

The Visit of the Wise Men

- Or Traveling as Spiritual Practice

Sermon for January 5, 2020
The Feast of the Epiphany
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*A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.*

Matthew 2:18

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, ‘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.’ 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5They told him, ‘In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 “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.” ’

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then 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.’ 9When 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. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On 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. 12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Grace to you and peace from the one who is and the one who was and the one who is to come.

The new year is only five days old, but already we have had so much disheartening news of turmoil in the world, it makes me want to stay in bed and hide under the covers. And in the midst of this news falls the feast of Epiphany, and we hear again the story of the wise men who traveled from the East.

How can this old story help us with our day-to-day challenges? And what kind of story is this story anyhow? It is a story full of intriguing and fascinating details, but it is also a story full of gaps.

There are mysterious travelers, called "Magi" which can mean many things: wise men, teachers, priests, astrologers, interpreters of dreams, shamans.

Where did they come from? Again, we don't know. From somewhere in the East, India, perhaps, or Persia, or Armenia.

And how many of them were there? Five? Ten? Twenty? The gospel does not give a number, but it does mention three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh; and it was these three gifts that gave rise to the notion that there were three travelers.

The gifts were precious and expensive and this gave rise to the notion that the travelers were fabulously wealthy-- they must have been kings.

And the storytellers took it from there. The three kings were draped in the splendor of the orient and given legendary names: Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. But their names might have been Kasim, Hassan, Abbas, Asad, or Samir, names which these days appear on travel-bans, beautiful names born by people whom we are supposed to fear or treat with suspicion.

Other legends have been added. There is a legend of a 4th king whose travel was slowed down because he helped various people on the road, and when he finally arrived, it was not in Bethlehem, but on the cross that he met the King of the Jews.

And in the midst of all these embellishments we lose sight of the reason why those travelers made their journey in the first place. Why did the Magi travel to Bethlehem? They went to worship, to adore, to bring gifts! And so, this story, among many other things, is a story about worship.

Many medieval paintings capture the moment when the Magi in all their splendor arrive at the humble dwelling of the Christ Child: they fall on their knees and hand over their precious gifts. It is a gesture of great humility and deep devotion. And this powerful moment might lead us to think that the kneeling and the gift-giving, that is how they worshiped. And yes, it is true, they knelt in adoration, they handed over their treasures, but their worship was so much more this, it was so much greater than this one moment.

Their worship included everything that led up to this moment, beginning with the attention they paid to the blazing star, and then their decision to respond to the star by traveling to Jerusalem. Every step of that journey was an act of worship.

Think of all they had to face during the journey: endless days in the hot desert, cold nights under a

starry skies, attacks from wild animals and from bands of robbers, sandstorms, thirst, exhaustion. Think of the dedication and the physical and mental strength required by such a journey. All of this, each arduous mile, was an act of worship.

And then there is the matter of gifts--gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Certainly, these were great treasures, but these were not the only gifts. There was also the sacrifice of time and resources: Think of all the supplies and provisions required for such a journey. And all of this--each purchase and expense--was part of the gift.

And while they were gone, they had to forego the comforts of home, they missed important occasions, births and funerals; they could not provide comfort to their family and friends and could not receive comfort from them. By making these sacrifices, they offered far more than their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Every step of that journey was an act of worship, every sacrifice an act of devotion. Traveling as worship and sacrifice as devotion - that is something that people in the Middle Ages understood quite well. People in the Middle Ages had a great appreciation for the devotional quality of sacred journeys, and they developed the art of pilgrimage as a spiritual practice.

Going on a pilgrimage in the Middle Ages was not a stroll in the park. In many cases it was very difficult and expensive. Pilgrims had to spend an enormous amount of money to pay for provisions; sometimes they had to sell land and property to finance the journey. The traveling itself was often challenging: the way stations offered only very basic comfort, and every night was spent in a different place. Robbers and bandits were always a threat.

And yet, in the High Middle Ages, pilgrimages were so popular that millions of Christians went, they often traveled more than 3,000 miles on foot, and spent several years away from home, not only men but also women. Some never even made it back home.

And what about those who could not undertake such an expensive and arduous journey? What about those who did not have the money, the strength, or the time to go?

Several alternatives developed, and one of them was walking a labyrinth. Have you ever seen a labyrinth? Or perhaps even walked around in one?

Labyrinths have become quite popular in recent years, and you might think they are part of those new-age things that people here in California come up with all the time. But in fact, labyrinths are very old, and they were especially beloved in the Middle Ages at the height of the pilgrimage craze. They offered the experience of a "virtual pilgrimage" to those who, for whatever reason, could not go on an actual pilgrimage.

One of the most famous labyrinths can be found in the Cathedral of Chartres in France and dates back to the 12th century. Many current labyrinths have been modeled after the one in Chartres. Grace Cathedral here in San Francisco has a replica of the famous labyrinth at Chartres. You can go there and walk the labyrinth by yourself or you can walk it as part of a guided spiritual exercise. Check out the listing at Grace Cathedral. It is an experience I highly recommend.

What is it like to walk a labyrinth? A labyrinth is not a maze. It is not designed to trick you or confuse you. It is not a puzzle to solve, there are no dead ends to confound you. There is only one path, and it will always, without fail, lead from the edge to the center.

It has been more the 20 years since the first time I walked a labyrinth, but I remember it as clearly as if I walked it yesterday. The labyrinth I walked was based on the one in Chartres, which has a very beautiful, very geometrical and very symmetric circular design. Because of this symmetry, I expected that the path would lead me step by step in a very predictable pattern from the edge to the center. But the opposite was the case: The path wound back and forth, in and out, constantly doubling back on itself.

At first I was frustrated, because there was no pattern that I could predict - and I love to predict patterns! And then I was frustrated, because this doubling back and forth went on and on, and the whole thing took so much longer than I expected. But finally I gave up all these mental gymnastics and did what I should have done from the beginning-- I put one foot in front of the other and walked. And then suddenly, to my great surprise, I landed in the center.

That's why walking a labyrinth is such a great spiritual practice: it forces the walker to let go of control, to let go of the need to be in a hurry, or the need to be efficient, or the need to predict what comes next. It encourages the walker to let go of all of these mental activities and just walk which, of course, means we can walk like this anywhere, we don't even need a labyrinth. Even just walking from our house to the bus stop can assume a devotional quality if we let go of our busy mind.

Earlier I asked you to consider the journey of the Wise Men from the East as an act of worship; not just the moment when they arrived and bowed down, but to consider their whole journey, every step of it, as an act of worship.

Worship can be so much more than gathering in a sanctuary--although that is not a small thing and never to be despised. We can worship wherever we are and with every step we take. And every sacrifice the journey asks of us is something that we can offer up as a gift to God.

And now that we are at the beginning of a new year and have to take in so many discouraging events that we might be tempted to hide in whatever comfort our homes or sanctuaries can offer, the story of the travelers from the East encourages us not to hide, but to step out into the world:

To step out in faith and hope, to step out in trust that there will be guidance, to cross boundaries not with aggression but in a sense of global brotherhood and sisterhood, to walk calmly and with peace, to walk mindfully, to pay attention to everything--the stars above me, and the flowers beside me; to walk with courage to walk with compassion to walk with honor to walk with humility and to offer each step as an act of worship to God.

May God bless us at this beginning of the new year.

May God guide our feet onto a path of peace.

Amen.

