1-5-20 The Journey of Christmas Rev. Amy Haines

Matt 2:1-12 Epiphany

Think of your favorite book or movie. Think of your favorite characters in that book or movie.

How do the characters grow throughout the story? What adventure or adversity do they encounter? What do they experience that challenges or changes them? Do they rise up and live into who they are called to be, or do they fail to claim who they are created to be?

This past week, I was honored to see not one, but two movies in the theater: *Frozen II* and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. That is a record for me in one month, let alone one week!

Without giving away spoilers, both movies took their main characters on journeys of growth and adventure. Elsa and Rey both yearned to find out where they came from, then had to deal with what they found. In *Frozen II* Christoff sang an 80s power ballad concerning his emotions.

In *Star Wars* Poe Dameron struggled to live into the leadership bestowed upon him.

Personally, I enjoy a good book, movie or television series that takes the characters on a journey, with highs and lows, struggles and celebrations, adventures and challenges.

I want to root for someone to move from struggle to blessing, or from despair to hope,

or from darkness to light, or from doubt to confidence.

Since seeing *Frozen II* on Monday, my daughter Rachel has been singing all week long

a song titled “Into the Unknown.” As a voice calls out to Elsa, she is fearful of going into the unknown, yet also excited to do so. Elsa sings, in part,

“I've had my adventure, I don't need something new
I'm afraid of what I'm risking if I follow you.”

Take those lines out of context from the movie, and how often do they also apply to our daily lives? How often do they also apply to our faith journeys? “I've had my adventure, I don't need something new I'm afraid of what I'm risking if I follow you.”

When God calls us to follow Jesus, how afraid are we of following where he leads us?

Are we willing to risk our comfort and preconceived notions to journey with Jesus?

Are we willing to risk growing in faith and growing in grace to journey with Jesus?

Journeys imply movement. From one place to another by car, plane or train. From one perspective to another by considering a new train of thought. From one way of living to another through intentional action. We cannot embark on a journey and remain where we are, or even who we are. For journeys change us. We are changed by who we meet, what we experience, and how we respond.

Consider the journey that was 2019. What were your highs and lows? What struggles or celebrations did you experience? How did the past year change you?

In your faith journey, how were you challenged or blessed as you followed Jesus?

Is your faith stronger today than one year ago? If so, what made the difference?

If not, how can you grow in faith over the next year?

Can you believe it is now 2020? That date used to seem so far away!

We don’t yet know what this year will bring, but we can be certain it will be a year of movement. Or at minimum a year of challenge and opportunity. We will face a presidential election. And our denomination’s general conference. We will face the call to reach out

to one another, our community and our world with the love of Jesus. Not with the hatred or apathy that surrounds us. But with the love of Jesus that moves through and among us.

Are we ready to journey by faith in this new year, ready to move closer to Christ in this new year, ready to reflect more of his love, his hope, his grace?

In the Christmas story every character embarks on an unexpected journey.

Mary and Joseph are told by angels they will begin the journey of parenthood earlier than expected. Joseph and Mary then travel to Bethlehem close to her due date for the mandatory government census. Shepherds left their flocks in the fields by night to journey into Bethlehem

to find the child celebrated by an angel chorus. Magi observed a new star on the horizon and moved out of their normal routines to follow the star and find the newborn King. The magi are also warned to steer clear of Jerusalem on the way home. Then Joseph and Mary, instead of returning to their hometown, fled to Egypt, to escape the wrath of King Herod.

Go beyond the Christmas story, and many more of our faith ancestors are found to be on the move. Noah and his family. Abraham and Sarah. Joseph. Moses. The people of Israel in the wilderness. Exiled leaders and the return of a faithful remnant. Disciples of Jesus sent out 2 by 2. Paul and his missionary journeys.

Each journey began with a choice. A choice to believe— or not. A choice to trust—or not.

A choice to live by faith—or not.

Do they believe the promises of God throughout Scripture, and believe those promises would be fulfilled? Do they trust God enough to step out in faith, to step out into an unknown future?

Do they trust God was with them, guiding their steps, with them no matter what they would face on their journey?

Thankfully, our faith ancestors show us how to choose to live by faith, by trust, by hope, by love.

They also remind us, especially in the Christmas story, that God’s love is a gift for all humankind.

Joseph and Mary were ordinary, faithful people called to parent the child of God. Shepherds were forgotten outcasts, living on the fringes of society, yet privileged to be the first to hear and share the good news of Jesus’ birth. The magi were foreigners given the gift of a star

to find their way to the Christ child.

In today’s Scripture, these famous travelers 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. The Bible also does not have the magi 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.

