

“The Journey: From Beginning to End”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio

January 3, 2016 – Epiphany Sunday – Rev. Ronald W. Botts

----- A Meditation -----

Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem in search of a child to be born as king of the Jews. These learned persons were ancient astronomers, for they studied the stars. They were also astrologers, because they interpreted their movements as well. They had come to Judea because they saw a star rising higher and higher in the sky. So compelling was this sign that they left everything else important in their lives to follow wherever this celestial messenger would lead them.

These early scientists sensed that this wasn't just a common star, but one that held out a divine portent. They were determined to discover its secret. Perhaps some would call them fools, but no matter. They knew what was crucial, and what was important directed their thoughts and movements.

They came to affirm and pay homage to this child king, so they brought gifts with them, gifts appropriate for someone of such importance to the world. They brought gold and also rare fragrances—frankincense and myrrh. Exquisite gifts for one deserving all the best. While the text doesn't say how many men there actually were, tradition has favored three because that was the number of gifts offered.

Their appearance at the manger on that holy night indicates that the star was already in place prior to Jesus' birth, for the men came a considerable distance. What is most significant is that they were not Jews and so were the first Gentiles to bow down and honor the Messiah.

These pilgrims understood well the ancient texts that pointed to one who would come to be Savior of all people. The star led them on their destination, and then to their knees as they bowed down before this tiny king who would change the world.

They came and they went. The texts tell us no more about these regal travelers. The biblical writers, after all, were interested in Christ and not those peripheral to the main story. The wise ones play their part; they serve their purpose; Christ is affirmed as the universal Savior.

Still, even here, every journey is more than just its most visible part. It includes all the preparation for leaving and all the unpacking after arriving back. In every journey there is an earlier beginning and a farther end, and not just the core trip itself.

You can imagine that such an undertaking took considerable planning and preparation. To be away for weeks or even months at a time would be challenging in our time, so think of what it would have required in past days. There would be luggage to assemble, livestock to gather, attendants to recruit, and food to carry them through the lean times. No, a major trek wasn't spur of the moment or undertaken without considerable forethought.

Life is like that. It requires constant attention and work, especially around major events and passages. For example, think of getting married, moving into a new house, changing jobs, going through child bearing... and then later, reversing things by scaling down one's lifestyle and moving into a more compact home. The most evident part of such undertakings is only a fraction of the total effort, much like the tip of an iceberg is to the whole of its mass.

Major happenings always include beginnings and endings which others may not know or see. Our story from Matthew makes me wonder today how the wise men looked back later on their decision to follow the star. Was it worth the effort? Did it profoundly change their lives? Would they have done it over again? Were they regarded as perceptive by those back home or just fools on the trail of a fleeting star? What sense did it make later when they looked backward on what had required so much of them at the time?

Well I think speculation about the magi on this particular Sunday is appropriate for us as well. The beginning of a new year is a natural time to look back on events of the past twelve months and try to view them with some perspective. Were our ventures worthwhile or simply **misadventures**? Did they bring about what we hoped for or end up in frustration or regret?

Whether we intend it or not, we come to points in our review that burst through the present clutter and demand our attention. There's something deep inside that forces us to look backward to determine whether our living has been worthwhile or whether it was just treading water. Sometimes we loathe this personal introspection but, in the long run, it serves us better to remember the past rather than trying to avoid it.

Experts tell us that, as our years advance, so does the amount of time we give to life review. With so much of our living behind us, we seem to have increasing need to consider if we've spent our years in a worthwhile manner. We want to be satisfied that we have used our days for good pursuits.

To others, who know you only casually, you are often viewed through the lens of a short biography: married, children, grandchildren, occupation, birthdate, accomplishments. That's not all of you, however, for you're complex and full of secrets. Except for a relatively few close companions most people only know a fraction of your story and who you really are.

Not everyone can be in touch with the real you, the full you, but there is one person who absolutely needs to know the essence of the one who answers to your name... and that person is you. Otherwise, how can you measure where you've been? And more importantly, how can you know where you're going?

If you're reluctant to look inside for fear of what you may find, remember this: God knows you, cares for you, and loves you. So even if you have doubts about your decisions and self-worth, you are successful already in God's eyes. When you know this then you understand that you're really blest along all of life's journey, from the very beginning to the very end.

Live fully then, and make the most of what you have been given. Use what you have, and dare to give back to life in proportion to what you have received.