

January 2, 2022
The Epiphany of Our Lord
Matthew 2:1-12 with prophecies from the Year C lectionary readings
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Transformed for a New Year

There is a lot that we don't know about the wise men. There's a lot of speculation about them, but there's not a lot of cold hard facts.

There's a lot of mythology about them too. In fact, Christian legend and hymnody has tried to flesh out these characters into people we can really get our minds and imaginations around:

it has numbered them,
crowned them,
named them,
and given them homes.

Our nativity scene, here at Emmanuel and the nativity scenes in many of our homes have given them camels. Christian legend tells us that there were three wise men. It has called them the three kings, it has told us that their names were Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior, and it has told us that they came from Persia.

All of this is speculation. Some of it is likely speculation, especially the belief that the wise men came from Persia, a likely origin of learned astrologers, but all we know for sure is what scripture tells us: that an unspecified number of wise men from the East came to Jerusalem to seek the newborn king of the Jews. They brought him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh they followed a star to find him, they found him in a house in Bethlehem, they worshiped him, and then they left, returning to their own country, bypassing Jerusalem.

So, we are left to wonder. Who were the wise men, really? How many of them were there? Where did they come from? Did they find what they were looking for?

If they had traveled as far as they would have had to travel to reach Bethlehem from Persia, they would have traveled over a thousand miles, they would have probably spent weeks or even months preparing for their journey, they would have spent months traveling through the desert wilderness.

I have to wonder, was it worth it for them?

The bible tells us that when they saw the star that they were following take its place over the place where Jesus was they were overwhelmed with joy and that they bowed down and worshiped Jesus and gave him their gifts.

But then, that was that. They had been warned by a dream not to go back to Jerusalem, where Herod was waiting for tidings of the newborn king, so, they left to make the long, long, journey back to their country by another road.

And as for Jesus and Mary and Joseph, it wasn't long before they were running for their lives, escaping just ahead of Herod's soldiers, on their way to Egypt, where they would live in hiding until one of the many powers that sought Jesus' life from the moment of his birth was dead.

So, this is the birth of the king. This is the climax of the star journey. And was it enough to sustain the wise men on the long journey home, through desert and hardship, encountering beast and bandit, returning to a land of blood sports and astrology and more of the politics of violence and power? Was it enough to change their lives?

I ask because we too have followed the star. We have journeyed from Advent to Christmas. We have heard the prophecies, that justice is coming, that righteousness is coming, that peace is coming, that joy is coming, that forgiveness is coming that we do not wait, that we do not hope in vain.

From Jeremiah we heard these words during the Advent season:

In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.' (Jeremiah 33:15-16)

From Malachi we heard this promise as we awaited the coming of our king:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. (Malachi 3:1-4)

With Zephaniah we looked forward with hope and joy as we heard these words:

The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
So that you will not bear reproach for it. (Zephaniah 3: 17-18)

From Micah we heard this promise of peace:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.
Therefore, he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of
the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends
of the earth;

and he shall be the one of peace. (Micah 5:2-5a)

All this we have heard and more. But is it enough?

We have seen the children tell the story; we have lit the candles; light against the darkness. We have heard the good news, “For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:11)

And we have joined with the songs of angels, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. Alleluia!”

We have exchanged gifts, we have decorated our homes, we have aimed a good cheer and sometimes achieved it, but is it enough?

Because we know, how painfully we know, what awaits us, even in this, a new year.

A world so violent that even the stories of Christmas are soaked, in the blood of innocent children.

We who have heard the prophecies of the birth of the prince of peace have also heard the headlines of a world where there is no peace.

We who have heard the prophecies of the child king, who was born into poverty, have heard that all too often, there is no pity, there is no refuge, there is no compassion, there is no recourse, for those who live in poverty today.

We who have heard in the prophecies that the coming one would remove disasters from us have also heard too many stories of homes and lives and land and habitat destroyed by natural disasters, by tornadoes, fires, and storms.

We who have heard the prophecies of the king who is to be great healer, have experienced in our own lives or in the lives of those we love, continued sickness, the nearing of death, and persistence of a pandemic that continues to upend so much of our daily lives.

So, are the stories enough? Are the prophecies enough? Are the ways that Jesus comes to us now enough? Is the meal enough? Is the community enough? Can our lives be transformed by what might seem like such meager means?

The hopes and fears of all of our years are met today and every day in this star child, who was threatened, vulnerable, poor, and who was a victim of what a sinful humanity can do as it attempts to cling to its old ways, to cling to its power, to control and to dominate to keep the other out, and to reject God's love, and God's presence with us.

Of course, Christian tradition, that named the wise men, that gave them homes and crowns, and theological messages to go along with their gifts, tells us that their lives were changed by their encounter with the star child.

It tells us that they were baptized by later missionaries of the risen Christ. It tells us that they continued to journey, to tell the story of Jesus, and the wondrous star, and the good news of the resurrection.

I hope it's true. I hope that they were baptized. I hope that their lives were transformed by their brush with true divinity, found not in the heavens, but in the simplest of earthly settings, a home, a mother and son, with father looking on, the holiness of God with us, in life we can understand, in all of its blessing and pain.

But more than I hope that they were changed, I hope that we are. I hope that we are transformed in powerful ways, by our encounter

with the star child, Jesus of the manger and the home, Jesus threatened by empire, Jesus the refugee, Jesus the poor. I hope that we find that what God does offer us is enough:

the broken body and the spilled blood of the star child,
transformed from death to life, for us,
the words of the prophets, calling us to hope and patience and
justice and peace,
the family of faith,
the communion of saints, living and dead, but still, living,

I hope that it is enough, to give us the strength to stand, in the face of all that is unholy, all that is ungodly, all that teaches us to hate, all that saps us of our energy and compassion, in the face of all that distracts us from God's call to be God's holy people, to be God's messengers of good news to be God's messengers of peace.

And I hope that it gives us strength to consider what new and different roads that we need to travel, in this new year, not only or even perhaps not even so that we achieve our personal goals, not only or perhaps not even so that we can live into our new year's resolutions, but so that we can be transformed more and more into people who seek God's goals, who seek God's ways, who seek to live in God's light, and who let our light so shine before others that they may see our good works and glorify God.

We will find as we journey in this new year that we are led, not by a star, but by the star child himself, by Jesus, our Lord, by Jesus,

our light, who enlightens our darkness, who gives us hope, who leads us on new roads, and who brings us home. Amen.

Lisa Gugliuzza—Laurie’s friend, systemic illness
and Mary Stevens—Kevin’s sister Thursday having kidney removed