

*Being re-membered*  
*Matthew 2:1-12*

Today it is the magi who show us the way to Bethlehem. As we near the end of our Advent journey, we need the magi to show us how to complete this journey...how to get ready to give birth to Light and Hope and Love and Joy in the world.

Matthew is the only one that includes “wise men from the East” in the story of Jesus’ birth. It’s a fascinating part of the story. And there are any number of sermons wanting to be preached! For example, Matthew is making it clear, immediately, that this birth is cosmic and global. We Gentiles are being included from the beginning. It’s also very interesting how much this story remembers and re-stories the story of Moses and the Exodus. In a part of the story that we didn’t read this morning, babies are killed just as they were in the ancient story, except this time we see that it was Herod...and Pharaoh...that killed the babies. It was never God. And this story also remembers and re-stories Egypt. In this birth story Egypt is transformed from a place of enslavement to a place of sanctuary. Such a compelling and rich story!

But the focus for us is the magi and their journey to Bethlehem. They are showing us the way. They’ve travelled from the East, following a star, to see this special child that is and that will be king in the Kingdom of God. Their journey to Bethlehem has much to show us about what the journey looks like, what we can expect, and what *not* to expect.

So let’s take a closer look at these men. The word “magi” comes from the Greek, *magos*. The NRSV says they are “wise men.” The same word in the Book of Acts is translated as “magician” and in Daniel, as “enchanter.” The point is, these men were not some pious Christians who wanted to be the first Gentiles to worship Jesus. They were much more like Harry Potter and Professors Dumbledore and McGonagoll.

So, a first thing for us to see is that the journey to Bethlehem is being travelled by all kinds of people. It isn't limited to particular religions or tribes or ethnicities, or to particular professions or social groups. In fact, Hebrew Scripture prohibits astrology...yet here are astrologers journeying from distant lands, crossing national and tribal and social boundaries because they have seen the Light. A Light so compelling that they want...they must get close to it.

In the middle of their living, these men saw something. Something caught their attention. Something so undeniable that they set out on a journey to find out what it was. And this is another thing for us to be shown: *They were looking*. The journey to Bethlehem begins with being attentive in our lives. For them to identify a star, a new star, they had to have been paying attention. So much so that when this new star showed up in the night sky, they saw it.

For us to journey to Bethlehem, for us to get ready to give birth to Light and Love in the world, we too must pay attention to our lives and the night sky. It's so easy for us to sleepwalk through our days and weeks. We've seen it. We know it. We have our routines, our work, our schedules. We have our expectations, our complaints, our unhappinesses, our successes. But the journey to Bethlehem begins when we notice something we have never seen before in the middle of our lives. The magi are showing us to pay attention so that when something wants our attention, we see it. The journey begins by listening deeply, by watching carefully, by being ready.

The journey begins when something in our lives, something within us, some event or emotion or circumstance, catches our attention. There are all kinds of journeys...but to make the journey to Bethlehem, we must leave home. The magi left their homes, their families, their friends, their country. Their journey crossed geographical and national

borders. Our journeys to Bethlehem are more likely to cross the geography of our egos, our understandings and assumptions, our habits, our ways of being and doing.

To give birth to God's Light in the world means that we too will leave home. *Not* our brick-and-mortar homes, but the home of our knowings, our certainties. The home of our stories. If I want the world to change, if I want God's Light to be born into the world and into me, but I insist on staying home, nothing will change. If I want my life and my relationships to be different, but I refuse to leave home, nothing will change. The journey to Bethlehem means we leave the familiar. We let go of what we have and hold. We release our certainties. Leaving home means being willing to hear and see things I've never heard or seen before. Leaving home means being willing to let go of my strategies, my habits, my ways of being and doing, my illusions about myself and others. It means putting one foot in front of the other even if we don't know the destination or the outcome.

Which takes us to yet another thing to see and learn from the magi's journey. They left their homes without knowing their destination. *We* know where they were going but they had no idea. They were going because the Light they glimpsed was so compelling that they were willing to leave home and go wherever the journey took them. But they didn't know their destination.

And perhaps that's one of the most important things for us to be shown: the magi were willing to be guided. The star, the Light that caught their attention in the first place, was all they had to orient them on their journey. They didn't know how long it would take; they didn't know where they were going; and they didn't know how to get there. But as long as they could see the star, they could keep going.

And because they were guided by a star, they were travelling at night. They were travelling in the dark. When we're at home in the dark, we can find our way around, because

we know the territory and the landscape. But they left home. And it was a long journey. In the dark. They may have travelled in the day, but to do so, when you can't see the star, would mean risking getting lost.

