

Sunday, January 7, 2018

Isaiah 65:17-25

Matthew 2:1-12

Welcoming the Kingdom from Afar

Happy New Year! Happy Epiphany, everyone! How many of you saw the full moon this past week? It was absolutely amazing—bright and full and it also seemed ‘fake’ that is, too close to be real! It was called a ‘supermoon’ which means that the moon was closest to earth in its regular orbit and with the light of the sun reflecting off its surface it appeared even bigger than normal. This doesn’t occur very often but when it does people notice!

One can only imagine the excitement of the Wise and Learned Men- Magi who studied the stars and had studied documents of the Israelite people and then saw the bright star up in the sky which shone over the place where the Infant King Jesus was. How excited they must have been to see this bright star and then realize what the Old Testament/ Hebrew scripture had said would happen. These learned men knew they had to travel to see the promised Messiah because this news was made known to them through the stars. This messiah was not only for the people of Israel but all people! So they packed their bags, their camels and prepared caravans to travel from the East to the Middle East in order to find the baby.

The star lead them to where they wanted to go and they followed it clearly and watched for the direction of the path that they needed to go= West. These learned men also knew that they would be entering into a foreign land under different rulers then their own but they went any way. They must have believed in God for He did reveal to them that the Messiah would be born and that the star which shone brightly would tell them where they had to go. How exciting this trip west must have been! Following a star westward and doing so because of an ancient teaching of another people and a bright light in the sky!

So when these people arrived in Jerusalem they asked about the place where the one born king of the Jews was. News traveled fast- from the street to King Herod’s ears. Herod was disturbed and “all of Jerusalem with him.” He called the chief priests and teachers of the law together and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. They answered using the words of the prophet Micah (6:2) Bethlehem in Judah for out of this town will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel.

Herod asked the Magi when the star had appeared and then sent them to Bethlehem. After listening to King Herod, the star they had seen at home went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. They were overjoyed! Not only had the star appeared at home, here it was again up high in the sky and leading them to the house where

the child Jesus was living. The star marked the spot of the house where Mary and Joseph had set up a home with Jesus. And this is the place where the Wise Men/ Magi focused their journey.

The camels and caravan enter the little community of Bethlehem. They see the main road through town and in the sky they see a bright star. They know exactly where they are headed. Did Mary and Joseph know that these people were coming? Did they have any idea of who was at the door when they heard a knock on their door? One can imagine the surprise on their faces when they see people who appear different from them with expensive robes and jewels adorning their bodies. They look out and see camels in a caravan. What did they do?

Mary and Joseph knew that Jesus was a special infant as they had been told by angels and in their dreams. But here was proof—foreigners have traveled from a great distance away and they see them and ask to see their son; God's son. They come in to the house and are made to feel welcome. They see Jesus not as a small infant but probably a toddler at this time. The wise men decided to travel when they first saw the star appear and it took them a while to cross the deserts, hills and valleys as they traveled west to Judah. So Jesus has grown older.

And then they saw the child with his mother Mary and they worshiped him and bowed down with respect for this was the Messiah of God. After speaking with his parents for a short while, they offered to Jesus gifts not of things that are practical for a child but gifts which signified who Jesus was and would become. They gave him gold, incense and myrrh. Gifts for a king, yes, but of a king going to die. I can only wonder what Mary and Joseph thought of these gifts and questioned their coming a great distance away to offer these gifts. Jesus was only young what did they know about the Messiah? Did Mary and Joseph realize that in order to save his people, the Messiah had to die?]

They visited a while and eventually found a place to rest. Through their dreams they were warned not to go back to see Herod but to go home via a different route. These strangers from the East travelled by camel to the place where Jesus in the path of light made by a bright star. But why is this star that shone in the sky so important? Why is it important for us to recognize this star as light on Epiphany and throughout this season of epiphany? It is because 1) it lead the wise men from the east on a journey into a foreign country where they would find the promised messiah 2) it shone brightly so that when the wise men asked about the infant, King Herod was disturbed to think another king had been born; 3) it lead them directly to the place where the child was—from Jerusalem to Bethlehem and to a house. And it is here that the Magi experience the peace found in the Christ Child. Once they see him they are filled with

peace and hope not only for themselves, but for the world. They have welcomed the Messiah into their lives and now they too will share the story with others when they return home.

The kingdom of Christ is not just in one area of the world. The peaceable kingdom is made possible around the world through God's gift of Jesus. The Wise Men knew this, experienced his peace and returned home forever changed. They had witnessed the Prince of Peace, and they knew of the Light of the world which shone as a star when they were at home, and they also came to know Jesus, the Infant King as the One Light to lead all people to God.

This light served a special role for the awareness and understanding of the Messiah to be carried through by the Wise Men. This light reflected God's glory and wonder and made possible the sharing of the good news of the birth of Jesus. Later on, when Jesus is teaching and sharing of himself he states, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life." (John 8:12) Jesus also taught them, "For a little while longer, the Light will be among you. Walk while you have the Light, so that darkness will not overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going." John 12:35

Just think for a moment when you are at home during these winter days. You walk into a room in your and the first thing you do is flip on a light switch so you won't stumble into furniture. When you light a candle the whole room lights up. When the star shone brightly those nights that the wise men traveled from the east, to Jerusalem and then Bethlehem their path was lit and they were safe.

We have begun 2018- with the beauty of the "supermoon", with very cold temperatures and yet during the day, the sky is bright with sunshine and at night the stars are visible. When we consider the light that led the wise men was a new star especially placed in the sky it acted as a beacon calling them to see the child born to be king. Like moths to a light in the summer sky, this star shone for those visitors to go and see Jesus, the light of the world,

What is it we need to see and experience to follow this light- Jesus? Do we need Hollywood beacons to say follow Jesus who is in this place and in the hearts of all who believe? Or do we follow the Light of the world because we believe he is the messiah, the promised one, the saviour? Do we believe he is the Light which calls people to get out of the darkness and live as he taught? Do we believe in the light that can sustain us no matter where we are and what we do?

Each of you have been given a star today and on it is a word which I am asking you to keep in a special place in your home or your wallet or purse in the next year. Each time you look at this little star and the words you are reminded that God is present with you. Each time you

look at this star, take the opportunity to 'be still' in God's presence and receive God's gifts. This is because God is generous. Let these words speak to you; if you are unsure of its meaning, look it up, redefine it for yourself. Share any experience with others if you find it gives you an opportunity to reflect on how God speaks to you. Yes it is one word but one word does make a difference in many peoples' lives.

As we remember the story of the magi, the star and the child Jesus, let us be reminded that this Epiphany celebration is how God's presence breaks through to shine as a light in the darkness. Let us pray:

Holy God we praise you for the light of the world, Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord, infant King and messiah. We thank you for the star that shone and led the wise men to see Jesus. We pray for the light to shine in our path so that we might always live as Jesus taught. We pray for Christ's light to lift us up and show us who we are and what we are called to be and do for His sake. Bless us O God as we carry our star gift words into this New Year and enable us to grow in faith as we continue to search for Jesus in our everyday life just like the Wise men of old. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.