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January 8, 2023

Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-23

Sermon Title: Learning from the Magi

Prayer...

Introduction:

This Epiphany Sunday as we explore the story of the wise men or Magi, I want to remind you of the beauty of the idea of spiritual journey or pilgrimage. In the field of Christian Spirituality, we often explore the journey of faith. The journey of deepening our relationship with Jesus is an ongoing process through our lives. In Christian history for centuries people have taken pilgrimages to Holy Christian sites to help support their own spiritual growth.

I have shared with this congregation before that my wife Karen and I went on a pilgrimage throughout Scotland in 2006. We visited the Holy Island of Iona where Columba, a famous monk led a monastery in the 6th century. He lived a life of prayer and mission, spreading the Gospel

through much of Scotland. Throughout the 10 days of our pilgrimage, we were encouraged to prayerfully reflect on our faith as we explored a new land for us.

The Magi went on a pilgrimage to visit the infant Jesus. We do not know much about these astrologers. They came from the East. Some say from the land of Persia. Tradition has given them the names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar.

In about the 8th century the names of three Magi—Bithisarea, Melichior, and Gathaspa—appear in a chronicle known as the *Excerpta latina barbari*. They have become known most commonly as Balthasar, Melchior, and Gaspar (or Casper). According to Western church tradition, Balthasar is often represented as a king of Arabia or sometimes Ethiopia, Melchior as a king of Persia, and Gaspar as a king of India. I appreciate that tradition offers a multi-ethnic image of the Magi. According to tradition, they were not white Europeans but multi-ethnic travelers from foreign lands.

Meaning of the Gifts for Jesus

Church tradition has also sometimes attributed specific prophetic meaning to the gifts of the Magi. According to an article on the topic, “Gold: is affiliated with Kings, and Christians believe that Jesus is the King of Kings.

Frankincense: is used in liturgical worship in traditional Churches and represented that people would worship and praise Jesus.

Myrrh: is a fragrance that is embedded on dead bodies to make them smell pleasant and represented that Jesus would endure persecution resulting in his death.”

The details and legends attributed to the Magi are interesting to engage, but today I want us to consider what we might spiritually learn from the Magi.

- Like the Magi pursuing the star, we are to pursue the light of Christ in the world. Jesus in Scripture is the light of the world. To live our lives with purpose and clarity, we need the light of Jesus to guide our lives. As we are entering the new year, let us pray for the light and love of Jesus to guide our journey.
- Let us learn from the story of the Magi, by being open to spiritual truth from other traditions. One of the themes of my preaching the last couple of years is that wherever we see love and light we see God's movement in the world. The Magi are astrologers. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph are Jewish. The magi are from a different spiritual and cultural tradition, but they are interested in the wisdom of the Jewish prophecy of the coming Messiah. This story invites us to partner with Christians, but also people of other faiths and spiritualities who also seek the light of God in our world. We can partner with people of other faith backgrounds in actions of justice and compassion in the world. As we partner in working for peace, justice, and unity in our world we can share

our own experience of Jesus, just as Mary and Joseph shared the story of Jesus with the Magi as they brought gifts. If we are honest, we need to admit that the Christian Church today struggles with nationalistic tendencies. Just as people in the United States sometimes like to say we are the best nation in the world because of the freedoms people find here, so we Christians like to sometimes say we are the best religion in the world. We pridefully approach our religion as we would our favorite sports team. We shout from the stands as we watch Jesus make a touchdown and shout praise Jesus, we're number one, we're number one. Maybe a healthier approach is to humble ourselves and share the message of Jesus as if we are sharing food for a hungry person or as if we are spreading light and love to lonely people. Being a Christians is less about being on the right team and more about discovering God's love in Jesus and wanting to spread that love to others. We can share about Jesus and also learn from other faiths and spiritualities that believe in a God of

love and grace. I suggest the story of the Magi teaches us to be kind to other faiths and even open to learning from them because God is present wherever love is present and we can find a lot of love in other faiths. The Magi certainly brought love to Jesus.

- The third way we can learn from the Magi involves our willingness to take risks in our journey to Jesus. The Magi travel some distance to meet Jesus. They encounter Herod and learn how to navigate his power. They actually make the mistake of asking Herod where the Messiah is to be born and then later are warned in a dream to not tell Herod where Jesus lives. Their pilgrimage is not without its challenges. Mary and Joseph have their own pilgrimage after the Magi leave. In order to avoid Jesus being killed, Mary and Joseph flee with Jesus to Egypt. They become refugees and experience the displacement that so many people around the world experience because of the violent and oppression present in many nations. We learn in this story that Herod has many children killed in his attempt to protect his own

power. This story of the Magi teaches us that in our dangerous world, we need to take risks in our faith. We need to be willing to confront power and sometimes navigate around power in order to be true to the light of Jesus. In our town Newberg, many people have faced danger by standing up for the light of Jesus. We stand for the light of Jesus when we care for the houseless, when we speak out against racism and prejudice towards all people. I wish I could say that following Jesus was easy, but it is not. At some point our faithfulness to Jesus will likely put us in dangers way. In those moment we follow the light and hope we can find safety as Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and the Magi found. Unfortunately, sometimes standing up for love requires the greatest sacrifice. Jesus would eventually give his life out of love. Next Sunday, we will remember the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., who also gave his life for love. I wish I could say the Christian life is always easy, but it is not. Love sometimes requires us to sacrifice our comfort.

- A final way we learn from the Magi is found in their hearts of joy. Our Scripture today says the Magi offered gifts to Jesus with great joy. Following Jesus is often hard and requires sacrifice, but it also is a joyful life. We find joy is living an abundant life of love and compassion. We find joy in embracing the fullness of life and drinking deeply of the water of the Holy Spirit. We find joy as we serve others in Jesus' name.

Thank you for journeying with me today as we learned from the Magi.

As we finish the Season of Christmas today, may we continue to remember the star and remember the light of Christ in our world. Let us share his light and love in this New Year with great joy and hope, just as the Magi did as they presented their gifts before our Lord.

In the Name of God who is Mother and Father to us all, In the Name of Jesus the Son, and in the Name of the Holy Spirit we pray. AMEN.

You may or may not know that Ron Parrish is a former minister and Professor of ESL at George Fox University. Ron is going to share with us a devotion on Epiphany before we sing our hymn.

Matthew 2

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

The Visit of the Magi

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi[a] from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star in the east[b] and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah[c] was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,

are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,

for from you shall come a ruler

who is to shepherd[d] my people Israel.’ ”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east,[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped,[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Escape to Egypt

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” 14 Then Joseph[h] got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt 15 and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

The Massacre of the Infants

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi,[i] he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the magi.[j] 17 Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah,

wailing and loud lamentation,

Rachel weeping for her children;

she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a

dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 20 “Get up, take the child and his

mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the

child’s life are dead.” 21 Then Joseph[k] got up, took the child and his

mother, and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that

Archelaus was ruling Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to

go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the

district of Galilee. 23 There he made his home in a town called

Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might

be fulfilled, “He will be called a Nazarene.”[l