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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

Thursday, January 6, 2022

The Epiphany, Revised Common Lectionary

[Isaiah 60:1-6](#)

[Psalm 72:1-7,10-14](#)

[Ephesians 3:1-12](#)

[Matthew 2:1-12](#)

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This Christmas season the journey of the magi has had an unusual parallel. Since December 25, and continuing through the twelve days of Christmas and now Day 13, the James Webb Telescope has been making its way through the sky. You can follow its progress live on NASA's website as it has completed its launch, unfurled its sun shield and the first of its mirrors. It's now almost halfway to its destination, which it's scheduled to reach on Day 29; the point in space called L2, where the sun's and the earth's gravity intersect in just the right way to help it stay in place, and from which it will have an unobstructed vantage point to peer into the darkness of deep space.

A long journey, in search of the wisdom of the stars. It's a fitting companion to the story of the Magi tonight. The Webb telescope will let us look not only farther into space than ever before but also farther into time, back into the past, receiving rays of light that were emitted longer and longer ago, closer to the Big Bang. It's an incredible testimony to the brilliance of human ingenuity, but more than that, to

our deep need to ask questions about the universe in which we find ourselves. Exploring the answers to those questions takes a pilgrimage, a journey, a quest.

Of course the Magi are different in other ways. They gaze at the stars not mainly to ask questions about the stars themselves, but about what they might mean for events here on earth. They are astrologers, more than astronomers. We know that the stars featured greatly in the religion of ancient Nabatea, which was just east of Judea, the place where the amazing rock city of Petra served as the capital and where buildings and monuments line up with the stars in complex ways. Some today believe the Magi were real historical emissaries from that kingdom. Others believe the legend of the Magi is more of a theological parable, something that may not have happened historically but that Matthew includes in the gospel story to shine a brighter light on who Jesus is for the world and for us. Unlike the stories of Jesus as an adult, we don't have accounts from contemporaries and eyewitnesses of the stories of his birth. And that's okay. In the end the point isn't factual knowledge about exactly what happened in the city of Bethlehem two thousand and twenty-eight years ago, give or take a year or two. The point is for us to join the Magi in their pilgrimage, here and now, in our own lives, and to discover that what we most love and long for in this world leads us to Christ.

They come to worship. They come to acknowledge someone outside themselves, to show honor, to adore. Contrast that with King Herod, who sees the light of the world not as something to adore but as something to stifle. Like so many rulers before or since, he's concerned primarily not with the search for wisdom but with the need to hold onto his own power, at any cost.

Now today is not just the Feast of the Epiphany. It's also an anniversary of a traumatic day one year ago when we saw a mob of people storm into the United States Capitol building, threaten the lives of government leaders, and disrupt the Congress in its duty of certifying an election. There were a lot of different people in that crowd. Some went there that day with the intent to exercise their right to peaceful protest and free speech, in the service of a belief I think was profoundly and tragically misguided, a lie about a rigged election, but acting out of their conscience and what they believed was right. But others went there that day with an intent to do violence. And people died that day, and a piece of this nation's self-identity as a place of order and institutions and the unquestioned peaceful transfer of power died too. But what happened last January 6th happened, I believe, because a crowd of people was egged on by another ruler with a desperate need to cling to power, and to the illusion of his own infallibility, at any cost; at the cost of truth; at the cost of the well-being of the nation; even at the cost of people's lives. There have been many such rulers from Herod's day through now. Maybe they've even been more the rule than the exception down through history. But there have also always been Magi: those who seek with open hearts, those who come on pilgrimage.

The Magi aren't blinded by power. They come not with their own agendas but open to whatever they may discover and ready to worship and adore. They bring their gifts, gifts given without strings or conditions. Gifts laden with symbolism: gold for a king, incense for a priest, and myrrh for one who will suffer, and who will carry the burdens of the world's sufferings on his shoulders. And then they go home, carrying what they have seen along with them: Jesus, a light burning more brightly than any star.

They are Gentiles, these Magi, these sages. In a Gospel very much oriented toward the people of Israel and Jesus' identity as a member of the Jewish people, Matthew nonetheless gives us this story right at the beginning as a sign that God is fulfilling part of the original promise to Abraham: "in your seed shall all the nations of the world be blessed." The light of the world rests in the heart of God's covenant people, and yet it also expands wide enough to take in everyone, everywhere. And we need that assurance too in our days, in days when it increasingly seems we are a people and a world divided against one another, split into opposed views of reality and opposed values of what a flourishing society looks like. We need the Magi's willingness to go outside our own people, our own language, our own group, in search of God's presence; just as in the parable of the Good Samaritan it was the hated outsider, the member of an enemy people, that Jesus chose as the one who would be a true neighbor. That is not a reason to avoid confrontation or accountability or speaking hard truths. It's an acknowledgment that our mutual destiny is bound up with one another, with all the children God has made, and loves.

In John's gospel Jesus says, "I am the light of the world; whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." But in Matthew's gospel he says, "*You* are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others that they might give glory to the Father in heaven." Jesus is the light of the world, and in him we too become bearers of that light.

May the star of Bethlehem guide us, like the Magi, to that perfect light, and may it shine brightly in us to bring the good news of God's love to the world.