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Epiphany of the Lord

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“A Light in the Fog”

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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 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.

A Light in the Fog

In December of 1952, a toxic mix of dense fog and sooty black coal smoke descended on London, England for five days. Deep darkness covered the city. Daytime visibility fell to one foot. Roads were littered with abandoned cars. Some said they couldn't see their own feet. Midday concerts were canceled due to total darkness. Archivists at the British Museum found smog lurking in the book stacks. Movie theaters closed because patrons couldn't see the screen. This environmental disaster took 4,000 lives and made ordinary life nearly impossible. Despite the dense, dark fog, however, Oxford and Cambridge Universities decided to carry on with their annual cross-country competition by positioning marshals along the track who would shout out, 'This way! This way, Oxford and Cambridge!' as runners materialized out of the thick haze.¹

Have you ever felt like you were lost in a fog? Unsure of the way forward? Have you ever had to figure out what to do next when the next step on your path was unclear? The story of the Magi, those wise ones from the east, is, as my colleague Amy Miracle says, "a short story which creaks under the weight of subsequent embellishment." Although the text doesn't specify – it is, you might even say, a bit foggy on the details, over time, people have added details: declaring that there were three and even giving them names. The text doesn't tell us much about these magi, but it makes clear that what compelled them to journey to a foreign land to visit someone else's king was a tiny pinprick of light in the night sky, a star. Although they didn't know where this star would lead them, when they saw it they knew, deep down in their bones, that they were supposed to follow it, even if doing so would be like walking through the great smog of 1952.

My friend Jennifer is a Presbyterian minister. Recently, she shared with me that every year during Advent, as the Christmas story gets told and retold, she tries to figure out which character in the story she identifies within that particular year. This year, Jen is a few months into a new position as an interim associate pastor at a church that feels very different, in theology and worship practices, than any other church she has served. Her sense of call to that congregation and to ministry itself is feeling more than a little foggy. But in addition to being a minister, Jen is a trained yoga instructor.

¹ This illustration and the sermon idea that follows come from a sermon by the Rev. Amy Miracle, "Seeing through the Smog," preached at Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Ohio on January 8, 2017. Used with permission. I also collaborated with the Rev. Derek Starr Redwine on this sermon.

When she started her interim pastor position, she began offering a Monday morning yoga chapel service, which combines yoga and worship. She has been surprised and delighted that every week, the service grows, and new people attend. This year," she told me, "I feel like the magi in the Christmas story. I don't really know what God is calling me to next, but the one thing I'm clear about is that I'm called to use yoga in my ministry. Right now, yoga is my guiding star." When we are lost in a fog, the smallest point of light can offer enough guidance for us to keep moving forward. A guiding star can be a value like compassion or equity or practice, like yoga or meditation or prayer. But when we are trying to figure out if the star that's guiding us comes from God, one question to ask is: does it call us to action, as the magi's star called them to go on a journey?

When the Tuesday morning Bible study group discussed this story a few weeks ago, one of the things we talked about were the verbs in the text, the words that describe the actions of these wise ones as they made their way toward Jesus.

They came.

They asked.

They heard.

They set out.

They saw.

They were overwhelmed with joy.

They entered.

They knelt.

They paid homage.

They offered gifts.

They went home by another way.

Putting all these verbs together got us thinking that the wise ones didn't just bring gifts of gold and fancy perfume for Jesus; they offer us a gift as well. Their gift to us is a pattern of the life of discipleship, revealed by the verbs in this story.

Come, ask, hear, see, enter, kneel, go. As we navigate our journeys of faith, especially when we aren't sure where the next step will take us, the example of the wise ones can be like a voice cutting through the fog, like the voices guiding those Oxford and Cambridge runners back in 1952.

Their example teaches us that, in our journey of faith, it is not our beliefs that matter as much as our actions. This story tells us nothing about the beliefs of the

magi. We know they weren't Jewish, and we know there was no such thing as Christianity yet. From all those action verbs, we know they were searching for a sign in the heavens, and when they saw their star, they were ready and willing to move, to act, to respond. When they finally arrived at Jesus's bedside, they acknowledged him as king without understanding who he was or what he would do. Like the disciples who will come along later in this story, the wise ones respond to God's call even when the path is completely unclear.

