

“Neither Here Nor There”

Epiphany Sunday

January 2, 2022

Once, long, long ago – about the time Jesus was born, in fact -- there were magi, very wise men, perhaps even kings, who were sitting in their own countries, going about their business, doing things magi in those days always did – studying the skies, deciphering ancient languages, philosophizing on mathematical concepts -- when a bright star appeared, a star with the intensity of all the other stars combined.

And in the magi’s country (or countries, perhaps – Arabia, Babylon, Persia, perhaps again), the star tugged at something deep inside each wise man who saw it, something that may have had something to do with his mind, yes, perhaps, but more to do with what others might call wonder or mystery. The star was calling each of them out of his lofty tower and map-lined study, toward the brilliant light.

So one took a softly burnished chalice of myrrh from its cabinet; another filled a gleaming urn with incense; a third wrapped an elaborate coffer of gold between soft cushions. They dressed in their velvet and brocades, walked through the doors of their palaces, climbed onto their camels and followed the star.

As they traveled west across the desert, each of them pointed to the star and knew they were on the same journey. They were of one accord that the star was leading them to Jerusalem, which made perfect sense because they had every reason to believe they were on their way to meet a king. What would the star reveal? Something divine? But the star had a mysterious force of its own. And because of that star they moved into the territory of sacred texts, people, and places.

Once in Jerusalem the magi had no trouble gaining entrance to the palace. They looked rich, to say the least, and that was enough to get them a royal audience. Without even conferring with each other, they knew that Herod was not the king the

ancient books described, so they asked if he knew of any other kings in the general area.

Then Herod conferred with his chief priests and teachers, who whipped out their concordances and told him what he wanted to know. Yes . . . there was something in the book of Micah about a new ruler for Israel, a Messiah, one day being born in Bethlehem of Judea, in fact, just a few miles away -- but nothing to get excited about. Those words had been there for centuries. But Herod was disturbed. There was that verse in David's Psalm: "May the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him." The verse disturbed Herod enough to make him want to meet with the magi in secret. He thought, "Why not send the wise men to Bethlehem and find out if there is actually any truth to the scripture?"

Back out in the Jerusalem night air again after their meeting with Herod, the magi could see the star clearly, and they followed it right to the doorway of an humble dwelling in

Bethlehem – – hardly the kind of place in which they had expected to find a king. They dismounted their camels, tugged at their beards, and looked around the neighborhood for a clue that this is really where they were supposed to be. A dog sniffed at the camels; the notes of a lute sounded a welcoming melody; the smell of garlic from an evening meal lingered in the air, tantalizing the magi.

If they had chosen the place themselves, they might never have knocked, but the star had chosen it. So they tapped on the door with a mixture of confidence and trepidation – and what may have seemed like foolishness -- and waited on the threshold.

When the door opened, the magi crowded into the small space, bumping their turbans on the rafters and snagging their robes on the door. When their eyes adjusted to the inside light, they saw the child. Their minds didn't even try to think. Their hearts took over. They were overjoyed in the quiet kind of way

that takes over your whole body and spirit, for the magi knew where they were – in the presence of the Messiah -- the still point of their journey, even their whole lives, and they knelt and paid him homage. They gave themselves to him completely, to the only one worthy of their worship.

Only then did they give him the things they had brought him – gold, myrrh, frankincense – things they suddenly realized that he had no use for at the moment. They should have brought a warm blanket, maybe two, and something shiny like the star. But how could they have guessed? So they gave him gold, worthy of a king; frankincense, worthy of a divinity; and myrrh, a spice used in burials.

Upon waking the next morning, the magi could not find the star anywhere. They stood on the threshold of the door a long time, hating to leave, discussing an alternate way back. No, they told the baby's parents, they would not be going home

through Jerusalem. They'd had a dream that warned them to steer clear of the city.

As they looked at Bethlehem waking up, they wondered what life would be like now here – or there -- where they lived. Something had happened to them in that that little home the moment they walked through the door, something as unpredictable as – well, as the star! Now it was time to move back toward the world, but they had been changed. Could they ever explain what had come over them? Would they be able to carry with them the presence of the divine Christchild? They stood on the threshold and wondered.

And like them, so do we.

Thomas Moore writes, “There are places in this world that are neither here nor there, neither up nor down, neither real nor imaginary. These are the in-between places, difficult to find and even more challenging to sustain. Yet they are the most fruitful places of all. For in these limited narrows a kind of life

takes place that is out of the ordinary, creative, and once-in-a-while genuinely magical.”

It’s easy to put the story of the wise men in the category of the “genuinely magical” with their kingliness and opulence casting a glow over the world of the poor peasants, the star shining like a jewel, their camels moving like ships of the desert, their emergence from the eastern darkness, the spellbinding mystery cast over them by the baby. Yet the more we hear this story, the more we understand that it is true.

We may not know whether there were indeed only three wise men (the Bible doesn’t say); we may not know their names (tradition calls them Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazaro; we don’t know how long it took them to make the trip or how old Jesus was when they got there (the Bible doesn’t tell us those things either). But we know that, like the wise men, we see signs – epiphanies -- manifestations of God’s presence. And

when we pay attention to these epiphanies and follow them, we will see also the presence of God.

Like the magi, we stand on the threshold of a new season, Epiphany, when we celebrate the coming of the Christchild to the whole world, for when the wise men stepped out of the door of Mary and Joseph's home, they held both the privilege and the responsibility to take the gift of the gospel for the nations, a gift that would not be real to *them* or to *us* if they went home the same way they came. They were changed right there, on the threshold of the future.

