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Jan. 7<sup>th</sup>2024

Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-15

Sermon Title: Learning from the Magi

Prayer...

Introduction:

The term Epiphany means "to show" or "to make known" or even "to reveal." On the Sunday closest to Jan. 6<sup>th</sup>, we remember the coming of the Magi who brought gifts to Jesus and in paying homage to Jesus revealed him to be Lord and King.

We are finishing today the season of Christmastide. I hope this Advent and Christmas season has given you an opportunity to once again humble yourself before the baby Jesus and to reconnect with the beauty of the incarnation, Immanuel-God with us in Jesus.

Last week I decided to watch one more Christmas movie. Our family has already watched Elf, Home Alone, Santa Clause-the Tim Allen version, and a few of the Hallmark Christmas romance movies, so I decided we

were ready to go back to the original Christmas story and watch a new version of the story of Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus and the Magi called Journey to Bethlehem. It is a musical version that came out this Christmas of the classic story of the birth of Jesus and for those who are interested it includes Antonio Banderas playing the role of Herod and Joel and Moriah Smallbone are also in the movie. Joel is with the band for King and Country and Moriah his wife is also a Christian music artist, so it was fun for my family to check this movie out.

There was a lot of humor and music, but it was also very thoughtful and meaningful. The movie starts with the Magi, who are presented as African, Indian, and Middle Eastern peering through a makeshift telescope and seeing the star that will lead them to meet a new king.

The playful characters of Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior decide to go on a journey to find the new king. They ride three camels and travel many days. The Magi are astrologers known for their wisdom, but these three in the movie are depicted also as normal humans with funny

personalities. I enjoyed the way this movie added humor to a story that sometimes feels so serious that it is hard for us to relate.

The point of the movie “Journey to Bethlehem” is that we all are on a spiritual journey in search of God. As Christians, we believe that like the Magi who traveled a long way to meet Jesus, we to go on a spiritual journey to know Jesus. Jesus is revealed to us during this Christmas season in the form of a baby, who will grow up and demonstrate God’s love for the world.

Imagine what it would be like to be a Magi, choosing to travel from the East to meet an unknown King. What would you be looking for? Why would you choose such a trip? How would you feel to meet such a simple, poor couple as the parents of a King, the Son of the Living God.

The season of Epiphany reminds us to be like the Magi and worship Jesus. We learn from the Magi the importance of pilgrimage or spiritual journey. We learn the importance of offering our gifts to God. We learn to humble ourselves in worship.

Pilgrimage or spiritual journey may sound appealing to some, but I can also imagine for others that it feels cumbersome. In our society, we try to move fast. We want to get to the destination quickly. We travel by plane rather than by car when we can. We drive rather than walk. In the days of Jesus, there were no bullet trains. People learned to walk long distances or ride on the backs of animals or in carts. I wonder if the slower pace of life gave them opportunity to more intentionally connect to God or one another.

My wife Karen and I make a habit of going on long walks together. We especially go on long walks after the Christmas season, since we are working off all the treats we have eaten. The nice thing about walking with Karen is that we make time to listen to each other. Sometimes we choose to be quiet and instead listen to nature. The spiritual journey of walking for us is not about getting to a destination. It is about building a connection.

Our spiritual journeys are an invitation to deepen our connection with Jesus. If you wish to build a connection to Jesus, you need to be real with your feelings. All feelings are on the table with Jesus (sadness, joy, anger, love, anxiety, peace). We bring all our feelings before a safe and loving God who wants to see our hearts revealed and who is willing to reveal a heart of love for us.

Where is your heart as you enter this New Year of 2024? Are you filled with joy or is your heart breaking? Or maybe, you are feeling a little bit of everything. The way I describe my life these days is that it feels quite full. It is mostly full of really good things, but it is full and sometimes I feel the need to stop and simply breathe. In fact my spiritual practice of choice these days is to either walk in nature with Karen or alone or to sit and meditate.

I am slowly learning the art of meditation. Meditation is about slowing down and connecting to your breath. You can meditate using a mantra, like Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me or another mantra might be I

am love and I am loved, which reminds us that God loves us and we are created in the image of God. Often times I listen to meditations on Insight Timer, an app on my phone. The meditations include affirmations that remind me that I am deeply connected to God and that I am deeply good. For me, beginning the day with words of encouragement is very helpful.

