

“A Good Journey”

Introduction: There is a card game I know some of you have played called “Five Crowns.” The game consists of eleven rounds, beginning with three cards and increasing by one until you reach eleven. In the game there are rotating wild cards that change every round, based on the number of cards dealt. So, when three cards are dealt, the 3’s are wild, when 4 cards are dealt, the 4’s are wild, etc., all the way up to the King. Since, in the final round, you are holding many cards, anything can happen, which is why the slogan of the game is this: “The game isn’t over ‘till the Kings go wild!”

All of which leads me to say, as we come together on this mid-January day, that although we may have taken our decorations down, Christmas isn’t over ‘till the Kings come to call!

The actual season of Christmas begins on Christmas day and continues for twelve days. It ends on January 6 with a day called Epiphany. “Epiphany,” as the church uses the term, is not a sudden insight but more like a journey, or gradual unveiling of the dimensions of the person we know as Jesus. If Advent has to do with waiting, and if Christmas proclaims that our waiting is not in vain because we wait for a God who comes, then Epiphany calls us to embark upon a journey, a journey to explore the fullness of the gift that the Christ child is for us. It’s not that our waiting is all done. It’s that there is a rhythm of waiting and seeking, of pondering and pursuing, that characterizes a life of faith and that the church year captures. It is to the seeking and pursuing part of the journey that we now turn.

I. The Seeking Wise Men

A. Such seeking and pursuing is begun and given flesh in the visit of the “wise men from the east.” While the carol we sing at Christmas begins with the beloved phrase, “We three kings of orient are,” it’s not a very accurate one! They did come from the east, from the Babylonian empire, but these fellows were not kings, and we’re not really sure there were just three! Matthew actually uses the word “Magi” to describe them, a term in the first century that referred to astronomers, men who diligently studied the stars. The number three comes from the three gifts they brought, but they often traveled in groups of 12 or so.

B. Why did they come? What moved them to undertake this near 1000-mile journey? Well, there was this star. Several astrological events are suggested for what this remarkable star, or constellation might have been but what they actually saw is still open to speculation. Essentially, these fellows believed that if something important was happening on earth you could see it reflected in the heavens, and if something remarkable was seen in the heavens than something remarkable was likely to be taking place on the earth. Something, it seems, was up.

C. These fellows also had some familiarity with the Hebrew scriptures, as well as with some of the Hebrews themselves, from the years the Israelites spent in exile in Babylon. Men like Daniel, for instance, would have openly shared his faith with the Babylonian wise men he had charge of, speaking about a coming Anointed one, and the prophecy of a star “coming out of Jacob” (Da. 2:48; 9:25f; Num. 24:12).

D. Finally, I think we also might say that they undertook this journey because they had come to realize that their star gazing was not enough, that they had reached the limits of human wisdom to truly

satisfy the longings of their hearts, that there was a poverty of spirit that needed satisfying. For when they were finally led to the humble surroundings where the child was, even though, as it turns out, he wasn't found in a palace, in a city that was decorated and filled with joyful people, it moved them to worship, followed by extravagant generosity and a willingness to respond to further leading.

These men were willing to leave what was familiar territory, to leave what kept them secure and in control, to take an unknown path in order to begin a journey of discovery and greater fullness. By a mysterious combination of God's loving grace and their faithful seeking, they came to know the King of kings and Lord of lords. It was a good journey.

E. As the early church read Matthew's account, not only would it move them to focus on where they might be in their own spiritual journey and in their own understanding of Jesus, and perhaps ask questions of what they still might need to leave behind to see the Christ child more clearly. They would also see, in living color, during a time when there was great angst about including Gentiles in the family of faith, that this Jesus was the King of all nations. Matthew wanted to declare right up front in his gospel account that the scope of Christ's mission was universal, one in which the nations of the world, represented by these strange, pagan astronomers, would come to worship the King of kings.

Paul declares this in his letter to the Ephesians, that through the good news the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members on one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus (3:6). This inclusion of the Gentiles would have been a true epiphany! This God, it seems, had a way of continually showing himself, and his ways, in unlikely places with unlikely people. The drawing of these fellows to Bethlehem, inviting them to become a part of the family of faith, pictures the wide mercy of God. Where, I wonder, would these unlikely places and people be today?

II. Herod and His Friends

A. Tucked into the other side of the story is this fellow Herod, one who refused to try to see, and the religious leaders who had thrown in their lot with him. Appointed by the Roman Empire to be their local ruler over Judea, Herod understood himself to be the king of the Jews. So, when the Magi landed on his doorstep in Jerusalem wanting to make sure their heavenly GPS was functioning properly in their search for this new (real) king, Herod was deeply disturbed. He had no interest in embarking on any kind of journey, even though he pretended to want to join the Magi in worship, once they had located him. And when Herod, an insecure and power-hungry man, discovered that he had been outwitted by the Magi, as they went home by another way, he exploded. The one who, through various jealous rages, had murdered his wife, three of his sons, and his mother-in-law, along with several of his friends, gave instructions to have all the boys in Bethlehem and vicinity, under two years of age, massacred.

B. The religious leaders in Jerusalem were equally disturbed by the arrival of the Magi in their holy city, asking questions about a new king. It turns out that they knew the Scriptures but had no interest in investigating what they said or where they led. So aligned politically with Herod had they become that no matter what he believed or how he acted, it was all about keeping the power he had given them, power they would lose if there really was a new, and righteous, king in town. Sadly, these "wise" leaders had the Scriptures right in front of them, and they had even worked out where the new king was to be born, but they had no interest and so they missed out on what God had for them. The pagan "fools," however, received and pursued what had been revealed by God to them and they rejoiced as they became a blessed part of God's family.

III. Fear and Joy

A. Author and pastor Will Willimon notes that this beloved story of the Magi is one full of both fear and joy. There is fear of the unknowns, and the perils of the journey. There is joy in having reached a destination and experiencing greater fullness. There is fear that turns to jealousy and murder and there is joy that leads to worship and generosity. There is fear of making any changes in one's life, of changing allegiances, and there is joy at going home another way, as a changed person. There can also be a fear of sharing our faith with others, from the nations to those who share a home with us, but a joy as we then come to see how Jesus can renew and light up a person's life, no matter who they are or where they have come from.

Looking back, as we said, Epiphany is less a sudden insight than a call to a journey of seeking and pursuing. As someone has put it, the brightness of the star of Bethlehem did not require the Magi to put on sunglasses, but it did call them to take a next step, and then another, and then another. Epiphany, we might say, is not a flood of light but consists of glimmers we get of the glory of God that provide us with direction for our journey, glimmers of a newborn babe, of one who changes water to wine, of one who feeds a multitude with a small lunch, of one whose mercy is seen on a cross, of one whose nature it is to reveal.

What glimmers might God have for you as these weeks after Epiphany unfold, glimmers that draw you onward, moving you from pondering to pursuing? Is there a place God may be calling you to be more active in your seeking? Keep your eyes open, and then, don't be afraid to step out!