



THE JOURNEY TOWARD LIGHT

January 5, 2020, Second Sunday After Christmas, The Epiphany of the Lord
Matthew 2:1-12

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My friend, Jon Walton, retired pastor of The First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, once said of this first Sunday in January: “Nothing is as over as Christmas when it is over. The decorations on the tree seem oddly out of place now,” and the wreaths, the bows, and poinsettias left in the chancel “can seem like relatives who have stayed too long for the holidays. When will they go home?”

But such decorations remain steadfastly in our churches, even if in our overly hot apartments the trees went out to the curb a week ago. It is the custom to observe Christmastide until the Twelfth Night, or Epiphany, which is January 6th — tomorrow. This morning’s service attends to the scripture readings for Epiphany, which is a Greek word meaning ‘to uncover’ or ‘reveal.’ When one has an Epiphany, it is like an “Aha! moment” and cartoonists depict an epiphany as a light bulb going off over a character’s head. Just so, our texts are all about light, the star, the mystery of Jesus, the Light of the World, being revealed, uncovered as the incarnation of God. And the starring cast of Epiphany are the Magi, those exotic figures found only in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth. No grimy shepherds here—that is Luke’s show. Matthew is where we get the tinsel.

The late appearance of the Magi means that our Nativity sets have a longer shelf life than the greenery. I have clergy friends who insist that their church Nativity set leave the Magi and camels packed away until this Sunday. Some of them have been posting photos on Facebook of the kings and camels in various locations around their town, as if they are making their way to the church, but have not yet arrived.



Matthew calls them Magi, or wise men from the East, and that is pretty much all the detail he provides, other than the content of their gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But this exotic story was enough to put Christian imaginations into overdrive. We have filled in Matthew's sketchy outline with colorful embellishments. The Magi, who were likely astrologers or magicians, are now kings. We made them three in number to match, I suppose, the gifts named. Somewhere along the way they were given names: Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar. By 700 C.E. we had assigned nationalities and physical details to them: Melchior was "white-haired;" Gaspar was "ruddy-complexioned;" and Balthasar was "dark-skinned and heavily bearded." One legend tells that these three men, "having undergone many trials and fatigues for the Gospel," met to celebrate Christmas in 54 C.E. After that celebration, each man died a week apart, all of them having reached the age of 100 years or more.

As you can see in our bulletin, these characters have inspired hymns. Why, even James Taylor was inspired to write a song about them, "Home by another way."

We are drawn to stories about journeys, aren't we? From Homer's *The Odyssey* to Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz*, we are captivated by people on a quest, facing unknown dangers, overcoming obstacles, and meeting interesting people along the way. They are searching for something external to themselves, but often discover that their external search requires them to search, too, for what must be found within most of all.

In a modicum of words, in only one verse in fact, the dynamics of the entire search of faith is set before us in Matthew 2:1. It says: "In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem..." I had never noticed before that chapter 1 in Matthew unfolds with no reference to time or place. It is chapter 2, verse 1 that situates the story: What time is it? The time of King Herod when visitors from the East come. Where do they come? To Jerusalem, the capitol city, bringing gifts to a new king who is not Herod, corrupt and cruel. The new king is not in Jerusalem, but in backwater Bethlehem. The conflict is already clear: There are two kingdoms, two visions set



in opposition to each other. They stand for opposite things; operate in diametrically different ways. One will stop at nothing to eradicate any threat to power. The other will stop at nothing to show true power's vulnerability in love and determination to welcome absolutely everyone in mercy. The Magi, these gentiles, are the first in this Gospel to discern that between these two kingdoms, they know which one is worthy of our best gifts, our highest loyalty, our deepest devotion. They know that once you have encountered the grace of God's kingdom, you cannot ever go back to the way things were, to who you were. Instead, you will have to return home by another road.

With every baptism, we give thanks that another person has joined us in the search to follow Jesus and to live in the ways of his kingdom. Like the Magi, we do not journey alone. We need each other, for along the way we must contend with so much that is opposed to God's will and God's ways. That way is not always clear, for Herod seeks to cover and hide his unjust and violent habits, as though he is a follower, too. We continually seek Christ's light, which uncovers truth, reveals forgiveness, justice, and love.