How would it look for you, in this new year, to be less concerned about what you believe and more focused on whatever star God has given you to guide you forward in your journey? A star that comes from God is a star that calls us to action, for the journey of faith never begins with belief. It begins with openness, with courage, and with movement even when the way forward is less than clear. On this journey, the verbs of the magi become our verbs: Come, ask, hear, see, enter, kneel, go.

If the verbs of the magi are our verbs, then their journey is also our journey which is to say we don't know for sure where it will lead. Unlike the map applications on our phones, there is no way to pull back on life and see an overview that shows us exactly how we will get from where we are now to where God is calling us to be. We throw around phrases like "journey of faith" or "spiritual path" phrases that make it sound like we have a turn by turn plan for getting from here to there when in fact we are all stumbling through the fog.

Annie Dillard offers an astute description of the so-called "spiritual path." She writes: *"Spiritual path" is the hilarious popular term for those night-blind mesas and flayed hills in which people grope, for decades on end, with the goal of knowing the absolute. They discover others spread under the stars and encamped here and there by watch fires, in groups or alone, in the open landscape; they stop for sleep, or for several years, and move along without knowing toward what or why. They leave whatever they find, picking up each stone, carrying it a while, and dropping it gratefully and without regret, for it is not the absolute, though they cannot say what is. Their life's fine, impossible goal justifies the term "spiritual."*

*Nothing, however, can justify the term “path” –
except for one thing – They don’t quit. They stick with it.
Year after year they put one foot in front of the other,
though they fare nowhere.
Year after year they find themselves feeling with their fingers
for lumps in the dark.²*

The good thing about fumbling around in the dark is that, when it’s really dark, a little light goes a very long way. Author E.L Doctorow once said “Writing is like driving at night in the fog. You can only see as far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.”³

The magi remind us that our first task is to **pay attention** so that when God puts a guiding light before us, we notice it and take the next step forward, even when the rest of the way is less than clear. Like the wise ones, on this journey, we are called to ask questions and to listen to the answers, and possibly to re-chart our course when we learn something new and unexpected. The magi went first to Jerusalem, the capital city and the seat of political power. They showed up at Herod’s palace because they were looking for a newborn king and where else would you find a king if not in a palace? But Herod said they should go to Bethlehem instead, and so they went. And when the star led them to a baby who was born, not in a palace but a stable, and not to royal parents but to the poorest of the poor, they trusted the guidance of their star and knelt down to worship him.

Ultimately, the wise ones show us that this journey with God, as foggy and unclear as it might be, is transformative. Living these verbs leads to moments when the fog suddenly dissolves, allowing us to see things clearly if only briefly, and such moments change us. Just like the magi who, when they left Jesus, went home by another way when an experience has truly transformed us, there is no going back the way we came.

Come, ask, hear, see, enter, kneel, go home by another way. Once you find your guiding star and follow it, take the first step and then keep moving forward along the path God has mapped out for you.

² Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*.

³ <http://writersalmanac.org/e-l-doctorow-quote-2/>

Yes, more often than not, it will be a path surrounded by fog, but this doesn't need to be bad news, because, in the foggiest darkness, all it takes to light your way is the smallest pinprick of light, just enough for you to move forward, step by courageous step. For the light that guides us is none other than God, who has promised to be with us, through the murkiest night, with us, every step of the journey.

Amen.

On this day of Epiphany, when we remember the guiding star that led the wise ones to Jesus, we celebrate this meal which is, for the body of Christ we call the church, one of our guiding stars. God calls us to this table that together we may be nourished and nurtured, no matter where we are in our journeys. Here, we gather as fellow travelers, sharing this extraordinary gift, bread, and wine that represents the very body and blood of the one who lived and traveled among us. This is God's table, and Christ is our gracious host. All are invited to share the feast.