

“Travelling Together” - Matthew 2:1-12 - Rev. Jeffrey B. Childs

For much of our society, Christmas is over. Have you noticed the trees out by the curb and decorations all put away. The sales on leftover Christmas items are giving way to St. Valentine’s Day displays. But we may recall from one song that there are in fact 12 Days of Christmas until the day of Epiphany when we celebrate the coming of the Wisemen on January 6th. But this year we are celebrating it today on the twelfth day of Christmas or Epiphany Eve. You might recall that Shakespeare wrote a play about it – “Twelfth Night.”

This story of Epiphany is only found in the gospel of Matthew and lets us know right off the bat that the birth of Jesus is not just for the shepherds and peasants in the region of Bethlehem, but it has global significance. Though we do not know exactly from where these wise ones came, the notion that it was ancient Persia or India arose among early scholars in the Middle Ages as well as the idea that one of them was black and from Africa. But wherever they came from, as the carol goes, they “travelled afar.” This gospel prepares us to discover that Jesus is not just the newborn King of the Jews, but the ultimate King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And here two thousand years later, that good news is still spreading around the world.

As we begin 2025, I want us to take a Journey seeking Jesus. We do not know how long the original wisemen journeyed. It may have been up to two years as the story has the magi coming to a house not a stable. And when Herod discovered that they did not come back to tell him which baby it was, he sent troops to Bethlehem to kill all the boy babies two years old and younger. This is not a short excursion or a day trip, it is a long journey – for us it is a life-long journey.

The underlying question for this sermon series is “Where’s Jesus?” Where all might we find Jesus in this new year? And where might Jesus lead us and by what routes? I expect some of us might find him by following a sign, like the star the wise ones followed. Signs are tough. People often miss them even when they should be paying attention, like when driving. Just think of all the signs we see trying to give us directions: This Way, One Way, Yield, Slow Down, Turn Right, Turn Left, Caution, etc.

As we read the story this morning, we discover that there were also some wise ones in Jerusalem. King Herod called for them for an intelligence briefing. They did not bring out their maps and star charts, they brought out their scrolls, their scriptures. They found him in the scriptures. We too, can find him in our Bibles. We will find him in Bible studies, (let me remind you to join us as we study the book of Ruth this month on Zoom on Wednesday nights.) Like the wise ones, we might have to stop and ask for directions and guidance along the way. Who better to do that with than other seekers?

I believe that Jesus is also found wherever the lost sheep are. The stories in the gospels have Jesus in many unusual places hanging out with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes and even the hated Samaritans. Jesus is also found in the Temple and synagogues and up on the mountain top alone praying. So, I would encourage us to look anywhere and everywhere.

M. Scott Peck told a story in his book *The Different Drum* entitled “The Rabbi’s Gift.” The story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, it had declined to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying monastery: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order. In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot to visit the hermitage and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery. The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. As he was leaving the abbot asked, “Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?” “No, I am sorry,” the rabbi responded. “I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well what did the rabbi say?" "He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving --it was something cryptic-- was that the Messiah is one of us. I don't know what he meant." In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words. The Messiah is one of us? Could he possibly have meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly, Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly, he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course, the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off chance that each monk himself might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed the aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the old monks. After a while one asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So, within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm. Alleluia and Amen.

Like Magi Travelling Long Ago

Jeffrey B. Childs 12/30/2024

Like magi traveling long ago,
We'll look for Jesus.
We'll share him wherever we go.
Jesus is among us.

They followed a star faithfully.
We will follow Jesus,
Going where he wants us to be.
Jesus is among us.

Where e'er we go we'll share God's love.
We will be like Jesus,
Until we're called to heaven above.
Jesus is among us.