

December 9 – Second Sunday in Advent

A Journey Completed

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11

Do you remember a time in your life when the path you were on was challenging? You kept at it because the goal you had in mind was worth the struggles. Do you remember how many times you almost gave up or wondered how you would get through this trying time? Perhaps it was attending college and it seemed as if that degree would never be realized. Perhaps it was raising children with those battles that left you exhausted. Do you remember? If so you can begin to appreciate what was going through the minds of the magi or wise men as they journeyed to find a king.

Lots of myths and legends have grown up around these travelers, the first Gentiles to see and believe that Jesus is the Messiah. One of the confusing things when it comes to these travelers is that they are called by different names. Are they wise men, magi or kings?

When we refer to them as the Magi, from which we get our words magic and magician, we are tapping into a legend that they are from the Zoroastrians priestly class who lived in the region of modern day Syria. These priests believed, among other things, that the stars heralded certain events. Their faith was one of the first monotheistic faiths, believing there was one supreme God. Because they could predict such things as eclipses, they were thought to command special magic. They were the forerunners of the modern day scientist. We know from their texts that they had learned something about chemical reactions between elements. The smell and smoke from such events awed those around them. Because of these things they were known as sorcerers as well as priests for the magic they knew. Also, they were the learned men, sages or wise men of their day. They were the most educated people in their country. The term Magi is what is used in the Greek when referring to them. By the time they translate the Bible into English a magician was not understood to be a wise man or sage so the translators did not use that term. Magi did not come back into usage until modern translations began to go back to the earlier Greek word.

After the birth stories of Matthew and Luke other legends attached to them began to circulate. The story of the Christmas Rose which we are exploring this year is

one of those. When it comes to our travelers, over time, the myths grew that they were not just magi, priests or wise men but kings. They were kings of the east coming to honor a new king and their kneeling at Bethlehem before the baby heralded the greater vision of Paul where every knee shall bow. As wonderful as the stories about the kings might be, it is not likely that they were actual royalty, our visitors. Most scholars now believe the term king came into usage when the Pope, as head of the church, and also a country, battled for supremacy with other temporal kings. His holiness would point to this story to remind the other kings that they too were to kneel before Christ's representative on earth! And how many were there? We are quick to say three because of the three gifts, but the number is unknown. The Bible is silent on that account. Also, we do not know where they were from, just from the east, and that takes in a lot of territory. We also do not know their names. Those details again come to us through legend. Now that we know a bit more about these special visitors let's get back to those questions I posed at the beginning of the sermon. Today we want to talk about perseverance, dedication and generosity.

They had seen a star in the skies telling them that a great king had been born to the people of Judah. Immediately they make plans to go and bring gifts. Beyond a spirit of generosity, which we will talk about more in a moment, I believe there was curiosity. These men were star watchers. The heavens were predictable. You could track the stars and events like eclipses through mathematical formulas. To have something appear that totally upsets this predictable realm of God would be more than amazing. They would want to see for themselves who was this child that changed the very heavens.

Yet, a journey of even a few hundred miles in those days was not an easy one. There was no "make sure the gas tank is filled" and through the help of the internet "secure lodgings for the trip." No, it would have taken time to assemble all that would be required to take such a journey. You had to take everything you might need with you. You had to plan for delays due to weather. Robbers were everywhere so you would have to take a large group of servants with you for protection, again adding to the complexity of the journey and slowing you down. In Matthew, when Herod is thwarted in his bid to find this new king, a threat to his throne, he orders all male children in

Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed. He had asked when the star had appeared. He would have rounded up the age so it seems likely that from time of seeing the star, to gathering the materials and people for the journey, and the trek itself, a time of at least 18 months had elapsed and they still had to make the journey back home!

I am sure they had moments of discouragement. There were times they must have felt like turning back but they stayed the course. One of the things they can teach us is to have a clear understanding of what you are seeking. Keep that goal in mind and it will allow you to persevere, to hang in there when times are tough. God will give us the vision and, if we do not lose sight of it, we will keep going.

Dedication, which is very similar in many ways to perseverance, is for me, in this case, seeing yourself as part of something bigger than yourself. They believed God was on the move and wanted to be a part of that journey. Perseverance without dedication can easily become stubbornness. We all know people who stubbornly hold to a task and will not be deterred. That can or cannot be a good thing. When there is dedication, an awareness of how God is calling you, leading you, and challenging you, then something greater happens. Though they were not ones who worshiped the God of the Hebrews and Jesus, they still have much to teach us about faith. In the text we hear three things that help us to see their dedication to a bigger picture.

We hear how they saw and followed a star. That star was what first told them of the events that set everything into motion, and it was the star that kept moving them forward. Without a focus on the star they likely would have given up. The star of Bethlehem was not some bright light in the sky as usually is depicted in art. If that was the case all would have seen it and been wondering about its meaning. When they arrive in Jerusalem and mention the star all are troubled. No one had seen it. So what they were viewing was more subtle, something you had to be looking for.

What are the visions of God that draw you forward this day? What are the things that comfort you, reassure you when the way gets long, and keeps you centered. When life is turbulent, I look for stories showing how incredibly good people are. In our paper, we have a raves and rant section. I rarely read the rants but I always read the raves. They share how good people can be to one another. That vision of the goodness

of humanity keeps me going forward, striving to love people believing this is what God wants.

Secondly, in being dedicated to this task they listened. They sought answers from others when the way was unsure and ultimately listened to God even when the direction was challenging. To leave and not tell Herod about the child would put them at risk. But they continued to listen.

Finally, when they reached the end of their journey they rejoiced. Do you know how hard that must have been? They had been on this long journey looking for a new and great king. They end up at the home of a carpenter. It would have been easy to think they had missed the mark, they had made a mistake or they had been deceived. Instead it says they rejoiced and offered their gifts. There is no mention of doubt at the end, just joy. When life faithfully lived sends you in new and surprising directions remember that we are called to see, listen and ultimately rejoice believing that the destination, even if not what we expected, is where God intended us to be.

Finally, just for a moment, let's talk about the gifts, the symbol of their generosity. There are many theories as to the meaning of their gifts. Gold, was often a gift given to a king. Frankincense is a resin associated with the priestly functions of all kings. Religion and State were one in those days. Frankincense is still used to this day in worship to create incense. Myrrh is the odd one. Its dominant use was as an embalming agent, so some say it was given as a harbinger of the death of Jesus, or that it was the most valuable thing that Mary and Joseph could have for trading when they get to Egypt. But those reasons seems pretty crass. Why would you carry something as far as they did just to remind the mother the baby was going to die or assume they would run and hide in Egypt? Rarely is it mentioned that myrrh was used as a healing ointment in those days. It was also used to heal digestive upsets. So it might have been a very practical gift to give a mother in taking care of her child and herself. This seems more in keeping with the gift of a wise man.

So today we honor them. It reminds us that God is still calling us to be faithful, to persevere, to be diligent in knowing God is with us and leading us and to be as generous as we can in thanks for all that God is doing for us and through us.