

## **“JOURNEY WITHOUT MAPS”**

**Readings: Isaiah 60:1-6**

**Matthew 2:1-12**

TODAY IS EPIPHANY Sunday, which means it's time to bring the curtain down on the Christmas season, but before we do that we first have deal with those mysterious visitors from the East—the wise men or magi as some people like to call them. Just who these exotic visitors were isn't exactly clear. Some scholars hold they were a Median tribe that hailed from Persia. Others suspect they were astrologers trained in the science of watching the stars. Still others think they were kings. Nobody knows for certain who these intrepid travelers were but they figure prominently in Matthew's version of the Christmas story and their journey is certainly worthy of our emulation.

Legend has it that there were three kings, although this morning's scripture lesson makes no mention of their number. I suspect the idea arose from the three gifts they came bearing—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Moreover, later legend (also not mentioned in the Bible) went on to give them names—Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar. Still later legend assigned each one of them a personal description. Melchior was said to be an old man, grey haired, with a long beard. It was he who allegedly brought the gold. Caspar was young and beardless; ruddy in complexion, and it was thought that he was the one who brought the frankincense. Balthazar was swarthy, with a newly grown beard, and it was he who brought the gift of myrrh.

But all that is merely conjecture. What seems important to me isn't so much who these wise men were but what they did. And what they did was undertake an incredible journey that not only changed the course of the history but also transformed their interior lives as well.

To set off on a journey today is a luxury. Back in biblical times it was only done out of necessity. Today when we want to go somewhere we visit a travel agent, read up about our destination, hop aboard a plane and off we go. Or if we are traveling by car we simply set our GPS coordinates and then let satellite guided imagery direct us to our desired destination.

The wise men in this morning's scripture reading didn't have that technology. Travel back then was dangerous, difficult, and definitely not for the faint of heart. No one traveled anywhere just for fun. You only hit the road if you absolutely had to. If you were traveling by sea you were at the mercy of the wind and the waves. On the other hand, if you were traveling by foot you were subject not only to extremes of weather but also to robbers, thieves, and bandits. So let's not kid ourselves. The journey these wise men undertook was no light matter. In his poem, "The Journey of the Magi," T.S. Eliot describes their experience this way,

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter.  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,  
Lying down in the melting snow.  
There were times when we regretted  
The summer palaces on the slopes, the terraces,  
And the silken girls bringing sherbet.  
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling

And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,  
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,  
And the cities dirty and the towns unfriendly  
A hard time we had of it.  
At the end we preferred to travel all night,  
Sleeping in snatches,  
With the voices singing in our ears, saying  
That this was all folly.

You have to wonder what motivated these magisterial wanderers to persevere especially after they locked horns with King Herod. Herod, whom history records as a true megalomaniac, claimed he wanted the wise men to find the child so that he could come later on and worship him too. But the wise men, who were not called wise men for nothing, saw through his little ruse and when the time came to bid the baby Jesus good-bye they wisely choose to head home by another way.

That right there should tell us everything we need to know about these so called magi. These magi were not only geeks, as so many people suppose, but they also had guts. It's one thing to have smarts. It's another thing to have courage. Oddly, these two traits exhibited by the wise men are two of the most important qualities we need in the church today. William Sloane Coffin used to say that one of the primary tasks of the church was to help people think straight. Fuzzy thinking seems to be a disease of our time. The first of the four cardinal virtues of the Roman Catholic Church is "prudentia," which basically means good thinking. Lest we forget, Christ came into the world to take away our sins, not our minds.

While we are on the subject of thinking one thing we should never do is equate intelligence with wisdom. I'm sure the wise men were no dummies but it was their judgment that made them wise not their SAT scores. We all know people who were straight-A students in school but then went on to flunk life. Intelligence combined with wisdom is the best combination but if I could only choose one I would opt for wisdom. According to the Book of Proverbs "wisdom is better than jewels" (Proverbs 8:11). It was also the one thing that King Solomon prayed for more than anything else (1 Kings 4:9). It was for their wisdom above all else that the magi were so highly sought after and so widely revered.

But as I mentioned before these wise men were not only wise they also had courage. Not many people dared to double-cross Herod who had no qualms about murdering his wife Mariamne and her mother Alexandra. Neither did he hesitate to have his oldest son, Antipater assassinated, as well as two other sons, Alexander and Aristobulus. It took courage for the wise men to stand up to a tyrant like Herod but somehow they found the wherewithal to do it.

Still, the most redeeming characteristic of the wise men wasn't their intelligence or their integrity-- it was their faithfulness. Someone once defined faith not as "belief without proof" but rather as "trust without reservation." And that is precisely what these wise men had. Yes, they searched the stars diligently; yes, they spent a lifetime in the pursuit of wisdom; and yes, they had the courage to hold their ground against a dictator like Herod. But more than anything else the wise men are worthy of our adulation because they were willing to "walk by faith and not by sight."

The truth is they had no idea what lay at the end of their journey. Maybe the whole thing was nothing more than a wild goose chase. Maybe it was nothing more than a misunderstanding. Maybe it was nothing more than a carefully laid trap. Be that as it may it didn't stop them from following the star wherever it led them.

The celebration of Epiphany is meant to remind us that faith is a journey without maps. The journey of faith is both the most dangerous and the most rewarding journey that any human being can undertake. To journey in faith is to

open ourselves up to the possibility of transformation and transformation means change and change means giving up who we are for whatever it is we might one day yet become. This country is going through a time of transformation and that's what all the fear and anxiety is about. The church--not only this church, but the mainline church in general-- is going through a time of transformation and that's what all the frustration and uncertainty is about. Are we like the magi willing to follow wherever that which is waiting to be born anew is leading us or like Herod to we expect someone else to do all the hard work for us while we go in later and reap the benefits?

Everywhere I go I hear clergy and congregations talking about the emergent church—a new way of being the church that is yet to be born. But if Epiphany reminds us of anything it reminds us that we cannot create this new way of being the church. Rather, we have to allow this new way of being the church to recreate us. Transformation as the magi found out, is a process, but it's a process that is not without its rewards.

This morning as we bid adieu to the Christmas season, let us endeavor as did those wise folk of old, to keep our eyes on the guiding light of God's never-failing mercy, love and grace. Moreover, as we continue our journey into the unknown, let us take comfort in the following prayer by the seventeenth century English Catholic John Austin,

“Fix Thou our steps, O Lord, that we  
stagger not with the uneven motions  
of the world, but go steadily on our way,  
neither censoring our journey for the  
weather we meet, nor turning aside for  
anything that befalls us.”

Amen and a radiant Epiphany to one and all!

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