

The Second Sunday of Christmas – January 3, 2010
The Rev. Richard M. Simpson, Holden, MA
Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Nearly every year, the wise men seem to get lost in the midst of all the Christmas hustle and bustle. In the Christmas gospel itself, from Luke, they are nowhere to be found. While it is true that they do make an appearance in our live nativity pageant on Christmas Eve, by the time we get through the holy family, the stars, angels, shepherds and animals, they seem to arrive almost as an afterthought. The actual feast day devoted to their arrival at the manger, January 6, (the Feast of Epiphany or as it is known in some parts of the world, “Three Kings Day”) usually gets forgotten, at least by North American Christians.

I sometimes wonder if that has anything to do with starting in on Christmas right after Halloween, and if we truly kept to Advent in December what it might be like to savor the twelve days. In any event, even if your trees have already been taken down and baby Jesus has been carefully wrapped up in his box until next year, it is still Christmas—ladies still dancing and lords still a leaping! These wise guys, while getting close to Bethlehem, aren’t even due to arrive until Wednesday. But since I will be in Israel on Wednesday, and since the lectionary gave me the option of this reading from the second chapter of Matthew’s gospel for today, well, here they are and here we are! Next weekend we move into the Epiphany season itself: beginning at the Jordan River and ending six weeks later on the Mount of the Transfiguration.

There are three points I want to make about these wise guys as we begin a New Year together. First of all, *they come bearing gifts*. These gifts are sacramental: outward and visible signs that reveal deep, mystical truths. Gold is not only an appropriate gift for a king but probably for anybody worried about the state of the global economy and a weak dollar. Frankincense symbolizes an offering worthy of Christ’s divinity; incense crosses the boundaries of various religions as a symbol of God’s presence. Myrrh, as every Monty Python fan knows, is a balm and what on earth is one doing bringing a balm to a baby? In fact, however, to be more precise, myrrh is the first century equivalent of embalming fluid. It reminds us that birth and death are connected: both ends of life signify in this case not Christ’s divinity, but his humanity. Like the grass we wither and fade away, it is a part of what it means to be human, and every baby born will one day die, hopefully at a ripe old age. That’s just the way it is. This babe whose birth we continue to celebrate in this Christmas season will not be so lucky, however, as to live to a ripe old age. He will be cut down in his prime, dying on an old rugged cross on a hill outside of Jerusalem in the prime of his life. T. S. Eliot summed it up nicely in his classic poem, “The Journey of the Magi” when he asked: *...were we led all that way for Birth or Death?* The answer of course, is “yes.” As it turns out embalming fluid is a poignantly appropriate gift that reminds us exactly who this Child is.

God’s gift in Jesus Christ and God’s call to us as his followers is to become more generous givers ourselves. The offerings these magi bring to the Christ-child are meant to inspire us to bring our own gifts. But what can we give, poor as we are? *We can give our hearts*. We can give ourselves, our souls and our bodies, as a reasonable and living sacrifice. This theme will continue to weave its way through the Epiphany season that lies ahead as we explore stories of call and reflect on our own vocation to be the Church in this time and place.

Second: the fact that these travelers come from the east suggests that they are Gentiles and not Jews. It is a reminder that Christ’s work, from the moment of his birth, is about breaking down

the barriers that separate people from each other. The Greek word *epiphaneia* literally means “revelation” or “manifestation.” Christ is made manifest not only to Jews as messiah but to all the nations as “savior of the world.”

In our society there is a kind of language around inclusivity that focuses on toleration and political correctness that tends to flatten differences. “*We are all the same,*” people sometimes say, and I think they mean well. But my experience is that we are not all the same. Like the spices in a spice rack we are all different and we flavor things differently. We are all beloved, all valuable, and all created in the image of God; but we are not all the same.

So the appearance of these magi may serve to remind us that the work of Christ begins with breaking down the wall that separated Jew from Gentile and continues with breaking down the walls that separate all of God’s children from each other. Our call is not to merely tolerate the other but to love the stranger and to celebrate diversity. “*Glory be to God for dappled things,*” proclaimed the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Our task is to be instruments of peace and ambassadors of reconciliation, so that Christ is made manifest in this time and place by continuing in the work he began. We are called to love, not fear, the stranger.

