

Faith Mennonite Church
January 3, 2010 – Epiphany
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Finding our Way to the Light of the World
Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

“They left for their own country by another road.” Matthew’s story of the magi, those wise ones from the East who came looking for Jesus so they might worship the new king, is a story of Epiphany—of finding the light, finding the truth. But it’s also about being changed and transformed. The magi went home by *another* road. Something had changed within them since they set out on their journey. They were new people that needed to follow another road home.

When we encounter the Light of the World, our path, too, takes a turn. We find a new direction, a new way to live. But how does this all happen? Where does this path begin? The story of the magi offers some sign posts for the journey.

First of all, the magi were attentive, they were looking for light. In their case, they were studying the stars, for they believed that the heavens held the secret and displayed what was important on earth. On the first Sunday of Advent our scripture advised us to “look up--to raise our heads.” These are postures of attentiveness. These are precursors to a vision. No one has ever found a new way or has discovered a star that they weren’t in some way looking for.

Now I believe in serendipity. Indeed about the only thing I remember from my first year, general chemistry class at Goshen College back in 1975, was Professor Hank Weaver’s mini-lecture about serendipity. Most scientific discoveries, he contended, come as a result of serendipity – those unexpected surprises that occur along the path of scientific inquiry and discovery. But, serendipity wouldn’t occur if there were not the inquiry. We may not always find what we expect to find, but if we are looking for light and for truth with expectation, God will surely reveal them.

As we enter a New Year, surrounded by the burdens of the past—a still struggling economy and high unemployment, our country mired in war in Afghanistan and Iraq, detainees in Guantanamo and an increasing number of undocumented persons in detention centers around the country, not to mention the personal burdens of family members who are ill and dying, of families struggling with mental and emotional illness, of relationships in crisis, of life being less predictable than we’d like... As we enter a New Year, will we focus on the burdens or will we look for the light? The magi invite us to follow the path of inquiry, to look for the stars that are way out there, barely visible above the horizon, rather than at the pothole that’s right in front of us.

And don’t worry if it seems unreasonable. The magi from the East were living at the center of the known world of astronomy, of learning. Why would they venture out and head west and into the little, obscure, occupied land of Palestine? Why would they bend and worship in front of a baby in a humble home on a back street of Bethlehem? Because they could imagine

the unimaginable. They could believe that light and truth break in at the margins, serendipitously. They were not ashamed and we need not be ashamed to be followers of one with humble beginnings in a manger, nor to follow a vision that God works through the power of self-giving love.

The path of the magi was not forged solely by vision of a star. They also knew the importance of tradition, of seeking the wisdom of the community that had nurtured and carried the tradition. Today it is not uncommon to hear people say they are “spiritual but not religious.” They are quick to name the faults of organized religion and believe that they can find light on their own. But as a friend of ours, one of Gerald’s colleagues in the theology department at the University of St. Thomas has said, “to be against organized religion is like to be against hospitals!” The magi show the importance of being both spiritual (open to vision) and religious (finding guidance for the search). The magi followed the light of the star, but there came a point when they needed to go deeper. What was the meaning of this star? Who might it announce? What does the tradition say?

And like today, the religious institution that they inquired of was flawed. The leaders, in this King Herod, were not motivated by things pure or spiritual – they used religion for their own purposes and power. And yet the institution, through the priests and scribes, were able to point the way. The scriptures that they knew inside and out offered direction to the searching magi.

We know that Jesus, himself, later ran into serious conflict with this same institution. Yet he, like the magi, continued to draw strength and sustenance from the tradition—the scriptures, the memory, the prayers—that had formed his people, the people of Israel, over centuries. We need vision but we also need community. We need the inquiry and at times the skepticism of our age. Yet we need the humility to recognize that we are all flawed. We need to respect and honor the accumulated wisdom of the past, even the dark and wretched parts. For only when we recognize and collectively confess the sin of the past and its unconscious hold on us, do we walk into the freedom of the future, into the freedom of light and truth.

Finally, along with vision and community, the magi teach us that we must be open to dreams that transform us and send us on a new path. Matthew says they were “warned in a dream not to return to Herod so they left for their own country by another road.” Maybe the dream was just God’s way of keeping Herod from getting the details about Jesus. But God’s ways are generally more multi-faceted. Going home by another way, around Jerusalem, suggested that this new life the magi had found, embodied in the promise of a small child, had relevance beyond the community and the tradition into which Jesus was born. There was good news here for their own lives, for the community they had come from. This journey and their encounter with Joseph and Mary and Jesus no doubt changed them.

And I would guess that it also changed the scribes and priests they met with in Jerusalem. How must it have felt to have foreign strangers arrive and ask about the promise of their tradition? A Mennonite church in Vancouver experienced a visit somewhat akin to that of the

magi a year ago. Christmas week in Vancouver last year was like our Christmas week this year. Emmanuel Mennonite of Vancouver had canceled its Christmas Eve service due to snowy weather and the secretary had not gotten the Sunday bulletin finished before Christmas. So while most folks were staying inside, close to home on the Saturday after Christmas, she was at church finishing the bulletin.

That afternoon, two young Indo-Canadian women came to the church door. They explained they had never been in a Christian church, only a Sikh Temple. But one of the women had a dream the night before telling her she needed to go to a church. So they wondered if it would be all right to enter.

The secretary took them into the sanctuary and sat quietly with them. They asked a few questions, but mostly sat in silence. They commented that it was relaxing and peaceful for them. When they were ready to leave they pulled out three boxes of chocolates from a bag and said "These are an offering for your church. In the temple we bring sweets or milk, and we leave it as an offering. It is then shared among the people who gather so it will bring them and the ones who offered it blessing.

The secretary thanked them and the women disappeared back into the snowy day. The next day, Sunday, the boxes of chocolates were opened and shared during their fellowship time after worship. People were moved when they heard the story of the visit of strangers and the gift of blessing they left.

As we begin a new year, I pray that we will be a people of inquiry open to the ways of God in our lives. I pray that we will be a people in community, gathering to worship to study and discern together how the ancient truths inform our modern life and the challenges we face. And I pray we will be a people ready to be transformed, shaped by our encounters with God in prayer, by our interactions in community, and by the dreams and strangers that bear gifts of blessing.