

What's Your Guiding Light? Epiphany Sunday - Jan 8th, 2017

Isaiah 60:1-6. Matthew 2:1-12

Did you ever find yourself somewhere and wonder, “How on earth did I get here?” Have you ever stopped to look back over the sequence of events that led you to where you are today? No matter how much we like to plan things in our lives, sooner or later there are always unexpected twists and turns that come our way. And sometimes when we look back, we notice there has been some kind of guiding light that has shown us the different paths to take.

I know if I look back over my journey into ministry I feel that way. If you would have told me twenty, or ten, or even five years ago, that I would be a minister, I would probably have shook my head and thought you were crazy! But God has a way of taking us on journeys that have twists and turns.

And I think that the Magi, or the Wise Men probably felt that way.

Today is Epiphany Sunday in the church calendar. Now there are various theological explanations for Epiphany celebrations, and historically Eastern and Western Christian church traditions have treated it very differently. In the Greek speaking, Eastern churches, the feast of Epiphany was linked to the baptism of Jesus. But in the Latin-speaking West, the holiday emphasized the visit of the magi. And it is this tradition that we celebrate in the United Church of Canada. In fact, in some parts of the western Christian world, Epiphany has also been called the “Three King’s Day”. It is a Christian feast day that celebrates the revelation of God as human, in Jesus Christ.

Now, I know that we sometimes have our nativities with the Magi at the stable with the shepherds. But really this nativity scene is not one story, but two entirely separate stories. The angels appeared to the shepherds who went to the stable the night Jesus was born – yes, that’s one story ... and the other story is about the wise men, or Magi. They did not arrive shortly after Jesus was born... and they did not find Jesus at the stable, either, which is how some of us may have thought the story went. After all, that’s what our nativity displays suggest.

But no. The wise men set out on a journey of faith, and didn't find Jesus until later... much, much later... In fact, the wise men didn't arrive in Bethlehem until several months later, and some sources even records it as two years later. And when they did arrive, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were living in a house. It tells us in verse 11, they: "*came to the house*", not a stable, and "*they saw the child*" not an infant, but a child, a toddler. The Magi had been travelling to find Jesus for maybe up to 2 years, and their journey had no doubt taken many twists and turns.

At the very beginning, when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the Magi saw a star rise and shine in the East. It was an ancient belief that an unusual movement or stellar event of great magnitude was often thought to herald the birth of a King, or someone of great personage. And so Matthew records that the Magi saw a bright star and deduced a royal birth had taken place. But the fact that the star appeared and moved, indicated perhaps more of a miraculous appearance than a natural one. And so, they were curious. They went looking. They were determined to find out more, and decided to leave their daily responsibilities, their homes and families to make a journey to -- well, where? They didn't know where... But somehow, they knew the light was significant. They went in search.

Their journey of faith had begun. They traveled by camel and on foot down miles and miles of bumpy roads. We are often led to believe that they followed the star, but in fact, they could no longer see the guiding light. Scripture tells us that they don't see the star again until they find the Christ child. No, the Magi were making a journey of faith -- unsure of where they were going.

I think that life is a bit like that for us sometimes. Some people might not sure what it is that they are seeking. The whole rise of the spirituality movement is full of many people seeking a guiding light; something to give their life meaning and purpose. And even if we are sure that our faith is in Jesus Christ, still we might not be sure where our paths might take us. I for sure did not know that my path would bring me to Knox United here in Ayr. Sometimes we are required to just step out in faith.

The Magi headed for Jerusalem, the capital city, since that is where they thought a King would be born. But I wonder if they ever felt like they were on a wild goose chase? After all, Jerusalem was a big city, with lots and lots of narrow streets, and turns, crowded with people. It's easy to get lost. Where should they start looking? It was like searching for a needle in a haystack. So, these distinguished travelers started asking around:

"Where is the one who has been born King of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." (Matt 2:2)

But no one in Jerusalem seemed to know what these foreigners were talking about. No-one believed them. They were outsiders. They weren't Jewish. In fact, their questions began to cause alarm. King Herod lived in Jerusalem and he considered himself the King of the Jews... so when he heard rumors of the Magi and their search, he was quite disturbed and upset. And the whole of Jerusalem knew that an angry Herod may have violent repercussions. Verse 3 tells us that:

"King Herod was disturbed and all Jerusalem with him." (Matt2:3)

Sometimes, when we talk about our faith in Christ, our belief in our guiding light, – it too can cause alarm in others. It makes others question us. Maybe sometimes we might be treated as an outsider – just like the Magi were. Sometimes, just like King Herod, others cannot understand or clearly see the light themselves. They may be guided by other things like money, ambition, or even various addictions. And when you can't see the light, when you are searching for other things, then it is hard to have faith.

After the Wise Men had left the secret meeting with Herod, they set out toward Bethlehem, still wondering if they were going the right way. I am sure that after leaving the palace, they may have begun to have their doubts. But then, just when they needed a sign the most, the star that they had first seen shining in the east *reappeared!* After being on the road for months and months, these Magi were absolutely thrilled to finally see the light again! Verse 10 tells us:

When they saw the star, they were overjoyed." (Matt 2:10)

The star led them to find Jesus, who was now a child...not a baby anymore. They found him living in a house with his parents in Bethlehem. And the moment the Magi saw Jesus, they knew he was the One they had been searching for. They knew immediately! These distinguished gentlemen travelers immediately knelt down in silence and worshipped him.

When we find Jesus. When we discover God's overwhelming love and acceptance – it makes us also kneel in worship. As we heard, described to us so beautifully in the dramatized reading of Isaiah 60,:

... when we find God's Light, the moment when it washes all over you in a warm glow, ... our lives are transformed ... things begin to make sense ... it makes you want to dance, laugh, cry, but most of all to praise.

The Magi had set out – not knowing where they were going, how long it would take, or even if they would be successful in their search for Jesus... yet, in faith, they set out on their journey anyway. They were curious to discover more. Their long search led them to discover God's love, revealed through Jesus... Their long, uncertain journey of faith had been worth it.

Are you, or anyone you know curious to discover more? Do you want to experience the light that Isaiah prophesied about?

Like the Magi, perhaps sometimes you wonder if you are going the right way. Sometimes a faith journey can be difficult; sometimes it can be filled with twist and turns and many doubts. But, like the Magi, we are all called to keep going through all the doubts, the questions, and the uncertainties. Even through the times when we feel that God is not near us.

And like the Magi, we have the promise of a guiding light to show us our way, especially through those times of trial. It is the guiding light of Christ's love for us. And I promise you, that light always shines when you most need it.

As we journey in faith, we are called to follow Christ's guiding light. And as we journey, we are called to mirror God's light and reveal God's love to those around us ... and to the world.

God guides us forward... on our own unique journey of faith ... and *all are always welcome*. Amen