

January 6, 2019
Matthew 2:1-2, 7-12
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“Epiphany ABC’s”

Good morning! As some of you know, this is one of my favorite Sundays of the year. It is Epiphany Sunday, when we celebrate the arrival of the wise men in Bethlehem. It is also Sunday when there has been a little breathing room from all the planning and festivities of Advent and Christmas Eve, a Sunday when I get to put out all this terrific stuff on the chancel table, and in the past few years, a Sunday when I know that I’m going to get a great slice of homemade cake during the fellowship time.

All of those trappings of the season are a bonus, but they should not keep us from recognizing the richness of this story from the gospel, and how relevant it is to us today. Matthew is the only gospel which mentions the wise men, whose visit triggers two other accounts of Jesus’ infancy -- the slaughter of baby boys in Bethlehem and the flight of Jesus and his parents to Egypt to escape King Herod -- which we read about only in Matthew. I left out the narrative of Matthew 2 which talks about King Herod, not because it isn’t important, but because I want to focus elsewhere this morning.

I believe that the story of the wise men -- or the magi, whatever you choose to call them -- still fascinates us because it is a metaphor for life, and how we live our lives. Every human tribe and culture has myths: that is, stories which help us understand ourselves and the forces of the universe which shape our lives. Myths often feature heroes (or heroines -- a hero can be either male or female) who go on a journey, a quest, or a mission to accomplish a difficult or even an impossible task: to kill a dragon or find the Holy Grail; to rescue a princess or save their family. The purpose of a myth is not so much to recount an event in the way it actually happened, but to tell a story which gives the listeners insight into their own lives. We don’t know

some significant parts of the wise men's' story: where did they come from, how long did it take them to get to Bethlehem, did they ever make it home, how do you pack a crown on a camel -- but their journey tells us important things about ourselves, about how God directs us, and about the purpose of our lives.

So what I'm proposing this morning is an Epiphany primer: the ABCs of Epiphany. If you can think of DEFs or other letters, God bless you, but I'm going to stick to the ABCs. The story of the wise men is the story of a journey; it tells us things about the journey of our own lives. Journeys don't have to be physically traveling from one place to another place: there are emotional journeys from immaturity to responsibility, and spiritual journeys from lack of insight to recognition. Sometimes we choose to strike out into unfamiliar territory, but more often we begin a journey because we've gotten the rug pulled out from underneath us with an unexpected life event, and we're forced to go in a different direction. The loss of a job, end of a relationship, the illness or death of a spouse are all things which can set us on a different path than we planned -- whether we wanted to go there or not. Here are some things which I suggest that we pack for whatever journey we are on.

A is for Awareness. Epiphany literally means insight, or revelation. A star with a tail as big as a kite is only an effective guide if you look up once in a while. If you keep your head down and go about your business and never go out at night, you're never going to see that star. I think it's safe to assume that at least one of the wise men was actively looking for signs in the stars. You might accidentally stumble upon direction from God, but our chances of seeing God at work go up exponentially when we are actually paying attention, and looking for signs of God's activity. The wise men saw what King Herod and all the priests and scribes in his court had missed. The star was not hiding; they weren't paying attention.

Awareness includes self-awareness. Self-awareness is one of the hallmarks of maturity. We get older whether we want to or not, but emotional and spiritual maturity takes intention and hard work. How do my actions affect other people? Am I entitled to hurt others because I have been hurt? Is there a time when my personal needs are less important than the needs of the community? Or, to put it in

the terms which Jesus used, what must I lose in my life in order to save it for the sake of Christ? These are adult questions; they are questions which we continue to live into as part of our journey. If we have never wrestled with these questions, we might see some interesting scenery along the way, but we'll have missed a significant purpose of the trip: journeys change us and give us insight which we wouldn't have if we simply stayed at home.

B is for **Belief**, or call it **faith**, if you'd rather; belief that God has put us on this journey for a purpose. Maybe we didn't choose this path and we cannot see where it is leading. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Whatever journey we are on, we walk by faith and not by sight. The wise men believed that they were on a quest to find a king, and when they found the place where the star was leading, they knelt down and worshipped, even though Jesus and his parents were likely not the royal family they were expecting.

Belief has several layers. The first is believing that God has the authority to guide and direct us; that if we are paying attention, God has the power to make stars appear when we need to see them. We also need to believe in our power to choose how we respond: nobody forced those wise men to go seeking Jesus; they felt like they had to know why the star appeared, so they went. Nobody gets to choose the family they are born into or dictate all the circumstances of their lives, but we do get to choose how we respond to those circumstances. Do we believe that God has a purpose for our lives, and that we are empowered to participate with God, even when the results are not what we expected? Or do we let life happen to us and wring our hands or blame other people if it doesn't go the way we think it should? The purpose of the wise men's journey was to find the child who had been born king of the Jews: they fulfilled that mission, but it did not make their lives or Jesus' life any easier. Baby boys were slaughtered and Jesus' family was displaced because of the wise men's visit to King Herod. Accomplishing God's purpose probably doesn't mean retirement in a comfy chair by the fire; it may be the start of another journey which will take us home by another road.

And finally, **C** is for **Courage**. God's mission is not for the faint-hearted. It is never easy to leave our own country and travel to an

unfamiliar one -- whether it's by our choice or because of circumstances beyond our control. Courage is, of course, related to our belief that we are on God's mission and not simply following our own agenda. Courage comes not from a belief in our own resourcefulness and strength, but from the conviction that God is with us, even when we are surrounded by enemies, even when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, even if we have to go home by another road. The wise men acted in good faith toward King Herod -- who pretended to want to worship the new king himself -- but they did not hesitate to change course when they were warned in a dream to not return to Herod's court.

Courage takes many forms: it may be the courage to fight -- to raise a fist or raise our voice against injustice; to tell our own story or to share stories from people who do not have a voice. But courage has many other forms, courage which is not a roar but a small voice; a small voice which says I will not retaliate, even though I have been wronged; a small voice which says I will try again tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that; a small voice which says I was wrong, I'm sorry.

Friends, I have never packed a crown on a camel. I own neither crown nor camel, and will likely never have the privilege of seeing an infant king of any nation. God knows that many of the journeys I have made in my life have not been by my choice, and I have gone reluctantly, sullenly and pouting along the way. There is no a single journey I can think of which has taken me on a direct, clearly defined course, and I have often lamented privately or in prayer to God, "Are we there yet? How much longer?" Maybe you can relate to this -- or perhaps your journeys have been simpler than mine. But when I study the journey of the wise men to Jesus, it gives me hope. Hope that there will be stars and signs to guide the way, hope that the path will lead me to Jesus, and that whatever gifts I have to offer -- even if they are wildly impractical or implausible -- will be welcomed, and hope that there is always another way home besides the road on which I came.

I wish each of you the gifts of Awareness, Belief and Courage in the new year. May our journey take us to Jesus and back out into the world. Amen.