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Grace Episcopal Church, Alexandria Virginia
Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12

I wonder if you have ever been outside on a night so dark so that you cannot see your hand in front of your face? It's hard to find this here in the suburbs because there's always some light coming from somewhere. But I wonder if you were in the countryside on a road on a moonless night with maybe even some cloud cover. That's dark. Of course you would have a flashlight with you, because how else in the world could you have gotten out there in the first place? But what if you only had one and the batteries died. That's when you can't see your hand in front of your face. As your eyes struggled to adjust, and struggled some more, they would hone in on any light anywhere, no matter how small. Even a small votive candle burning on a cabin's windowsill, would feel like a spotlight on your retina. You would feel drawn to it because the light gives you assurance that someone is there and you literally don't know where else to go. The path towards that light is at least taking you somewhere.

I wonder if this was what it was like for the three wise men, the Magi. In those times, it was commonly believed that celestial events marked the birth and death of great leaders. What light were they drawn to? Our tradition thinks big. For instance, it could have been the birth of a new star, a supernova that could have burned more brightly than the moon for weeks or even months. But there is no record of one at that time. Maybe they saw a comet, which isn't a star, but was known as a "bearded star" by the Greeks. Halley's comet did come through in 12 B.C.E. – a bit early for Matthew's Gospel account. Then of course there is the planetary conjunction hypothesis. You remember, we just had one on December 21, 2020, a year ago! In 7 B.C.E., Saturn and Jupiter were also in conjunction, meaning they looked like one light. But something else happened in 7 B.C.E that didn't happen in 2020. Just after their conjunction point, Saturn and Jupiter were joined by Mars so that all three planets were closely aligned in the sky, all within the constellation of Pisces. Because of the meanings attached to these three planets and this constellation, it's likely that eastern astrologers believed that a world ruler of the last days would appear in Palestine among the Hebrews.

It's very interesting, but it's all speculation. What if the reality was actually something more simple? Something more indicative of how God is at work in our world. What if it was just an ordinary light, but seen through extraordinary eyes. I wonder about this because The Feast of the Epiphany marks God's outpouring of limitless love to the entire world, yet an epiphany is a realization often brought on by an experience of the ordinary or commonplace. These definitions have me wondering about what God is telling us through Matthew's Gospel, the only place we hear of the wise men.

The Magi were scholars but they were also seekers who were out in the everyday world of people and nature. They may have inherited the expectation of the Messiah from earlier Jews who were exiled in Babylon in 586 B.C.E. Equipped with knowledge, tradition, and a love for the world, they had "eyes to see" that others did not. As they journeyed west looking for this new great leader, of course they went straight to the seat of power in Jerusalem. Where else would you look for the new king? Wouldn't everyone there know? Strangely, they didn't. They didn't see. But this didn't turn the Magi back. They had gotten that far, but they needed more information to narrow their search and move ahead. A reading from the prophet Micah gave them the specific revelation – go to Bethlehem of Judea. But what an odd place for a king? Not in the center of power, but in the margins of a small and lesser clan a few miles away? This didn't make sense but again didn't deter the Magi. They pressed onward and the star responded by reappearing and pointing exactly where to go. Medieval

believers thought that this “star” was actually a bright angel that the Magi mistook for a star. That would certainly explain the agility of that celestial body.

Whoever or whatever led them to the holy family, the Magi found the king in the most unlikely of places, born under the most unfortunate of circumstances. This didn’t deter the Magi because they knew who they had found and they were overwhelmed with joy. They attested to his worth through their gifts. The perfect gifts for one who was all human and all God: Gold since he is a king, incense since he is to be worshipped, but also myrrh a perfume used for burial. A third gift to young Jesus that was already pointing to the importance of his death in his incarnation. The myrrh is the link between the gold of his royalty and the incense of his divinity. The myrrh is the symbol of the perfect union of God and man in Jesus. Transformed in Jesus, myrrh is no longer the scent of death, but is the perfume of everlasting life.

I find it fascinating that in that first century of our faith, the Magi were very popular. “Trending” we might now say. Like wildfire, they caught the imaginations of early Christians, while the shepherds, not so much. The Magi appeared in writings and artwork a couple hundred of years before the shepherds were ever included. And when they did, they were a supplement to the Magi. The wise men were the rock stars of early Christianity. What do these ancient influencers have for us today? I wonder what does God speaking through Matthew tell us as we begin a new year in a continuing pandemic of multiple sorts?

Remember that the Magi were thinkers but not in ivory towers. Knowing that God’s hallowing touch is on everything, they watched for God’s signs in the world. But at every step of the way to Bethlehem, they didn’t find what they were expecting. Nonetheless, they didn’t turn back but remained open. They were believers. They trusted and persisted. They asked for help. They watched for God’s signs and adapted. Once they received the presence of the one they were searching for, they had their moment but didn’t dawdle. They moved on back out into the world taking a different road than they had planned. These three were indeed wise, but they left wiser and they took that wisdom straight back out into the world. Maybe Matthew is giving us a hint about life for those who have met Christ? You end up with a new map. You end up traveling by a different road.

As we leave 2021, may we also be wiser about ourselves, our priorities, and our longings. May we not just thank God that year is behind us, but instead be aware of the new map it gives us. How does the year behind us shape how we go forward? How do we see them as gifts? How are we different as a people? How are we more wise? How will our “going forward” be different from just “going back”?

I bet we can all list some answers to these questions right this moment, but I suspect the deeper answers, the greater epiphanies, will be discovered as we take this new road of 2022. Like our brethren, the extraordinary Magi, we must watch, trust, adapt and ask for help. We must look towards that small light on the windowsill. Not the one in the cabin. O light of the world, it’s the one that burns on the windowsill of your heart as you live your ordinary life. May that be the star that you follow. You may end up on a different road than you expected. It is a road to somewhere. The road to unbridled joy.