What we do know about these magi are they are surprise visitors who come to pay the Christ child homage. Their presence in this story is scandalous, since they are foreigners, they are Gentiles, they are non-believers, yet they, too, are invited to worship Jesus.

God speaks to the world through the magi, to declare that God’s good news of salvation is indeed for all people, just as the angels proclaimed.

The journey of the magi 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 magi 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 log sand going back to their daily lives, these magi were drawn to begin a journey to personally find and worship the baby born as king of the Jews.

The magi 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.

How do we live by such faith and trust in God to guide us?

Sometimes I wonder—

what were the magi expecting when they started out on the journey following the star?

Were they looking merely for adventure, a good story to take home to tell others?

Were they looking for new royalty for their land and for the land of Israel?

Were they hoping to find the Messiah of whom Daniel had long ago prophesied?

Did they ever think about turning around in the middle of the desert and giving up on what others would call a wild goose chase?

When they reached the city of Jerusalem and were told to go to the village of Bethlehem,

did they ever second guess themselves and wonder what kind of game the heavens were playing on them?

And then, when they arrived with all their riches and wealth in the small town of Bethlehem,

when they realized that Jesus’ birth had gone unnoticed by so many around him, did they ever begin to question God’s choice or be disappointed by what they found under the star?

We really have no idea what the magi thought along their journey. We only know that they saw a star and stepped out in faith; they trusted that their journey would take them to a new king;

and when they arrived and knelt before the infant Jesus, they were overwhelmed with joy and worshiped him.

That was the purpose of their journey—worship. To greet and welcome and pay homage to the newborn king.

The gifts they brought were secondary. Their gifts were their offerings of gratitude for who Jesus was and would become.

Their gifts foreshadowed Jesus’ future.

Gold—riches you would bring to a king.

Frankincense—a gift you would bring to a priest.

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

These magi 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.

We touched on Herod’s part in the Christmas story last week, as he sought to trick the magi into directing him to the child whom Herod saw as a threat to his power. When the magi didn’t return to Jerusalem, Herod killed all the infants two and under in and around Bethlehem,

yet was unable to kill the Christ child.

Herod reminds us that the gift of Christmas is given in the midst of the real world. Jesus came into a world of darkness. And our world still is filled with darkness- 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 and our journeys of faith.

The magi, having been warned in a dream, traveled home by another road, 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 magi journeyed home changed by their encounters with Herod and the Christ child.

How has the journey of Christmas changed you?

Throughout Advent, we spent time pondering the words of John Wesley, who invited us to choose to move from almost to altogether Christians. To move from a superficial faith to a deep faith, a faith grounded in God’s love, God’s hope, God’s peace, God’s joy, God’s trust.

Are we ready in 2020 to embark on the journey to be more like Christ each and every day?

Are we ready in 2020 to live as altogether Christians? Are we ready in 2020 to follow in the footsteps of magi and shepherds, of Joseph and Mary, trusting God, worshipping Christ,

and following wherever the Holy Spirit leads us?

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.

Living by faith is an important journey. No matter when we start to live by faith, whether we are 8 or 80, we are all called to grow in our faith, and to continue growing throughout our lives.

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.

..In John Perkins’ memoir, *Dream with Me*, the civil rights leader describes how a life lived with God can change very suddenly, and what was seemingly impossible can become possible.

He wrote:

How in the world did I get here? The only answer I know to give is that these things can happen

when you walk with God. It’s easy to look at a person—to see where he started and how far he has come—and think you know how the story will end. But I’ve learned what Saul learned on the road to Damascus: when God’s involved, everything can change in an instant. You may think you know where you’re headed, but often God has a different plan—something “exceedingly abundantly above all that [you] ask or think” (Eph. 3:20 NKJV).

Sometimes a light drizzle becomes a deluge. Other times you open your eyes to find yourself by still waters. Sometimes you hear thunder clapping along with the rain. Other times the clouds disappear so you can see a billion stars in the sky.

*-John M.Perkins, Dream with Me, Baker Publishing Group.*

thepastorsworkshop.com:journey

Sometimes God calls us to love the people around us. Sometimes God calls us to reach out to those we would least expect. Sometimes God calls us on a journey that moves us beyond our comfort zones. Sometimes God calls us to use the struggles we have experienced to assist others.

Each one of our journeys will be different. Yet wherever God calls us to go, we can go, in faith and hope and trust and confidence. Just like our ancestors before us. Wherever our journeys will take us, remember that we are not alone. God is with us.

So go boldly into 2020, to live the journey of faith God has called you to live.

Go faithfully into 2020, knowing God is guiding our steps, even when we go into the unknown.

Go lovingly into 2020, sharing the light and hope of Jesus with all you meet.

Go live out your faith journey with Jesus.

May it be so. Let us pray.