

“Wise Men from the East”

January 3, 2016

Epiphany Sunday

We’ve been talking about journeys since before Christmas. Some journeys that we don’t want to take. Some that turn out better than we expected. Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, the shepherds, Simeon and Anna who waited for God. All of them trusted in God to lead and guide them.

But some journeys take a long time. Our journey to Bethlehem and our look at the people and places of Christmas wouldn’t be complete without the wise men, although it’s interesting to note that though we might want to put the wise men at the manger with Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds, Gospel writer Matthew tells us that they found Jesus in a house. Take a listen to a wise man this morning:

MEDIA: “THE FIRST CHRISTMAS – WISE MAN”

I think of the magi as exotic, eccentric men who come into Herod’s palace with a lot of fanfare. But they probably weren’t kings as much as they were seekers of truth. And, really, isn’t that all of us? Don’t we want to be seekers of truth?

They came from Persia - modern-day Iran or Iraq. And it’s important to pay attention to their journey. We can learn a lot about how we grow in faith. For the magi, it begins with **observation**. “We saw his star when it rose...” They were experts on the stars who counseled those in power. They were observers. They were looking for signs.

How many of us are looking for signs? Last week, when you gathered, Dirk invited you to think about how you experienced God. If we’re not looking for or anticipating God’s presence, we might miss it! We can be so distracted and disillusioned that we ignore how God is working around us and showing up in ways we never expected!

For me, looking for signs has become important in these past couple of weeks. I know from my experience that when a loved one dies, we are more attuned to looking and watching. The day after my grandma’s funeral, both of my sisters called to tell me that they had experienced signs of God’s comfort and peace. My older sister saw 19 cardinals in her yard on December 23. For us, it was a sign of love and grace from God.

Looking for signs is important, but we don’t stop there. From observation, the wise men moved to **investigation**. They came to Jerusalem from the East asking about the new king because they had seen a star. They invested their time, money, and energy into this trip. Perhaps they knew something of the prophets of old who had promised a king. Were they waiting, too? Were they longing like Simeon and Anna for the coming of the One who would bring peace?

We do know that they wanted to worship this king. So much so that they go to King Herod who wants them to return to him when they find the king for his own purposes - so he can get rid of this new king who is a threat to his power. The magi follow the star. And it says they were excited when they came to the house where Jesus was.

Are you and I willing to invest ourselves to know more and grow more? Yes, I know it's a new year, and it's a time when people make resolutions, but the magi challenge me to think about how I use my time, money, and energy. What's the end goal? Am I growing closer to Jesus?

From investigation, they moved to **adoration**. They bowed down and worshiped him, it says. These adult men - educated, used to counseling people in power - are brought to their knees by a child. Jesus is the Light of the world! He is God with us! They offer gifts and return home bypassing King Herod.

These men were Gentiles – not Jews – who came to worship. They are the first Gentiles recorded in Scripture to have believed in Jesus as Savior. But another interesting wrinkle: they are Gentiles descended from the Babylonians. Their ancestors had taken the Israelites into exile. If there was any doubt that God welcomes all, that Jesus is for all the world, the magi confirm it.

That's what this season of Epiphany celebrates - that the Light of the world is for all people! Jesus comes for the whole world. Remember the humble, lowly shepherds and now these wise and wealthy seekers of truth? That, in itself, is a miracle! Even at his young age, Jesus was beginning to attract a mix of people – Jews and Gentiles alike.

The journey that the magi took was probably arduous. Scholars figure that they traveled many months – even up to two years and 1,000 about miles – to worship Jesus. Maybe they wanted to quit, turn around, and give up. Journeying with Jesus isn't easy. It involves risk. The magi show perseverance, which is a hallmark of faith in Jesus. Paul talks about perseverance more than once - running the race and persevering to the end.

We might want a life of faith to be easy, but it's not. It requires commitment and persistence, sometimes waiting and praying and hoping and waiting some more. It means that there are struggles - not because God is mean and awful, but because we are human. It means that there are joys - some overwhelming and some quieter - but all of them blessings that we claim and celebrate because God is good.

There's a church sign that shows up this time of year. It says, "NEW YEAR, SAME GOD." That's a powerful message about who God is and who I am. God is faithful, and God's love is steadfast even when I sin and fall short of what God intends. Does that mean I should give up? No! I can't do it on my own. I have to trust in Jesus to help me seek to be faithful.

So as we celebrate the season of light, we come to the table where Jesus offers us a feast of his love - love that makes sacrifices for others, love that shows mercy and forgives. This simple meal makes God's grace real for us. And as we come to the table, we consider where we are before God.

Just as the wise men journeyed to come to him, we do, too. It started with their observation of the star, continued with investigation about what they saw, and then their adoration of Jesus. They worshiped Jesus and offered him gifts. It wasn't about impressing someone. Their worship showed that they received this blessed gift of a Savior. They understood that they were invited into God's loving presence, and they responded.

And though their journey was complete in adoration, I'm confident that they shared what they experienced. I think that their journey continued with **communication** - telling others about what happened to them and encouraging others to worship Jesus, too.

Friends, we can be really good at observation and investigation, but sometimes we struggle to get to adoration or communication. The call is to worship that shows our love and loyalty to God in Christ above everything else. Worship is not a service on Sunday, but a way of life that shows where we put our hope and trust - and where we've learned to love. Worship invites us into God's loving presence, and when we've experienced God's presence, we have something to say. We have much to offer, much to give, much to share.

My prayer for all of us is that this day, this year, this opportunity to come to the table, would be a time to renew our hope in Jesus. He is Emmanuel - God with us. Take time to pray and ask for God's help.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.