

And the Journey Continues
Matthew 2: 1-12

By the calendar, the last day of Christmas was Friday and yesterday marked Epiphany, a word meaning manifestation, the time we recall the journey of the magi. They were spiritual seekers from Persia, practitioners of Zoroastrianism, a religion as old as humanity. Its supreme being was Ahura Mazda and its primary prophet Zoroaster, also known as Zarathustra. Though the religion has dwindled down to less than 200,000, its strands have been woven into many of the world's major religions. Primarily centered in eschatological monotheism, a fancy way of saying ultimate hope in one holy being, its belief system embraced a search for truth and justice and the duality of choice and consequences. *One's primary purpose in life was to be among those who bring new life to the world.* Beyond their one god, they also believed in a Messiah, the one who would be the embodiment of hope, ushering the world into an era of truth and justice, an idea not at all distant from the Jews of that time nor from our own faith today. Though we often see the magi as exotic and mysterious, they were more like us than not - people who were grounded in the hope of a better way to live, a belief that there is an ultimate good and truth. It was their trust in a Messiah that pulled them from their homes in faith that the treacherous 2000-mile trek would be well worth any perils that might be presented. Believing in what could be because of that Messiah, they followed a star.

When we hear the story of the brave journey of the magi and their expensive gifts, it seems an apt ending to the Christmas story, one concluding in joyful acknowledgement of the Messiah as hope for us all. Yet the reality is far from the idyllic tale we would prefer to recall each year. For after their arduous journey through the dangerous territories of the Middle East, the magi entered the world of Herod the Great, Roman client king of Jerusalem, and one of the most polarizing figures of Roman history. He was known for his lavish building projects such as the Second Temple, the fortress Masada, and a water system for Jerusalem, which on the surface appeared to be noble efforts indeed. Even such grand gestures as those were

darkened by his tyrannical egotism. Though Jewish by birth and well aware of the role of the Temple in Hebrew life, he had the symbol of Rome - a large golden eagle - garishly emblazoned upon its entrance in direct violation of the commandments to build no graven images and to have no other gods. The Masada was designed to be his escape in case of revolt by the people. That wonderful water system was reserved for the wealthy.

His administration moved that part of the Empire from a republic to a rule by an exclusive aristocracy at the expense of the people who had called that area home for generations. He crafted an oppressive tax structure that weighed heavily on all but the wealthy, who greatly benefited from it. The established faith leaders integrated their own taxes into this system, creating a dual burden for those who could least afford it. Herod's motives were selfish, and his actions evil and cruel - and the people suffered.

Yet it was his paranoid volatility that has earned him such a nefarious place in history. Not only was there constant intrigue and turnover as rapid as the changing desert winds among those who served him as political leader, his personal life reflected his unpredictability. When he found another woman who pleased him more than his first wife, he had wife #1 and her children banished. The fate of wife #2 was even more tragic. She was executed. Friend, family, employee - it mattered not when Herod decided that one was no longer useful or got the idea that his iron-clad rule was threatened. In today's text, we heard, "When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him."¹ There was absolutely every reason for the people to be terrified, because when Herod was troubled, people died. The journey of the magi was not simply a quest for a Messiah but a daring entry into a dangerous world, one that could cost them their lives.

The magi found their way to Bethlehem where Mary and Joseph had settled into a home with Jesus. There they presented him with extravagant gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which were definitely not your typical baby presents. Even though they did not believe in the

¹ Matthew 2: 3 NRSV

God of Abraham and Moses and though they were themselves powerful and wealthy, they knelt in respect, filled with awe they had found the hope for which they had long traveled in a defiant gesture to Herod that he was not their king. Their journey took yet another unexpected turn. Keenly aware of Herod's treacherous manipulation, they went home by another way.

This was the ending of today's text but far from the close of the story. Though they walked different roads, Mary and Joseph were on the same faith journey as the magi. For them, the visit of the spiritual seekers from the East was another life-altering moment. Because of political demands and with the songs of the angels still in their hearts helping them on their way, their own life's walk had already taken them from their home to Bethlehem. Now that Herod was aware of Jesus' existence and raging with orders to kill children, they became refugees and fled to Egypt. Even when they returned after Herod's death, it was to Galilee, on the outskirts of Judaism and far from the clutches of Herod's successor. It was quite a tumultuous beginning for a young family and a tenuous, fragile hope for the people of God. That is the stark reality of the Christmas story - one of darkness, one of weakness, one of fear side by side with songs of hope and courage and a star that still shines across the years.

