

Tippecanoe Presbyterian Church Message for Worship 1/8/23
– Epiphany Sunday

Message “What We Seek” Rev. Trish Eckert

Throughout Advent, we journeyed through many stories leading up to the birth of Jesus, and on Epiphany, we focus on the story of the Magi. They’ve been observing a star’s rise, using that to navigate their journey to find the divine incarnated in a child. This story invites us to consider, what are we seeking? Love? Wisdom? Connection? Acknowledgment? Purpose?

We can only speculate what kind of people the Magi were. Were they royalty? Astrologers? Sorcerers? Alchemists? Philosophers? Were there three or many? Were they all men, or were they an entourage of men and women, aged adults and young adults? Despite the vagueness of their identities, we can learn much from their actions. They observe the star and discern that it is pointing them to the divine. Instead of ignoring it or simply observing it from afar, they decide to make the treacherous and arduous journey closer to Christ. They cross over geographical, political, religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries to seek out the newborn child. They are filled with joy at the sight of the child and humble themselves before him, bowing and bearing gifts. They listen intuitively to their dreams and evade Herod’s deception, choosing what is perhaps a more difficult journey home by a different route.

The magi are shrouded in mystery. In the midst of Matthew’s relative lack of information about them, we do know a few things: they possessed the ability to read the heavens, they felt compelled to follow a star, they traveled a vast distance to welcome and pay homage to Jesus, and they brought him amazing presents.

It’s interesting that although Matthew gives us few details regarding the magi, he is very specific about the gifts they brought. This suggests that the gifts are part of Matthew’s whole point in telling the tale of Jesus’ birth. The first hearers and readers of Matthew’s story would have understood the significance of the wise one’s offerings, but, as we ponder the story two millennia later, it’s good to remind ourselves of what these gifts would have meant.

In Jesus' day, the first gift, gold, had many of the same connotations that it does for us. It's precious. It's lavish. It's a gift fit for a king. In the Bible, gold is sometimes mentioned in the same breath as royalty. Isaiah and the Psalms refer to kings who bring gold to honor a great ruler. For the wise men, the gift of gold was a way of acknowledging Jesus as a king.

It is, perhaps, a little harder for us to grasp the value of frankincense and myrrh. Both frankincense and myrrh come from the aromatic resin of trees. More bluntly put, they are dried tree sap. What a gift for a child! But in Jesus' time, they were costly, myrrh especially so. Frankincense was typically used in religious rituals. In Exodus 30, God tells Moses to make an incense that includes frankincense, for use in the tent of meeting, where God meets with the priests; God tells Moses, "It shall be for you most holy." The gift of frankincense symbolizes that God has come in the person of Christ, that Christ himself has become the place of meeting between divinity and humanity.

Myrrh is perhaps the strangest gift of all. In Jesus' time, it was especially associated with funerals and was used in the process of preparing a body for burial. In the New Testament, the only mentions of myrrh, besides today's reading, are in the gospels of Mark and John, in connection with Jesus' crucifixion and death. This seems a curious gift for a young child, and I have to wonder if this gift haunted Jesus a bit. Though it carries some foreshadowing of what will happen to Jesus, I think the magi intended it not as a morbid gift but rather as a reminder to Jesus that, even for him, earthly life is brief, and we are called to use it well.

The Magi were seekers. They sought wisdom, they sought the divine, they sought fortunes to tell the future. Their seeking leads them to Jesus, the newborn king of another culture and religion. And yet, their seeking is also what protects them from Herod's deception and harm. After the Magi go home by another way, Joseph is visited again by an angel in his dream. This time, the angel brings a warning, and like before, Joseph heeds the message. Fleeing from Herod's massacre, Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus seek refuge in Egypt; they remain there, living as immigrants, until Herod dies.

Matthew's text reveals to us a frightening journey for Jesus and his parents. Just like many migrants and refugees today, the Holy Family experienced the anguish of persecution when fleeing to Egypt. Through their story, we

are reminded that a better world for all means to enter deep solidarity and accountability with one another.

As I wrapped up the readings from the Sanctified Art resource materials we've used for this Christmas season, I was moved by the experience that Dr. Christine J. Hong shares about her family in the wake of the Korean War and her parent's eventual relocation to the United States. We've heard a couple of other reflections from her throughout Advent, and this is what she wrote when thinking about her family's story and that of the story that Matthew tells us. She writes,

In the decade after the Korean War ceasefire, my grandparents and my parents would tell me about the many ways neighbors helped one another survive. In fact, when I was growing up, I had great aunts and great uncles whom I later learned were not biologically related to me. They were neighbors who raised children together, cooked together, lived together at times, and became one another's adoptive families in the wake of the loss everyone experienced when one Korea suddenly became two.

When my parents became immigrants in the United States, their experience of being welcomed by the Korean American community was what grounded them during a bewildering and tumultuous time. In the Korean American church, they sustained life together, preserving culture and language for their children, and processing the many ways racism affected their lives. For them, in the Korean American church there were no strangers, only extended family.

When we consider Mary, Joseph, and Jesus' story as refugees, fleeing from an enraged despot, I wonder about the people who came alongside them. We know the example of the Magi, who protected the Holy Family by going home another way. Yet, surely, there were others too. People who helped the new parents and their child hide along the way to Egypt. Neighbors who helped settle the small family in a new country, among a new people. Friends who helped them learn a new language, and new ways of life. Jesus probably had many aunts and uncles who were not his blood relations but were family all the same. I give thanks for all my great aunts and great uncles via war and displacement, for all the Korean American church aunts and uncles who raised me, and for the aunts and uncles in Jesus' life those thousands of years ago. I give thanks for the strangers who became friends and family through solidarity with the

Holy Family, wanting a better world, not only for themselves, but for a refugee family too.

The text we've heard from Matthew today is filled with wonder and mystery. In light of the many ways that the ancient narratives of the Christmas story echo our own experiences, let's think about what the Epiphany text invites us into.

Like the Magi, may we seek the divine and be willing to journey closer to God. Like the Holy Family, may we seek safety for all families who are under threat. This new year and every year to come, let us keep seeking—wisdom, purpose, justice, and a better world.

And now, let's enter a few minutes of intentional quiet and contemplation, while considering these queries:

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Reflect on the actions of the Magi. What can we learn from them? What do they teach us about being a seeker, as in, one who persistently seeks the sacred?

Look back at all of the humans involved in the story of Christ's birth as it unfolds—Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, the shepherds, Herod, the Magi. As God intervenes in their lives (in mysterious and startling ways), what does each person seek? As we begin this new year, what are we seeking?