

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
January 3, 2016
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria G. Hopewell
Text – Isaiah 60: 1-6, Matthew 2: 1-12

This, no doubt, will sound a little silly. Yesterday, as I tried to navigate my way from the Eastern Iowa Regional Airport in Cedar Rapids area, I found myself comparing a small part of my journey to that of the magi. Oh, it wasn't the ultimate purpose or goal of the journey that was on my mind—only the means of finding the way. I suppose it was natural that my thoughts go in this direction. After all, the magi, as our theme for worship today, were on my mind—at least just barely beneath my consciousness.

Since my flight arrived in Iowa very late in the evening on the first, I had chosen to get a motel room and drive back to Galena in the daylight. That took me a few miles away from the immediate access to the small spaghetti bowl of route numbers that would set me on my way toward Dubuque. Now, my car does not have a GPS. I rely on an iPhone app called “Waze.” So, on Saturday morning, I drove out of the McDonald's next to my motel, equipped with a large cup of coffee, and began to retrace the way I had driven the night before. According to my Waze lady, that was obviously wrong. So, she patiently rerouted me. And I followed the gentle directions, even when I was scratching my head, finding myself headed west toward Iowa City. And sure enough, we soon took an exit, a turn or two, and I was sailing past the motel and McDonald's for a redo. There was one more misstep--my inability to ease into an exit lane in time. So, yet another redo that took me back toward the airport. But, ultimately, I was safely on north-east bound 151 to Dubuque. And the Waze lady quietly rested on my dashboard.

The magi, of course, had no such technology. They followed the ancient practice of studying the placement and movement of stars in the sky. I expect that practice originated very early in the life of humanity, long before astrologers and philosophers like the magi began to ascribe meaning to the skies. Meaning, like the significance of a new heavenly body, never seen before. This extra brilliant star that we now call “the Star of Bethlehem” that behaved in a way that drew them from their distant homeland to find what it signified—thought to be the birth of someone very important who would impact the whole world. Most likely a king. It was unusual and seemingly important enough to do more than study the star and its course. To undertake a long and arduous journey to find and honor this king in a different land, different culture, and different religious faith.

Of course, they sometimes needed some additional help. Perhaps there were some cloudy nights. Or, perhaps they had developed some of their own notions about where they were going and came to doubt what the star was telling them. Bethlehem? That dusty little no-account place? Really? Wouldn't a king more likely be found in a place like Jerusalem? The place of the Temple? Maybe that's why they took the detour that led them to Herod the Great, the King of the Jews, to Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem. Herod, of course, was very interested and called on the Jewish priests and scribes to interpret the words of the prophets in scripture. The magi's dream, telling them not to comply with Herod's request to report on their findings, sent them home by a different way. But they probably never knew that their doubting the star unwittingly set off Herod's fears and resulted in the slaughter of all baby boys to assure that the one who might pose a threat to his own power and standing would be eliminated.

What stars do we follow? Who do we trust when we question or doubt the epiphanies that confront our own lives? Or when the path seems to meander in unexpected directions or to become harder than we think we are able to handle?

In this world of ours, we are bombarded by stars. Stars of success. Stars of material comfort or luxury. Stars, for some, of fame or power. Or happiness. These speak loudly—they shout. And if we follow them, we may achieve the promised rewards. For some, that is just fine. For others, questions arise. What next? Is this all there is? I have all of this, but I feel empty.

Sometimes we receive some insight, some compelling sense of purpose or direction. We struggle with a decision to change course, to risk something very new. We come to terms with the choice and set off, probably with a mixture of confidence, excitement, and anxiety. Where do we go when the light of the guiding star dims a bit or leads us to a twisting path that stirs up doubts? Who—or what—do we trust?

Getting lost on my little trip from Cedar Rapids to Galena didn't have any major consequences. I might have gone on to Iowa City, used up a bit of gasoline, taken a chunk out of the nap I needed because of a sleepless night in a motel. That would be the end of it. No big deal. No great insight, no story to tell.

The magi, though, by the time they got to the end of their quest, had a big story. It did, indeed, end in Bethlehem. But there was no king or palace. Just a simple house with a peasant couple and small child. Very ordinary. At that point, they had a choice—doubt the star? Assume that they had been misled and head on home with their gold and precious spices? Or set aside their doubt, their expectations. Get their heads around this unusual ending. Trust, and recognize that they might not know all the answers yet. More might remain to be revealed as they traveled back home, or even after they got there, as they told their story and passed on the news, strange as it might have seemed.

The right stars, the right epiphanies are about light. About revealing. It is a light that lies within us—the light of Christ that burns deep in our hearts and can drive away the darkness. It is this light that we must recognize, must nurture just as we would tend the burning embers of a fire. And we must trust it—even when the going gets rough and especially when it takes you to unlikely places. And, of course, we must spread that light. Every little ray. Our world so desperately needs it!

Of course, sometimes we conclude a journey only to find ourselves right back home where we started. But that is all right. The Rev. John Phillip Newell quotes from a poem of Mary Oliver, 'Six Recognitions of our Lord' writes of such a moment. 'Then,' she says, 'I go back to ... my own house, my own life, which has now become brighter and simpler, somewhere I have never been before.' Newell goes on to say, "I think the wise men in returning home saw everything more brightly. The Light they had found in a distant land turned out to be the Light at the heart of their own land. But now they saw it as if for the first time. Shall we serve this Light together? Shall we bow to it in one another and every nation? It is the Light within all life."

Amen.