Third: I want to reflect for just a couple of minutes on an important metaphor in Scripture and how that metaphor is important for us today. *We speak of faith as a journey.* In fact, right after our mission statement and vision statement, our very first core value here at St. Francis states that...

... Faith is a life-long journey; it is not certainty, but trust in God. We celebrate the fact that at any given time we are at different places in that journey.

These magi are not the first journeyers we meet in Scripture. Abraham and Sarah set out for a land they did not yet see based on a promise. They set out by faith. Moses and the Israelites left Egypt with Pharaoh’s army on their heels and journeyed through the wilderness of Sinai. They set out by faith. We could come up with countless examples, including Jesus’ disciples who were even willing to leave their father standing in a fishing boat to set out on a journey with Jesus. But for today, our attention is turned to these strange visitors from the east.

Sometimes we are like little children, playing hide and seek with God. We may say we want to have a more profound experience of God, a deeper faith in this New Year, a more serious commitment to following Christ more dearly, and nearly, and clearly. But if we aren’t willing to actually make any changes in our lives then it is unlikely that this will happen. We need to be willing to meet God halfway or at least take a step in the right direction. That may require of us that we set out into uncharted territory, often with little more than hints and half-guesses to go on. We need to take the risk of following our own star and finding our own “true north.” There are no guarantees when we set out on that journey to find Christ that we will find what we are looking for, anymore than there were guarantees for the magi. But when we look among the poor and hungry—whether in a first-century manger or a twenty-first century homeless shelter—we put ourselves into a place where we are more likely to both find and be found by Christ.

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The journey of faith will have many twists and turns. Too many Christians, including Episcopal Christians, have the mountaintop as their dominant unspoken metaphor for what faith is supposed to be like. We set out as if climbing up Mt. Wachusett or Mt. Zion or like Julie Andrews in the Sound of Music, thinking that the end of the journey is to reach a pinnacle where we will behold Christ and all will be clear and then we will “know” and then we will have confidence and then we will never doubt again.

But it doesn't work like that. The journey of faith is more cyclical; indeed more like a labyrinth. While it does include some hills, it also includes valleys. While it includes epiphanies, they sometimes lead us to uncertainty and doubt. What is required for such a journey is not certainty but trust: trust that God is with us as we make our way and take the next steps. This, I think, is the whole point of the Incarnation.

We are not told how many magi there were. We are told they had three gifts but it is possible some of them chipped in on one or more of those gifts. I'm happy to believe there were three, but the point is that there were definitely more than one. So it is with us as well: the journey of faith is personal, but not solitary. We need companions for the journey and we are promised that wherever two or three are gathered together, Christ is with us too.

Each of our stories are different: some of us are blinded by the light while others come to see little by little as our eyes adjust to the soft light of a candle shining in the darkness. Some will experience one big radical earth-shaking EPIPHANY while others will experience tiny little epiphanies along the way that accumulate to something approximating hope. We are not the same. And we cannot expect that in the midst of all of our diversity as God's people that we will see things the same way. As we begin a New Year together I invite you to give thanks for one another, as I give thanks for all of you. This is not a perfect congregation but it is, I believe, a place where you can be *who* you are and be *where* you are, with integrity.

None of us can tell with certainty what lies ahead in this New Year. Some will be born and some will die. Some will move here and become part of our life-together and others will move away. Some will find jobs and some will lose jobs. Some will find faith for the first time while others will lose their faith and still others will have their faith renewed again. There is an ebb and flow to this journey we are on. What binds us together, however, and remains constant from day to day and year to year, and decade to decade is Christ.

Through Holy Baptism we have been claimed as Christ's own and in return we have promised to love God and our neighbor. May the resolutions we make to begin this New Year draw us ever more into the love of God, and more deeply into this faith community, as the journey of faith continues.