I hope as you go on your spiritual journey that you will explore what spiritual practices help you feel God's love for you and that you also do spiritual practices that help you feel love for yourself. The Beatles had a favorite song that said "All we need is love. Love is all we need." I think they were pretty wise. Maybe John, Paul, George, and Ringo would have gotten along well with Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior.

We are all on a spiritual journey. Our final destination will be heaven, but while we are on the road of life remember it is less about the destination and more about the journey. May we live our lives centered

in a heart of love for God, others, and ourselves. There is enough love to go around.

One of the special things about the Magi in our story today is that they are from the East. If you read about the Magi, they were astrologers possibly from Persia or China. Legend says one of the Magi was African. The idea that they were from the East is interesting when we think about the journey of Modern Western Christianity today.

I wonder if the type of Christianity we are exploring today, might benefit from learning from the East. When I listen to different spiritual meditations, they often end with the words Namaste, which means the Divine in me honors the Divine in you. Celtic Spirituality writer, John Philip Newell writes about how the word Namaste is actually a wonderful gift from the East for the whole world. He writes, "Think of the way in which Hinduism in its maturity has blessed humanity with a single word, Namaste. This ancient Sanskrit greeting has become common parlance throughout the world. It means the Divine in Me

honors the Divine in you. The Sacred in me bows to the Sacred in you. Hinduism has freely given this away to the world. There are no strings attached, no accompanying conditions. We do not have to become Hindu to use the phrase.”

John Philip Newell is one of my spiritual mentors these days because he is a Christian who has learned to share his Celtic Christian faith, but also to learn from other faiths and spiritual traditions. By the way John Philip Newell is coming to Rose City Park Presbyterian Church in Portland on Feb. 15<sup>th</sup> and Feb. 16<sup>th</sup> . My family is going to go meet him. If you are interested in meeting him too, let me know and we can give you more information about the conference he is leading on Celtic Christianity.

The story of the Magi is a story of how Jesus is revealed to visitors from the East who are in search of a King. It is also a story of how we all can learn from the spirituality of the East.



The type of Christianity that is most needed in the world today will share the message of Jesus freely to the world and will also be open to the Spirit of Christ that is active in other faiths and spiritualities.

Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were Jews and the Magi were probably Zoroastrian in faith. Christianity was not born as a religion until after Christ rose from the dead. The future of Christian faith is an openness to the love and presence of God throughout the world wherever we see love, peace, joy, grace, and hope shown in people and in the fullness of God's creation.

Epiphany is about Jesus revealing himself as a light to the world. The future of Christian spirituality is a uniting of all people who are open to the light of Christ in the world, even in places that the Western Church has been cautious of in the past.

As we reflect on the revealing of Christ in the world, I want us to also remember the journey of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus at the end of our story today. Led by an angelic dream, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus leave for

Egypt as refugees. We must never forget that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were poor, brown skinned refugees who had to travel long distances to escape violence.

As we remember our own spiritual journey, may we remember all the displaced people in the world who are refugees today. Historically, Jews like Mary, Joseph, and Jesus have been displaced and this still happens today. Also, today we are aware of Palestinians who are being displaced due to a war between Israel and Hamas. Central Americans risk their lives daily to find safety. So do people from Ukraine, Syria and Somalia. There are refugees from Afghanistan and Myanmar. The list goes on and on.

One way to be a faithful Christian today revealing Jesus to the world is to show love and compassion to all refugees of all faith traditions.

Today, let us be grateful for the season of Epiphany when we remember the presence of Christ revealed in our world. Let us learn from the Magi as we seek to follow Jesus and humble ourselves before Jesus. May the

future of Christianity include an even greater heart of openness to people from the East and the wisdom we can find in other faiths that also embody Christ's heart of love.

And now, I will read A Prayer for Epiphany by Kayla Craid-To Light Their Way.

"We come to You, O Light in the darkness.

We come to You, O Light of the world.

We worship You, Son of God,

Whose glory has risen upon us,

Who traversed the cosmos,

And who broke into our world with love

For all people, for all places, for all time.

We have unwrapped the presents

And placed the garland back in  
the boxes.

And now, in the quiet, we seek

The brightness of Your dawn,

Just like the three kings so long ago.

Let this not be an end to Christmas joy

But rather a beginning,

Beckoning us toward the future,

Toward a life of worshiping You."

AMEN

## Matthew 2:1-15

### 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.”