

SERMON – JANUARY 6, 2008 – EPIPHANY
“THERE’S A STAR IN THE EAST”
Matthew 2: 1-12

Didn't you just love our wise men and camels this morning? I know they made their appearance a few weeks ago, but the story goes that they really came much later, maybe as long as two years. This is 12 days after Christmas – Epiphany – the traditional feast of remembering them, so let's let the story capture our imagination once again.

First of all, let me point out that when it comes to Christmas, we have mixed up Luke and Matthew who really tell two different stories, we mix in John who talks about the coming of the Light of the world, and on top of that there is some Persian influence and later church additives! (in Matthew, there's no mention of three – it could have been 10! – no mention of Kings, except King Herod and King Jesus, and no one is called by name!) Luke doesn't mention the wise men and Matthew doesn't mention the shepherds.

But with all that debunking – it doesn't take away from the story being a wonderful vehicle to let our imaginations soar!

Here we have Oriental Mystery men – where did they come from? what was it that captured their curiosity to go searching for one who was called the Messiah – remember, they weren't Jewish, so why did they care? How long were they traveling? We have very few actual details so they are prime candidates for the imagination to create a story. Add to it the drama of Herod – Tyrannical King who now wants to kill all the baby boys under two years old because of their story. So what gets set up is beginning of the conflict between Jesus and those in power.

Matthew and Luke had different purposes for the writing of their gospels. Matthew was writing to primarily a Jewish community and was concerned to trace Jesus back to the prophets. But he also was concerned with the expansion of Christianity to the wider known world – the last words he has Jesus saying to the disciples are, “Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”. So the gospel comes full circle – it starts with non-Jews, Gentiles who were not respected by the Jews – as the first worshipers!

This is radical! Magi in Jesus day were not wise men. They were not models of religious piety. They were magicians, astronomers, star-gazers, pseudo-scientists, fortune-tellers, horoscope fanatics, but Matthew makes them heroes in his first story following the Savior's birth. The Magi shouldn't be there! They are heretics. They don't worship the right God. They are the wrong race, the wrong religion. It is said that they came from Persia (modern day Iraq and Iran).

So, what are they doing in the story? They are Matthew's sign of the Universal Love of God. How amazing it is throughout scripture that it is the unexpected, the outsider, the “enemy” who becomes the vehicle of revelation.

These men were going to ask the uncomfortable questions. On the positive side, they have come with open minds able to discover that babe born in a humble place and they moved from being the worshipers of logic and signs and the stars, and suspended their “scientific” minds to bow in awe and wonder at the unexpected.

In their journey, they were off by nine miles. They went to where they expected to find news of a new King – to the seat of power – Herod. But no, this new king did not come from Royalty or power but from love – from two simple peasants following the will of God.

So, with that background, I remind you that there are many themes to this story, which is why it can get preached in a fresh way every year. Today, I'd like to use their journey to remind us of our own.

I give you three questions:

Where have we come from?

What gifts do we bring/

Where do we go from here?

Where have you come from this year to greet the Holy Child?

- has it been a hard dusty journey? For some, I know it has been – as you have faced health problems, or loss of loved ones, or family concerns, or fears in the face of world events.
- Has it been a journey of discovery – some have shared your stories with me that you are on a search – looking for a new relationship with Christ and have sought it out in a new community. Is there something that has been urging you to go deeper into your faith – a yearning to understand more?
- Has it been a journey of joy – have there been experiences this year that have brought that deep sense of contentment and thanksgiving?
- What kind of journey are you on right now? What will help you discover the foundations of faith that will sustain you through any experience? There is a sub-question to all of that that asks – What is it that compels us to seek out Jesus?
- Each journey is different and yet, in community, we discover those common threads as well.

What do you bring?

The Wise men were said to bring Gold and Frankincense and Myrrh, in their packs and left them at the feet of Jesus – but more than that they brought themselves – they used all of their innate gifts and energy to make the journey in the first place and they suspended their expectations to be able to be humbled and bow down in awe in a simple setting.

It's said that if they were wise women, they would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts and there would be peace on earth! What do you think?

What do you bring? What gift of yourself – your uniqueness, your skills, your time, your resources, your questions, your experiences of faith – what do you bring? Ask again, “How can this person, me, that God has created and continues to form and develop give one's best for the love of God to grow and act in God's creation.

By what route will you travel next?

How many got GPS's this Christmas? My friend Art did and he used it to get to our News Years gathering. I was in another car and saw him coming around a corner from the wrong direction – it seems that's the way the GPS took him. Now, he'd been to the house many times before, but didn't stick to the old route. He had to follow this new authority.

Will you stick to the familiar? Venture out to try something new? Will you depend on someone else setting the direction?

The wise men were warned to go another direction – to not return by way of Jerusalem and Herod – their old reliance on power and authority was now suspect. Sometimes, what happens in our lives sets us out on an adventure – the unknown – occasionally by choice, often by circumstances.

So, as the new year begins, and as the light of a star draws us a long a new road – off we go! Our packs are a little lighter as we have left our gifts. Our hearts are brighter as we have followed the star, and now, we're ready – Where in the world is God taking us next?