

The Light, the Journey, the Gift
Sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany, January 7, 2018
St. Martin's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Leslie Scoopmire

There are definitely a lot of things that are not true about the image we have in our heads of our gospel reading today.

Before we get going, I'm going to ask you to carefully look at what ISN'T here in today's story, even though we put it there—at least in our heads, anyway. Although many of us assume it to be so, the Wise Men in our story today do not find Jesus in a manger—they find him in a “house.” No animals, no feeding trough. It also doesn't say “three” Wise Men, nor does it name them—that comes from tradition, and in a 19th century poem by Longfellow.

It could be that this takes place months or even a couple of years after the birth, but probably not mere days. Go ahead—look! In the end, our understanding of the story ends up being a big mish-mash of all the details from all the versions plus from artwork that we have seen or songs that we have sung. So, yeah, parts of this story definitely have gotten scrambled in our heads as we've been singing carols by the dozen and arguing over when to put the tree up or take the tree down, and all kinds of stuff that makes us the glorious Episco-nerds that we are. The popular image doesn't match up with the facts we just read. Next thing you know, we'll be finding out that St. Nicholas was far more likely to punch heretics in the face as to leave presents for kids.

Oh, wait—that's true too.

As Episcopal priest and preaching legend Barbara Brown Taylor has noted when preaching on this story of the Wise Men at Epiphany, “It's not that the facts don't matter. It's just that they don't matter as much as the stories do, and stories can be true whether they happen or not.” The stories we tell, and the way we tell them, shape our lives.

We have observed the full twelve days of Christmas. Now along come these unnamed and unnumbered Wise Men, coming from lands far away, having been guided by some kind of strange astronomical event to see a portent or prophecy in the heavens.

The story we hear today centers on three things: the light, the journey, and the gift.

The first is the light. Our Isaiah reading begins with a joyful command: “Arise, shine! For your light has come, And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you!”

The story we tell today starts with the power of light, and it’s no accident that it is told when cold and darkness have settled over us in the chill of winter. This too shall pass, we are reminded, as the Light of Christ dispels the darkness that dwells within us and around us, if we welcome it and open our hearts to it, as Christ calls us to find our true home as children of God.

In the gospel we just heard, the star is the light leading the Wise Men to the infant Jesus. From inside the wondrous light of that star those wise men heard the voice of God, whispering in their ears back in their home country, the voice of the prophet Isaiah, speaking of awakening and perception where previously there had been only darkness.

Those Wise Men set out on a journey, and they didn’t really know where it would take them. Oh, they had seen the signs, and interpreted the prophecies, and followed the stars. They stepped out in faith, though, led by that light in the heaven, and ended up beholding the light of Christ where they least expected it. And when they follow the light of the star to Bethlehem, they end up finding an even more incredible light, the Light of God shining like the wisdom of ages from the inquisitive brown eyes of an infant Jesus.

They see this light, and they know they have seen God. They experience an “epiphany,” a sudden in-breaking of understanding that completely changes you when you experience it. And so their journey of faith has really just begun, and the cosmic significance of Jesus that we heard about in last week’s gospel from the Prologue to John, is brought not just to Judea, but to all the world, represented by these foreign scholars who travel so far.

Our sacred scripture is full of journeys: Abram uprooting himself and leaving everyone he knew in Ur to travel to some far-off land because God’s voice in his ear told him to, and along the way, Abram becomes Abraham and Sarai becomes Sarah and in the end there are babies, too.

Moses leading his people on a journey that’s more of a panic-driven flight as the chariots of Pharaoh pursue them. Paul traveling from one town to another all along the Mediterranean to bring the gospel to anyone, even gentiles, who was willing to listen. And Jesus himself, in each of the gospels, travels from place to place, preaching, teaching, and healing.

The story of the Wise Men teaches us that the ways we find God are always not as we expect—God’s presence often sneaks up on us in the most unlikely ways. Yesterday, the twitter account attributed to Pope Francis tweeted this: “Like the Magi, believers are led by faith to seek God in the most hidden places, knowing that the Lord waits for them there.” Right now, the people of St. Martin’s find themselves on a journey different from the one we anticipated even a few weeks ago. Yet the new path we are taking will lead us to learn things about ourselves and each other that we didn’t know before—and yes, I believe it will leave us stronger.

One of the gifts of journeys such as these is to lead us to see Christ where we least expect him—which is sometimes right next to us, in the face of each other. Even though we KNOW that, we can forget it in the everyday hubbub that sometimes makes us forget to look for and pay

attention to that light in each other. Yet we can find, like the Wise Men, that when we step out in hope and faith, that God was right in the midst of our story all along, especially where we least expect it.

Poet and artist Jan Richardson has written a beautiful poem entitled “For Those Who Have Far to Travel: An Epiphany Blessing,” which ironically Emily included in the 505 last night, and it was all I could do not to laugh out loud when I saw it in the bulletin, since I had been meditating on it all this week. I’d like to share it with you:

*If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it;
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.*

*Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping
step by single step.*

*There is nothing
for it*

*but to go
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:*

*to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;*

*to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions
beyond fatigue
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.*

*There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns*

*you could not
have foreseen.*

*Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel*

*to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.*

As the Magi presented their gifts to the Holy Family, they worshipped this child, and recognized in him something of that same light that had led them there. They eventually stumbled back out into the night, and the night had been changed forever. Their dazzled eyes now swam with the radiance and glory that they had seen in that tiny child, in that humble dwelling. And on their way home, they found that the light from that star that had led them so far was no longer there in the sky to guide them. They didn't need it. When they returned home, they were instead led by the light of Christ, which had moved inside of them.

This brings us to the gift. When they saw the infant Jesus in his Mother Mary's arms, they suddenly saw not just a newborn King of the Jews, but the Prince of Peace. And they responded by offering their gifts to Jesus. And, through the sheer joy of welcoming Christ's love and light

into our hearts and our dazzled eyes, we are called to do the same. That holy light still breaks into our lives in the most unexpected ways, and calls us to follow, and be transformed.

The gift of God's grace, healing, and love comes to us in times of both joy and anxiety, and we too are dazzled, amazed, changed. What gifts can we offer in return? Perhaps we can renew our commitment to walk this journey of faith together, to offer God and each other the best we have to offer of ourselves.

The life of discipleship, of following Jesus, leads us like the Magi, leads us on a different journey than we would have had had we just closed our eyes to that light, that crazy light. It changes us, shapes us, reconciles us. The life of discipleship also calls us to bring forth our gifts and lay them at the feet of Christ, so that we can then embody his light ourselves and reflect it into the world that so desperately needs it. Are we willing to follow that light wherever it leads us?

Arise, shine!

For your light has come,
and it lingers over our hearts,
leading us to the Holy One,
into whom has been poured all the wisdom and light,
and beauty and glory of God,
come to dwell among us
and within us.

Arise, shine!
For your light has come!

Readings: [Isaiah 60:1-6](#); [Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14](#); [Ephesians 3:1-12](#); [Matthew 2:1-12](#)