

Led by a Star

Matthew 2: 1-12

Epiphany marks the coming of the Magi, the wise men, to “pay homage to Jesus”. This story raises some questions.

- Who were those wise men really? The answer is, we don't know!
- From where did they come? Evidently, they came from the Far East. They may have been oriental or Indian.
- Where did they go? They went to Jerusalem, apparently wandering around until they got King Herod's attention. Then they went to Bethlehem.
- Did they go straight to the manger? No. Actually, there is no manger in Matthew's gospel. There is a house that seems to be Mary and Joseph's house in Bethlehem. It is not a temporary residence.
- If Mary and Joseph were living in Bethlehem, what about Nazareth? According to the story, the young family fled to Egypt to escape Herod and eventually returned and settled in Nazareth of Galilee (perhaps in the witness protection program?)
- How many wise men were there? The general assumption is that there were three. This is because of the three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.
- Where is the story of the wise men found? It only occurs in Matthew's gospel.
- Where did it come from? It could be historical, though this seems unlikely since it appears in no other source. It could be created by Matthew's author from within the Jewish tradition. The following passage, from Isaiah 60, contains some familiar images.

*Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.*

*²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.*

*³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.*

*⁶A multitude of camels shall cover you,
the young camels of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come.*

*They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.*

Matthew has camels bringing the gold and frankincense. The “Sheba” reference in v. 6 is to the Queen of Sheba who came from the East to Solomon's court. Sheba is famous for myrrh.

Why include this story at all if it's not historical? What is its meaning in the gospel? The wise men are non-Jews and have traditionally represented the wise world of non-Judaism. Shortly after the year 70CE, when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, the Christian Church became almost totally Gentile. The Magi were following the star,

their beacon of light, to the source of light for all people, not just the Jews. The kings serve as a model for us. They were following a star and they also were blazing a trail. Their willingness to journey inspires us. Their willingness to work out their route, to blaze their own trail, teaches us. They found what they didn't know they were looking for, in Bethlehem's baby.

Those wise men were following a star. What does that mean for us? American poet Robert Frost gives us an answer.

O Star (the fairest one in sight),
We grant your loftiness the right
To some obscurity of cloud-
It will not do to say of night,
Since dark is what brings out your light.
Some mystery becomes the proud.
But to be wholly taciturn
In your reserve is not allowed.
Say something to us we can learn
By heart and when alone repeat.
Say something! And it says "I burn."
But say with what degree of heat.
Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
Use language we can comprehend.
Tell us what elements you blend.
It gives us strangely little aid,
But does tell something in the end.
And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
Not even stooping from its sphere,
It asks a little of us here.
It asks of us a certain height,
So when at times the mob is swayed
To carry praise or blame too far,
We may choose something like a star
To stay our minds on and be staid.

(Choose Something Like a Star by Robert Frost)

What about us? What about Crossroads? What does that mean? What does it look like - following a star? The star is the big picture, the over-arching direction. It's what I do in these sermons - what I try to show. The star we follow has five points. The first two are basic components of our existence: freedom and community. I have talked about them at length and won't expound any more at this point. The other three are large theological truths that guide our direction individually and as church: grace, justice, and peacemaking.

Grace is at the center of the Christian life. We cannot earn God's love and forgiveness by our actions or beliefs. These are totally free gifts. At the same time, we don't need to earn God's love and forgiveness.

Many of us struggle with forgiveness and with reconciliation in relationships. We struggle with the perceived need to earn God's love and the love of others; the need to be good enough. Grace reminds us that salvation cannot be earned by believing the right beliefs or by belonging to the right group.

When we embrace grace, lives and ministries become transformed. With grace as the focus, life shifts from trying to please and to earn love, to living in co-creative partnership with God's Spirit.

The star offers us justice. This is biblical justice, like the prophet Micah wrote, "What does the Lord require of you but to ... do justice...." The contemporary Church struggles with its identity and direction in a postmodern world. Individual Christians often feel confused and even lost. At the heart of the Christian Gospel, there is a call to justice that leads to life. By choosing to act in response to the biblical call to "do justice", we can keep our faith.

How do you do justice? How do we as individuals do justice? The answer lies in the ways we engage personally our lives and the world. This includes how we choose to invest ourselves: our relationships, our careers. It has a lot to do with how we treat other people, especially those in our lives who tend to be invisible. The answer to how you and I do justice is as individual as we are, yet it will inevitably include how we value other people regardless of what they can do for us, how we invest our time and energies, and how we invest our money.

How do we as a congregation do justice? Here are just a few ways.

- We are engaged locally in a neighborhood partnership ministry, working to build relationship with households in two city blocks for the purpose of developing ministries together to address needs of the neighborhood and of this congregation.
- We are engaged locally, using our talents for musical drama, in presentations such as *Godspell* and *Joseph...*, and in last year's summer theater workshop for children.
- We are engaged locally by being a welcoming and affirming congregation, standing tall in the struggle for justice and being a beacon of hope for many who have all but lost hope in Christianity.
- We are engaged beyond our borders in Guatemala, helping a village develop their local economy by developing a *sewing cooperative* in San Lucas. Our hope is to help empower the villagers economically and also to empower both them and us through shared relationship in Christ.

The star offers us *peacemaking*. This was central to Jesus' message as he embodied the new creation God is bringing into being. Theologian Walter Wink (*The Powers That Be*) sees peacemaking as neither a passive non-resistance to evil nor a response of violence. It is an active and non-violent resistance to very real presence of evil in our lives. As peacemakers, our prayer becomes cooperative partnership with God for the transformation of evil.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers....” Mark’s gospel encourage inclusion and tolerance as priorities: “those who are not against us are for us”. Some practical implications of peacemaking include having respect for other religious traditions and recognizing the great diversity that exists within the Christian tradition. It includes standing up for your own beliefs, but never doing it violently. It includes advocating non-violent ways of resolving issues between nations because the greatest victims of war are always innocents, especially children.

This is an exciting and challenging time to be church – challenging because of the division and hostility within the church. Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong says we are in the midst of a new Reformation. It is an exciting time to be church because peacemaking has emerged as a central mission of the church. There is a marked increase in ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, even in shared ministry! Advances in biblical and archeological scholarship have moved from seminaries and universities to the sidewalks of cities and the hallways of church buildings. There is hunger for discovering and living truth. It’s an exciting time to be alive. Opportunities are presenting themselves for the transformation of this world in partnership with God’s new creation. This is the big picture.

The big picture is crucial. It is the star we following. At the same time, the meaning of so much of life is worked out on the ground. It is our work of blazing trails.

As community, this means paying attention to the nuts and bolts. It means working our system and hashing out what we’ll do each year and each month. It means C2 committee and budget. It means work teams and differences of opinion. It means planning how we’ll live at 7917 Main Street: how we’ll be visible and how we’ll minister in that location.

As individuals, trailblazing has to do with how to live each day. It involves decisions about money, relationships, and priorities. It includes the direction of our lives and our many choices: career choices, behavior choices, relational choices, and financial choices.

This community is here to help. We are here to support each member as each of us continues to grow as individuals. I look forward to a year of trailblazing, working together. As we do this important work, let us not fail to look up to the star that guides us, that leads us on. It may well be that we will feel as Mary and Joseph might have felt when they learned what God had planned and that their lives were about to change forever. In that moment, it must have dawned on them that the wildest dreams they’d ever had hadn’t been half wild enough! (adapted from Buechner’s *Peculiar Treasures*).

Our journey continues, blazing trails and looking for stars. We know that God continues to lead us. Wherever the journey takes us is where we need to be.