In biblical times, the word "threshold" referred to the doorway leading to the place where the grain was threshed. Beyond the entrance lay the place of separating the wheat from the chaff, of sorting and sifting, of beginning to cull that which would become bread. John the Baptist used this image as he spoke of how Jesus would come to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat. His words served as a vivid warning to

the people to prepare, to consider whether they were ready to walk through the doorway toward the life to which Jesus called them.

Does entry into our homes means coming through a carport, pausing to hang up coats in a hallway, or putting down the mail in an entryway? Rarely do we think of any of these spaces as thresholds. Even here in this spiritual home of ours, we walk straight up the sidewalk, making sure we have on our masks, and go straight into our small foyer, the tiny hub where we receive our worship bulletins, receive directions to write our names on the sign-in list, pick up our juice and bread for communion. It's our little Grand Central Station. Could it also be our threshold?

In other times and places, great attention was given to the threshold of any building, even the humblest home, because it was a kind of barrier between the dangers and chaos and

strangers of the outside and the comfort, safety, and connections on the inside.

The thresholds of temples and other worship spaces were a place to make a shift, no matter how subtle, to pause and take a deep breath to slow and calm the mind, to consciously turn toward things of the spirit.

In old Irish cottages, the earthen floor just inside the threshold was known as the “welcome of the door.” Upon entering, a visitor would linger and say a blessing for the household. This was holy ground. The threshold was an in-between place; it was sacred because it marked the boundary between the life of the human family within and the wide world without. It was neither here nor there

Spiritual thresholds are places of hope, of anticipation, of expectation. In a vestibule or foyer of the spirit, sometimes we are like children opening the doors to a grand wardrobe, not knowing that we will find Narnia if we step through.

But the threshold is not simply a stop along the way. It can be as sacred as waiting for Emmanuel God during Advent, as intentionally reflective as Lent, as full of life and ministry and discernment as this church has lived worked hard and lived faithfully during the interim. Any of these seasons is rich in itself. Any liminal place like these has, in itself, been holy. God has been present with us.

I tell anyone leaving the baptismal waters, “Remember these waters. This may be the only time you step into them. Stay in here while the congregation sings the next hymn. Stand on the steps and feel the water drip off your robe as you walk out. Remember. This is a holy place.” From the old life to the new life in Christ . . . through the waters of baptism . . . into the world to serve . . .

Standing [or the time without covid that we long for]-

Perhaps the best pastoral care teaching I’ve ever received came from Helen Harris. The first time she came to talk to the

care group leaders years ago, she was honest as she could be with us. “Sometimes,” she said, “you’re going to find yourself called to the hospital and find yourself walking down the hall to a room and wonder ‘What am I doing here?’ You may confess to yourself, ‘I don’t what to do.’ Or even ‘I’m scared.’”

Then Helen told us, “That’s when I stop outside the room of the person I’m going to visit and pray, ‘God, I’ve never done this before. I can’t do it by myself. Go with me into this room. I’m trusting in your spirit to guide me.’” How many times I’ve borrowed Helen’s prayer on the threshold of a waiting room door, the driveway of a house recently visited by grief, in the elevator at the hospital. It is the prayer that gets me from here to there, that allows me to cross to the next place, knowing that I do not make the journey alone.

It is often in the threshold places where we place trust in a sign from God that is bigger than our own compass. Like the

wise men, we pay attention to what we see and hear. Our senses and our vulnerability are heightened.

Imagine with me this morning that you are standing on a threshold. Imagine that you are standing just outside an Irish cottage. The wind blows strong around the walls. Below us, the sea runs wild and free. We have walked for miles and miles over the hills, and now we're about to go inside. Perhaps this doorway reminds us of one we have longed to walk across. We have wanted to step boldly, but somehow we could not. But this time, it's as if something beyond and inside us has lifted us across, some greater grace or power beyond us.

Imagine that you are standing just outside a Baptist church in Texas on an unbelievably cold January morning. You've heard of this church. You've heard about the way the church cares about people, even during this time of Covid, the ones in our community here at church and those in the community around the world. You can sense how much they long to be

together, so imagine watching some of them inside the sanctuary and understanding there are others watch from home. You know this has been a hard year for all of them – actually, this is the second day of the third year that’s been really hard for them and for the whole world. Everyone standing at the threshold of this new year, in this Texas church and in other places, is changed in ways that none of them can fully understand.

And then you step through the crowded threshold into the room. You spend much of the service looking at banners that say “On Earth Peace” and “God’s Love Made Visible” and “Home by a Different Way.” You look at the people, and even in worship, you can see how they live out the words that described the early Christians: “See how they love one another.” When you leave you keep thinking about this day they call Epiphany,

Imagine that you are a wise man, standing on the threshold of a small home in Bethlehem. You don't really want to leave where you've been, but you know that you will never forget the wonder of this young family's welcome and the Child who caught your attention with his gaze that was as ancient as the beginning of the world and as fresh as this morning's breath. You put the bread the mother gave you for the journey in your camel bag. It would be easier to leave, you suppose, if you knew where you were going . . . you hesitate again . . .

And then you take a step. Your camel kneels, you lift the bottom of your robe, and your page helps hoist you onto the blankets on the camel's back. The camel raises to his full height on his wobbly legs. You look down and the family below waves up at you. You shield your eyes and look for the best road to take you home without going through Jerusalem.

Your camel falls in line behind the others as you look toward the horizon and wonder where you are going. But your

fear fades as you move. You are assured of the epiphany you just experienced. . . that vision of divinity decked out in human flesh, Emmanuel, God among us. The star has faded, but the power of God's revelation will never leave you. From here, high on the camel's back, you can see the first part of your journey -- a journey that will take you into the world by another way, sharing the story of your visit with the ChristChild with whoever God places in your path.