Fred Craddock once described his reaction to his own baptism at age fourteen. The minister had preached that morning from the verse: "Now you have been raised with Christ, you have died and now you have been raised with Christ. Set your mind on things that are above." "As I walked home with my wet clothes wrapped in a wet towel under my arm," Fred said, "I tried to think what that meant. You know, after you've been raised from the dead, you don't look the same, sound the same, talk the same, do the same. But what do you do? How do you talk? What do you sound like?"

"I went to school Monday morning," he continued, "thinking, *Is anybody going to know that I've been raised? Should I dress up a little better from what I've been dressing? It wouldn't hurt. Do I talk another way? Do I throw in a verse of scripture now and then? What do I do at ball practice? Are they going to say, 'Well, looks like he's been raised from the dead.'* How do you talk? How do you walk? How do you relate?"ⁱ



A new year, 2020, is now unfolding for us. It offers an occasion to reflect on the journey of the year just past...the joys it brought and the sorrows, too. The plans we made and achieved; the things that were left undone; and the surprises that took us in directions we could not have predicted. Some things from last year we bring into this one, of course. Some will even stay with us forever because they have to do with what is eternal.

The beginning of a new year is also a time to think, to plan, to dream and imagine about what this year may hold. We will do well to approach it with a balance of attention to detail and firm resolve mixed with wide-wonder and open minds and hearts and hands. In our *Book of Common Worship* there is a brief prayer that seems just right for this first Sunday in January of the year 2020. It might even have been the prayer those Magi would have uttered if they had known at the outset of their journey the God they were about to meet along the way:

Eternal God, you call us to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with courage, not knowing where we go, but only that your hand is leading us and your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We journey best when we place our trust in God's love and providential, guiding hand. This is my prayer for you as a congregation in 2020. To keep your eye on the light of God's guiding star, discovering joys and meeting challenges along the way.

E.L. Doctorow once wrote that, "Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as the headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way." As Jon Walton put it: "Sometimes I think life is like that. Like driving a car at night. You can only see as far as the headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way."ⁱⁱ



Some greet the new year not with hope, but in deep grief and sadness. Others find it hard to have a sense of hope for tomorrow due to depression or stress or despair at the world's volatility and threat. Here in our city, my email is flooded with pleas from the Jewish community for us as Christians to stand in solidarity with them at the steep rise of anti-Semitic rhetoric and acts of violence even as our leaders proclaim hate does not have a home among us here.

In a December 30th opinion piece in The New York Times, U.S. Representative from New York, Nita Lowey, and David Harris, CEO of the American Jewish Committee offered guidance for right responses to these hate crimes. They recalled how, in 1993, a community in Billings, Montana presented a model for how a community might join in solidarity and make a wider statement, too. When someone threw a brick through the bedroom window of a young child in a Jewish home that had a menorah on display, the community acted swiftly and decisively. Across the community, cutouts of a menorah were made available. Thousands of households in Billings put them in their windows. The message was clear: Anti-Semitism and racism and prejudice and hate have no place here. In 2020, how might this congregation join in solidarity, responding in ways that spread light, and dispel night's fear?

The cultural New Year begins just as our faith community marks Epiphany—marking the Light of God that has come to dwell among us, uncovering, revealing love and grace and truth. Bringing hope. With the Magi, moving forward in stages by way of starlight, we can make it the whole way through. There will be discoveries of unforeseen joys and daunting obstacles and we will meet interesting people along the way. There will also be days of just making it through the sand and over one more hill. The search will have its list of external things, but whenever and however it is a search for what is eternal, an internal search will be required most. Thank goodness, like the Magi, we do not journey alone. In groups of 3 or 30 or 300 we go.

And however this year begins, we are likely to find that God invites us home by another road, into ventures of which we cannot see the ending, yet guided by



God's hand. Tomorrow is Monday. And it is Epiphany. May someone look at us and say: "Well, look at that...Looks they've been baptized...looks like they've been raised from the dead..."

ⁱ Fred B. Craddock, **Craddock Stories**, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 92-93.

ⁱⁱ A Sermon by Jon Walton, "Like Driving a Car at Night," preached January 4, 2004.