshipped the Christ child.

Consider how many of your nativity scenes have at least one of the wise men kneeling before the Christ child. Most of mine do!

These wise men were not paparazzi closing in for a better view; they were not curiosity seekers wanting to get the scoop on a newborn king to poor parents in a nondescript village. No, these wise men were focused on one purpose, and that purpose was to find and worship a newborn king whose star appeared in the sky. These wise men were focused on following the light to come and pay homage to the Christ child.

How many of us can say that is our purpose in life, our purpose on the journey of faith, to pay Christ homage?

Homage is an ancient word. According to the dictionary, homage means to show respect.

It is an action, an expression of high regard, a tribute to another. Today many of our Bible translations substitute the word “worship” for the word “homage”. What these translations are trying to convey is that the wise men then, as well as us today, are all called to show our respect, our honor, our obedience to Christ through our worship. Worship is an action that reflects our state of mind as well as our faith.

This is true when we gather for worship on a Sunday morning and this is true when we live by attitudes of respect in all we do throughout the week in our homes and at our businesses, with our families and with fellow believers, in our interactions with strangers and in our time spent with friends.

All of life should be lived in an attitude of worship. Can we here today proclaim that our worship is truly homage to Jesus? Do we offer our Lord the respect he deserves on a Sunday morning as well as throughout our lives? Is that part of our gift of faith?

When the wise men journeyed to pay homage to the Christ child, they brought three gifts that reflected their respect for a king and foreshadowed who Jesus was to become.

They brought Gold—riches you would bring to a king.

They brought Frankincense—a gift you would bring to a priest.

They brought Myrrh—a fragrance used in burial. --gbod.org adapted

If the wise men were surprised to find at the end of their journey a peasant couple in a humble house in the small town of Bethlehem, they did not show their surprise and disappointment by refusing to pay homage and by refusing to offer their lavish gifts. Worshipping Jesus was the end of their long journey, the fulfillment of following the light of a star to find the one who would shine God’s light and love to the world.

Their presence, however, would have been a shock to all who encountered them. Why would foreign astrologers find their way to the small village of Bethlehem to worship a baby whose birth few even noticed?

Yes, they fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.” V3

“Countless camels will cover your land, young camels from Midian and Ephah. They will all come from Sheba, carrying gold and incense, proclaiming the Lord’s praises.” V6

Yet Matthew is also reminding us that God’s light will shine for all the nations and God’s love is for all peoples.

When even Gentiles come to worship Jesus, can we do no less? Is our worship a duty, an obligation, or an opportunity to once again give our homage to Christ? Do we watch for glimpses of God in the midst of our ordinary lives, or are we so busy we miss the light of Christ shining into the darkness of our world?

**Importance of Going Home Another Way**

The wise men sacrificed their time to follow a star, they sacrificed their respect and gifts to pay homage to the Christ child, then they sacrificed their lives by risking disobedience to King Herod and going home by another road.

Remember when the wise men stopped in Jerusalem to ask for directions King Herod told them, “Search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I too may go and pay him homage.” Yet read on, beyond verse 12, and you will find that King Herod did not want to pay homage; he wanted to kill the Christ child, ruthlessly getting rid of any threat to his power.

There will always be darkness in our world, the darkness of violence and power, the darkness of grief and terror, the darkness of oppression and poverty. Yet into the midst of all of that darkness, God comes. God is with us. And God offers the light of his love, his grace, and his redemption that will guide and transform our lives.

The wise men, having been warned in a dream, traveled home by another road, thereby detouring around Herod, refusing to be a part of Herod’s evil scheme, refusing to sacrifice the life of the Christ child to save their own skins.

The wise men traveled home a different way than what had taken them to Bethlehem.

When we encounter the Christ child, when we kneel to pay homage to Christ, when we worship him and recognize his light in our lives, we also must go home another way, for we will no longer be the same.

Christ will change our lives. When we proclaim our belief and seek to live by faith in Jesus as God’s Son, our Savior and Lord, we will be changed. We will be forgiven our sins. We will learn to follow the ways of God rather than the ways of this world. We will have hope for tomorrow, knowing God is with us in this life and the life to come. We will know the importance of worship, of prayer, of study, of service for a growing life of faith.

Christ will change our lives when we pay him homage.

If you find yourself at the same place on your faith journey today as on New Year’s Day 2018, or in 2020 you remain where you are today, I pray that you will take seriously the journey of faith, and allow that journey to change you. Allow the Holy Spirit to work within you. Allow God’s light and love to shine into even the darkest corners of your life, to redeem and to transform you.

Each day, we are called to take another step on our faith journey.

Each day, we are called to deepen our trust in and worship of Christ.

Each day, we are called to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit in the direction God desires for us to go.

In this new year, may we not just talk about the importance of faith, but live it. May we allow Christ to shine through us so that others will be drawn to his light. May we reflect his ways in our ways, his love in our love, his hope in our hope.

Then, as we go forth into the journey that is 2019, may we follow the words of the late Oscar Romero who proclaimed, “When we leave *worship* [Mass], we ought to go out the way Moses descended Mt Sinai: with his face shining, with his heart brave and strong to face the world’s difficulties.”

--James Howell 1-6-19 ministrymatters.com

That is the way of our ancestors, the way of the wise men, the way of God. As we are drawn to the light of Christ, may that light reflect in our lives and in our worship.

May it be so, in this new year and beyond.

Let us pray.