

The Journey of the Magi
by the Rev. Barbara Stewart

Happy Twelfth Day of Christmas! Twelve drummers drumming.... The church is wise, I think, in giving us these twelve days to celebrate the birth of Jesus; one day is just not enough to take in the immensity of God's love in coming among us.

The Gospel of Matthew, which we just read, continues the account of the birth of Jesus. On Christmas we read Luke's account of the birth, and the response of the angels and shepherds. Last Sunday, we heard the prequel from John's Gospel, In the beginning was the Word. And today we hear what happened after the birth, with the journey of the wise men.

The wise men from the east came, seeking the one born to be king of the Jews; guided by the star, they came to the place where the baby was. Overwhelmed with joy, they offered him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Can you see their faces? And can you imagine what Mary and Joseph were thinking and feeling? Yes, they knew that their child, their little boy, was Emmanuel, God-with-us, the Son of the Most High. But now they were seeing this for real – it was no longer only the words spoken by the angel Gabriel to Mary, or the words Joseph heard in a dream. It was real and alive and taking place right in front of them.

Who were these wise men? The word used to describe them, the magi, the wise and learned ones, was found as early as 600 years before the Gospel of Matthew was written. The magi were a group of religious experts in Persia, advising kings, performing religious rituals, watching the stars, and interpreting dreams. How many were there, making this journey to Bethlehem? We don't know; traditionally the number is three because of the three gifts they brought. But surely their entourage was greater than that – somebody had to feed the camels.

Four to five hundred years after the Gospel of Matthew was written, these men were called kings. In the writings of the Venerable Bede, who lived

672-735, the magi were named. Melchior was described as an old man with white hair and a long beard, Gaspar as young and beardless and ruddy complexioned, and Balthasar as black-skinned and heavily bearded. By the eighth century, these three magi were held to represent the continents of Asia, Africa, and Europe – the whole known world at the time, coming to worship Jesus.

I wonder what was going through their heads as these magi set out on their journey. What did they hope to find? What would this do to their lives – a king of the Jews, an alien people, not who they were? This was no simple hop down the road; there were no places or freeways to speed the journey along, no motels or rest-stops along the way. It was a long way to Bethlehem. And yet they persisted – they met with Herod, not the most welcoming guy on the block – and even then they persisted, traveling to see the one born to be king of the Jews. And they were overwhelmed with joy on seeing him.

I wonder if we might put ourselves in their shoes for a bit. Okay, not the camels and all that – but what is it that we seek? What do we hope to find? And what do we bring?

We have just started a new calendar year. 2024 is finished; 2025 has begun, a year which carries a degree of uncertainty. Where is St. Thomas called to be in the midst of that? The people of God, here, in this place, what does our life look like? How do we best reach out to those around us, those challenged economically, those without a home or enough food to eat, those caught up in questions of status and citizenship? What are our hopes, what do we seek as this community of faith, both for ourselves and for those around us?

And in our own lives, what are our hopes and dreams? What are we seeking? What journeys do we need or want to make?

A couple of thoughts about the journey:

The wise men from the east were not Jews; they were, in today's parlance, outsiders. Our journeys may take us through different places, traveling with

different people, different cultures, different languages and customs, different understandings of how the world works. That may be challenging at times, but also a rich and wonderful opportunity to learn and grow. In our Baptismal Covenant, we promise “to respect the dignity of every human being”. To be able to see each person as a child of God – that stretches us sometimes, but, we pray, with the help of God, we can do this.

The journey of the magi was not an easy one. It was a long distance, through unfamiliar territory. And yet they persisted, through all the twists and turns in the roads (if there even were roads). The fulfillment of our hopes and dreams may not be a smooth one, it may not be an easy one. May we have the grace and the strength to persist, even if the going gets rough.

And may we have the grace and strength to reach out to each other, to walk on that journey together. The magi were guided by the light of the star. They weren't all on their own, left in the darkness; there was light. What provides the light for our journeys? What shows us the way? It may be family and friends who help shine the light; it may be this community of faith here at St. Thomas; it may be the stars themselves, the beauty of creation, the presence of God in all the world.

In our Gospel lesson last week, from John: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. The true light – always. We never have to journey alone; the light is there, the light of Christ, always.

And what gifts do we bring? It's all too easy to catalogue all the things we don't have. What if, instead, we looked at all the gifts God has given us? What would we bring to give to the little one, the king? Or, another way of asking that, what gift can we share with our family, with St. Thomas, with the world around us? We may not have gold, frankincense, or myrrh in our backpacks, but what about taking time to talk with someone who is alone, or helping someone with a project around the house, or finding a blanket to keep someone warm? What gifts do we have?

Ann Weems has written this poem, *The Gifts of the Magi*:

O Lord, I'd like to go to the stable this night!
I'd run
 even through the dark
 to lay my gifts at your feet.

Lord, why couldn't I have been there?
I needn't have been a king,
 perhaps just a shepherd child
 or someone sent from the inn
 to check on the progress of the birth. . .

Or are you waiting this night in other stables
 for me
 to bring my gift?
Are you waiting for me to run
 even through the dark and cold of the night?

When the magi saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. They went in and saw Mary with the child. May we find joy in seeing Jesus, God-with-us, Emmanuel, and may we share that joy with those we love, with those around us, with those we are called to serve.