It's one thing to be on the road at night when you're on a four-lane highway with your GPS programed to your destination. But that isn't what we're talking about. The magi are showing us that to go to the place where the Christ Child is born, we must be ready and willing to travel in the dark. Guided only by a Light we noticed in the middle of living our everyday lives. A light that is distant and elusive. A light that is never at the same place in the night sky but keeps moving even as we move towards it.

In case there is any doubt about how romantic and "nice" the journey to Bethlehem was and is, the magi show us that it is absolutely terrifying and completely vulnerable. There is *nothing* to hold onto...except a moving light in the night sky. Yet, once we give ourselves to the journey, we discover that the darkness is also full of mystery and pregnant with possibility.

The journey to Bethlehem is, of course, a journey of transformation and new birth. Bethlehem is the place where we encounter God, where God is with us in a way that we've never before experienced God-with-us. Bethlehem is the place, the encounter, the remembering that happens when the Light is no longer distant but here, undeniably near, and the only response we have to offer is falling on our knees because we recognize that God is here. And we have become part of the Light. Bethlehem is that moment when we see with new eyes that what has happened and how we got here was God's doing, not ours. Never ours. In the darkness when we couldn't see, it was always the Spirit of God working in us, guiding us when we thought we were lost, making a way when we were sure there was no way.

The time we are living in now is pregnant with opportunities to journey to Bethlehem. Take COVID. This pandemic is an invitation for us to leave home, letting God's Holy Spirit guide us to a place we've never been before. Our impulse is to say, "We want to *get back* to normal. We want to be at *home* in the familiar, where we know how things are. But the possibility of COVID is for the Spirit of God to give birth to something new in us...in humanity. Might we be willing to journey with curiosity, keeping our eyes on God's Light in the world, in the night sky, letting ourselves be guided by the Spirit of God?

Who knows, the destination may be a place we could never have imagined...and one that God has always been imagining!

What if we considered social justice as a journey to Bethlehem? Because certainly when we work for social change, when we work to dismantle the Doctrine of Discovery and white supremacist structures, surely that work is for the purpose of seeing and experiencing more of God's presence and Light in the world for all people. If social justice is Bethlehem, the journey for us, especially those of us who are white, means leaving the "home" of White, Western thinking and understanding and problem-solving. The ways we as white and privileged people have learned to see and think and work in the world is permeated with White Supremacy. To let ourselves be guided by the Light of social justice means *we don't know*. We don't have the answers. We have to be willing to be lost. And to let ourselves be guided by our sisters and brothers of color. It will mean travelling in the dark, trusting others to guide us.

And perhaps when we do, we will find ourselves in a place we could never have imagined...and one that God has always been imagining!

We could also think of disturbances as a potential journey to Bethlehem. And by disturbance I mean anything that is causing dis-ease in my life. It could be something I'm

unhappy about, whether about myself or someone else or in the world or here at FoH. It might be conflict or a broken relationship. Anything that disturbs my well-being and keeps me from being at peace and experiencing the fullness of God's joy is an invitation to journey to Bethlehem. When tension is present in our lives, our impulses and instincts are to assume that circumstances and other people are the cause. So we wait—sometimes with patience, sometimes in anger, sometimes hopeless—we wait for “them” to change. But what if...what if those circumstances and “those people” are signs, or glimpses, or invitations to journey to Bethlehem?

Here, Bethlehem would be experiencing a sense of well-being, experiencing repaired and healed relationships. Bethlehem is our capacity to be at peace and experience God's joy in the midst of whatever is happening. When we leave home for this journey, we are leaving behind our expectations that others need to change. When we begin this journey, we are stepping into the darkness, trusting the promise of God's Light to guide us. We step into the night, knowing that for a relationship to be re-membered, *I* must be willing to be changed. And I don't get to say how I will be changed. It is God, it is the Light of God, it is the transforming Love of God, it is the Spirit of God who guides this journey of transformation and new birth. We take the journey of healing and reconciliation, not knowing how long it will take. It will be terrifying and terribly vulnerable. We will find ourselves in places we've never been. But I promise...more importantly...God promises presence and grace, mercy and love. And a Light in the night sky. These are all the provisions we need for the journey. Whether it's a journey of a week or a decade, it is a *long* journey. For whenever we are travelling in the dark, being lost is *always* a long time.

But when we arrive at the destination, we find a peace, a joy, a healing and liberation we could never have imagined...and one that God has always been imagining!

May we, together—with each other—journey to Bethlehem, in the dark, guided by the  
Light of God in the night sky.

May it be so.