

A Search Ends but the Journey Begins

Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on Epiphany Sunday January 3rd, 2021 (Matthew 2: 1-12)

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Some learned men from the East, Persia, modern day Iran/Iraq, had been studying the skies and saw something of interest or of significance. A shooting star or a comet or meteor or maybe all the planets aligned – we don't know what it was, however it meant something to them, enough to pack up their bags and go on a long journey.

We know very little about these men. They were learned – maybe astronomers, astrologists, priests or philosophers, learned enough to know what they saw meant something and they needed to find out what.

We don't know how many undertook the journey – we have always assumed 3 as the story has three gifts. However, I suspect they journeyed with more, maybe they brought their families. We have assumed they travelled on camels but the story doesn't tell us that. It would make sense though as they could travel long distances and carry luggage.

We know very little until they get to Jerusalem and Herod's palace. I wonder what their journey was like. How often were they thirsty or hungry? Who did they meet along the way? What did they discuss at night over the campfire? How long did the journey take? Years? How often did the camels get stubborn and refuse to go? How often did they regret they had started out? How did they cope with missing family? Where did they stay? Did they like T.S. Eliot suggests, think that - "... this was all folly".¹ Where the nights cold, the sun biting hot during the day, did they find dry waterholes? Did others they met on the journey think they were mad?

They simply followed the star, their sign with a lot of hope, a little bit of lack and much hard work. They put aside any fear and pride they had and simply followed the sign.

They search first and then ask questions at the palace, where else would you go when you had become convinced the star meant that a new king had been born. They listened to the interpretation of scripture by others which foretold of a new king to be born in the city of David – Bethlehem. They told Herod all they knew about this sign – not their best plan it turns out. Were they surprised by his ignorance of all of this? What did they make of him? Could they sense his jealousy and insecurity?

So, they search and follow, follow and search until they finally find the object of their search.

They enter the building where Jesus lay and the first thing they do, is lie prostrate in his presence. They are overcome with joy and then they offer the mother gifts of great symbolism. Gold for a king, frankincense for a priest and myrrh for burial.

What did they think upon finding the child with his small family born into poverty?

Whatever happened during that encounter they are changed and everybody's circumstances change in an instance. Warned in a dream, they begin to understand Herod's duplicitous nature and maybe now their initial meeting makes sense, they return home by a different route. Joseph also warned in a dream that the child's life is now endangered takes his family to Egypt to become a refugee family.

¹ This quote and the previous discussion is from TS Eliot's poem "Journey of the Magi"

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These folk from the East followed a star which they understood to be a sign.

That journey is celebrated this week in Orthodox churches, for the Orthodox community this is Christmas. As we did on December 25th, they will celebrate with presents, activities, games and special food.

The star is the symbol of what we call Epiphany. The word 'Epiphany' means manifestation or sudden appearing or unveiling. This unveiling of God happens in the most unexpected way – it is not in the midst of palaces surrounded by power, but it happens out of the way, in the midst of a bunch of foreigners with a teenage mum surrounded only by poverty. That is the way God chooses to reveal his love and way to us. The Magi are symbolic characters – they represent the whole world. God's revelation of love, peace and justice is for all people, in every place and for all time. A cause for celebration indeed!

There is a Persian legend is called "The Stone", in this legend, the Magi are given a gift by the Christ Child. This gift is taken home with them and they are reluctant to open it. They wonder all the time about what it might be. Fellow travelers try to coerce them to open it, but initially they are very protective of the gift.

Finally, they open it and discover it is a stone – their fellow travelers laugh at them. One of the Magi believes it must mean something, another takes the stone and hurls it into a pit. Shortly after this they noticed fire coming from where the stone had landed and light filling the sky. The merchants travelling along nearby all came and lit their lamps with the flame and carried it away to the faraway places from whence they came, to all places on the earth, to be shared by all people. They then begin to understand what it meant. They knew it to be a gift that would bring justice, healing and peace into the world. A gift that is to be shared and is for everyone and a sign that belief or faith must be as strong as stone and burn in people like fire.

Just as they followed their sign, they become a sign for us. They are model disciples for us. So, as we enter 2021 and this next decade, may you:

- Seek God with all you have – curiosity, determination, courage
- Ignore the criticism of others who think you are engaging in mere folly
- Allow God to shed more light, and deepen your understanding
- When you encounter those who, would want harm for others, may you see through them and find another way, being gentle as doves and wise as serpents
- Always experience joy when you encounter God in your life
- Be prepared to partake in civil disobedience when you see injustice
- Go courageously and generously into the world and share the good news to all around us, taking the light of God's love with you
- Allow yourself to be transformed again and again as you encounter God in Jesus, God with us, may you be changed. Gustavo Gutierrez says "That's the trouble with God. He does not let you leave us you come. He sends you back, stripped of your presumptions making for home by another way."²

May we become an Epiphany, a revelation of God's love and transforming power in the world in 2021. Let the journey begin! Amen.

² Cloth for the Cradle p. 126