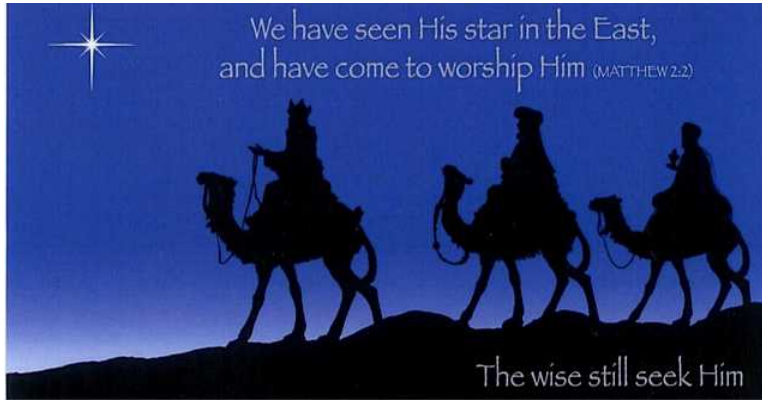


“THE WISE STILL SEEK HIM”

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, January 3, 2016
Epiphany Sunday – Communion
Higganum and Haddam Congregational Churches
Making Disciples. Making a Difference.*



Text: Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.



Today we are observing Epiphany Sunday. Epiphany means “divine manifestation, revelation, appearance, self-disclosure.” In a Christian context, Epiphany refers to the manifestation of Jesus, the King of the Jews, to the Gentile world, represented in today's narrative by the magi. Jesus was made known to these “wise ones from the East” through the book of nature (their study of the stars and planets) and the book of scripture (prophecies about the coming of the Messiah).

Today is also a communion Sunday, our first communion Sunday of this new year. During our communion liturgy, we recall the story of Jesus' post-Easter appearance to the disciples on the Emmaus Road, when he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

My sermon title this morning is taken from the caption of a Christmas card I received a number of years ago. The card depicts three silhouetted figures on camels against a dark blue sky. Ahead of and above these three figures is a bright star. Directly above them is a verse from Matthew's Gospel: “We have seen his star in the east, and have come to worship him.” At the bottom of the illustration is the caption: “The Wise Still Seek Him.” I had no idea how popular this saying is until I did a Google search and came up with more than 10 million hits in less than one-tenth of a second. (Most of the hits said “Wise *Men* Still Seek Him,” but I prefer the inclusive language version.)

Ever since I received that Christmas card, I have been fascinated by this caption. So this morning, as we observe Epiphany Sunday by remembering the narrative of the visit of the Magi to Bethlehem, I would like to reflect with you on that story, and on some implications of that Christmas card.

When Matthew's gospel was first written, toward the end of the first century, perhaps in Antioch of Syria, it's quite likely that Matthew and his congregation were not aware of Luke's Christmas story. So let us seek to consider Matthew's narrative of the visit of the magi independently of Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus.

Who were the magi? They were Gentiles, who lived in Persia, in a non-Jewish culture. They were, to use our language, both priests and scientists. Their religion was Zoroastrianism, and their science was an amalgam of astrology and astronomy.

These priest/scientists and their forebears “had gathered centuries' worth of observations and correlations of planetary movements and synchronous events on Earth. From charts and tables, magi could interpret the celestial omens. The kings they advised liked to hear about their own births, and magi obliged by developing individual birth charts called nativities, with emphasis on identifying patterns that indicated legendary reigns.”¹

What did the magi see in the night sky that led them to undertake an arduous journey of more than a thousand miles? We don't know for sure. One theory suggests that “an ideal set of astrological conditions, heralding the birth of a king of the Jews of divine destiny, appeared in the skies on April 17 of 6 B.C. That day, the beneficent king planet, Jupiter, rose as the morning star, in its position of greatest power, reborn of the power of the sun.”²

¹ http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_9_39/ai_96238074.

² Ibid.

As impressive as this sign was, it only indicated in a general way where the “king of the Jews” had been born—in the province of Judea, part of Herod’s kingdom. In order to actually find the child Jesus, the Gentile magi needed to consult with Jewish biblical scholars, who could search for a prophecy that would pinpoint the exact location where the newly-born king could be found. Their study of the scriptures suggested that the King of the Jews whose birth was revealed in the predawn sky could be found in Bethlehem.

Guided both by the star and by the scriptures, the Persian priests and scientists eventually found Jesus and his mother Mary in a house in Bethlehem (not in a stable). By this time Jesus, the future King of the Jews, might have been as much as a year old. The shepherds and angels had long since returned to their homes. The wise ones from the East had been on the road for many months, traveling through a variety of landscapes and cultures, perhaps having occasional doubts about the wisdom of the journey they had undertaken, but for the most part confident that they would ultimately find the One they were looking for.

As they set off on the last leg of their long journey, Herod told the magi to “go and search diligently for the child”—which they had already been doing for many months. They were “overwhelmed with joy” when they found Jesus and Mary in the house in Bethlehem. And the gifts they gave the little King of the Jews—not only the material gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, but also the spiritual gift of their worship—these gifts foreshadowed the time when Jesus would not only be King of the Jews, but also Lord of the Gentiles and Savior of the world.

Wise ones from the East who searched diligently for the child found the One they were looking for. When they first set out on their journey, they knew they had far to travel. Their long geographic and spiritual journey required of them that they be persistent and diligent. Their persistence and diligence were rewarded, and they were “overwhelmed with joy.”

During this new year that has just begun, we three wise ones (two churches and one wilderness guide) will be on a spiritual journey of our own, not to find Jesus (who has already found us), but to find out how we can best serve Jesus in our time and place. This spiritual journey will ask of us that we be persistent and diligent. This spiritual journey will ask of us that we bring our best gifts of discernment and devotion with us. As we set off on this journey whose destination is not yet defined, here is an Epiphany blessing for our journey. This blessing, “For Those Who Have Far to Travel,” is by Jan Richardson.

If you could see
the journey whole,
you might never
undertake it,
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.

Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping,
step by
single step.

There is nothing
for it
but to go,
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;

to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;

to press on
beyond distractions,
beyond fatigue,
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.

There are vows
that only you
will know:
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,
make them again;
each promise becomes
part of the path,
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel

to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.³

³<http://paintedprayerbook.com/2016/01/02/epiphany-for-those-who-have-far-to-travel/>