Two thousand years later the journeys of the magi and the family are now ours. The person Herod no longer exists, but Herods do. The powers of the world still do not favor truth and interconnection. With each tweet, with each lashing out, with the cold dismantling of freedom, with the emphasis on wealth and power as a measure of success, we find ourselves walking in perilous sand of a different kind from the magi and from the young family, one just as dangerous. The big picture of living in today hangs ominously over us. Like the magi and like Mary and Joseph, we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the inherent threats around us. Yet it all seems so daunting, so perilous. It would be easy to hunker down and simply live from day to day in our own insulated worlds. That is not the journey of faith, for faith has always stood outside the world looking in calling it to another way of being, challenging it, reminding us all of God's call to live in truth, justice, grace, and love. For the magi, for Mary and Joseph, and for

Jesus, the journey continued but not in ways they had anticipated, for they walked on the edges of society and dared to find a new way. We, too, are called to follow a star that leads us on unknown ventures with only the promise of God's presence and hope that we were created to be better than now.

How did they do it? The odds certainly seemed stacked against them for Herod had the power of Rome behind him. Through their intertwined journeys, they continue to offer us a lesson in how to survive, how to thrive, how to live faith in a world that seems so hostile. They fervently believed life's greater meaning could be found when they reached outside themselves and dared to venture into the unknown. They focused on a star to guide them carrying their dreams in their hearts for protection, for comfort, for a reminder of who they could be and who they sought. We look to that same star of hope. We reach deep inside ourselves, take hold of one another, and set out with the belief we are part of something greater than ourselves. There is goodness, there is truth, and through our faith we are part of making that a certain reality in this chaotic world. For us that hope has been embodied in Jesus Christ whose own living was an example of the journey we all embrace when we say we believe.

In one of the confessions that reflect faith in the Reformed tradition, *A Brief Statement of Faith* from which we read earlier in the service, is a picture of what faith looks like in such a world:

In a broken and fearful world
 the Spirit gives us courage
 to pray without ceasing,
 to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
 to unmask idolatries in Church and culture,
 to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
 and to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace.
 In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
 we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
 and to live holy and joyful lives,
 even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
 praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

With believers in every time and place,
we rejoice that nothing in life or in death
can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.²

That was the journey of the magi, that was the journey of Mary and Joseph, that became the journey of Jesus, and it remains ours today. That is the star we follow.

Life is filled with uncertainty. Sometimes I think that might be the very definition of life. In a community of faith, such as ours, there is always change, always a need to look outward and set out on new ventures. Just in my time here we have lost many, welcomed new ones, witnessed many shifts in leadership, and watched the world spin around us in a time of political uneasiness and turmoil. Yet the star still shines for us, leading us onward, reminding us of God's faithful presence and our call to continue to hope, to seek truth, and to be that hope and truth for a world that will not always welcome our voice. As I immersed myself in the text this week, it brought to mind the words of a Christmas carol. *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* was written by a Unitarian minister from Massachusetts, Edmund Hamilton Sears.³ Unlike most Christmas songs, it does not focus on the birth of Jesus but the hope that leads us onward. Writing in the unclear days of unrest just prior to the Civil War, when the winds of revolution hung over all Europe, and the country was still reeling from the war with Mexico, Sears chose to focus on the songs of the angels, the hope that defines our faith, as a reminder that we are not yet who God has created us to be, that the world is indeed frightening, but the angels still sing and the star still shines. In one of the original verses, Sears wrote these words, words you can hear with your heart:

But with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long;
Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song, which they bring:

² <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/brief-statement-of-faith/>

³ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-it-came-upon-a-midnight-clear>

O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing!⁴

Hush the noise, listen to the angels, look to the star, and let us follow with all our beings as
together we seek God's new world.

Now to God who is able to do far more than anything we can ask or imagine, to God be all glory.

Amen.

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⁴ Ibid.