

Epiphany Year C: January 6, 2019

Matthew 2:1-18

Sermon: Dreams, Stars, and Prophecies

Rev. Michele Ward

Today is Epiphany--the day that the Christian tradition celebrates the arrival of the Magi at the home of Mary and Joseph. Some Spanish-speaking countries celebrate *La Dia De Los Reyes*, or Three Kings Day. In some churches, today is the real day to celebrate because it is the day the Magi present their gifts to Jesus and his parents. People leave water and straw under their beds at night for the kings' camels when they arrive. Families and friends exchange gifts on Epiphany rather than Christmas Day because of this. Last night, Parker and I were invited to celebrate with our neighbors, one of whom grew up celebrating this holiday because of her Puerto Rican family. We ate plantains, rice and beans, homemade flan. We listened to music, met neighbors, and celebrated one last time. It was the final Christmas party of the season. As we ate good food and enjoyed music, I couldn't help but think of the complicated nature of this story. While it is full of celebration and discovery, it is also a wild story.

So this morning, we're going on a journey. A dangerous, suspenseful, courageous journey. You see, this is no ordinary caravan. It involves astronomer-priests from Persia, a fearful, violent king, escape across the desert for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and genocide. What an intense way to end the Christmas season! Who thought it was a good idea to put the story here, anyway? And while we may sing of kings in flamboyant costumes--frankly, the best costumes of the Christmas story--we can easily forget the risks they took to show up where they did. We can easily miss that they brought more than three gifts with them because the fourth gift they brought isn't as obvious. They brought the gift of their courage. Not to necessarily leave with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, but to share. In order to share that courage, though, they had to take the first step out of their doors and into the open landscape in front of them.

The Magi are not magicians, and they weren't kings of others nations. Historical criticism says that they were an elite class of astronomer-priests from Medes and Persia. They would have been similar to the Levites in ancient Israel,

the priestly order of Jews. Their roles would have included astronomy, philosophy, politics, and religious duties. They gained much power and influence because of their priestly and political roles in the Persian empire, eventually serving as gatekeepers to the Persian throne.

And, we don't know if there were only three of them that came to bring gifts. It is likely there were more than three, and they had a bit of an entourage with them. Men of that social status would most likely be traveling with others, especially on a long journey.

So--I want you to imagine these members of the Persian Empire, these astronomer-priests, showing up in the Roman Empire and visiting Herod the Great. These two empires did not get along, and for men like this to show up unannounced, without an invitation, would not be taken well. Rome was currently dominant, but the shadow of the Persian Empire was well within Rome's view. This visit from the Magi to King Herod was not a casual stop at the information desk to ask for directions; this was a threatening encounter. Herod was paranoid as all get out when it came to losing his throne. For the Magi to tell him what they believe is coming and to then have his own scribes confirm this, it would have been too much for him. Herod does not have any qualms about killing the people that get in his way or threaten his power. He killed his wife, three sons, and his brother in law, to name a few. His fear of losing his throne became his obsession. He did whatever he had to do, even the murder of his family, to maintain power. He saw a newborn child as a threat to his reign--the newborn baby Jesus. And Herod should have been afraid. Because a king was coming unlike any king that reigned before--a king that comes to usher in a world of peace and justice, not one of violence and anarchy.

The Magi come with their prophecy in hand, and it mirrors the one that Herod's scribes also know. Rather than this be a comfort to Herod or a cause for the people of Jerusalem to celebrate, they are afraid and they do nothing. They ask the foreigners to go in their place and 'report back.' They do not drop everything they're doing and join the caravan of Magi. No. Instead, they ask their visitors who have traveled for months to keep going and then come back.

Leave it to the ones who spend all their time memorizing the prophecies of their faith tradition to stare the fulfilment practically in the face and freeze. Now, it would be easy to judge them from this side of the page. We are let off the hook then, right? We're not in that courtroom, trying to decide who to follow or what to believe. But we are here, in this sanctuary, trying to sort out where God is in the midst of everything going on in the world and in our lives.

Sometimes the first step is the hardest one to take. The one that takes you a way you've never been before. The one that will inevitably be longer and include more detours. The one that puts you and your companions in situations difficult to explain or understand. And yet, those are the places where we can be sure that God is waiting, ready to show up and surprise us with grace.

The Magi went to Bethlehem without any Jewish leaders in tow. They continued their journey and presented their gifts. And in a dream, they receive the message to go home another way. To go back on a different road than they came to Bethlehem. And they obey. We do not hear from the Magi again in this chapter, but we do know this. It is their courage that sends them. It is their trust in God that guides them. And it is their openness to the Spirit's messengers that ensures they stay attuned to the Mystery.

They are not the only ones that have a dream. Joseph has another one, but this time it isn't about his lack of faith. It is about their lack of safety. An angel warns him that they must leave Bethlehem, too. They must escape their homeland, an already foreign-occupied homeland, and travel in fear for their lives. They are asylum seekers, refugees. They are the families at our border, pleading for safety, for fair wages, for reassurance. The urgency of their flight resonates with us. Have you ever felt a strong tug inside of you, one that starts at your gut, one that tells you that now is the moment you must act? Now is the chance to do something before everything is different? The Magi, Joseph, and Mary did not hesitate.

When you know it is time to take that first step, take it. When you realize that there is no going back to the way things were, do something about it. Because God does not show up in those moments for us to stand frozen in place. God does not show up in those moments for us to hunker down in fear or, worse, plan the demise of others. God does not show up in those moments -- in the stars, in the dreams, in the prophecies of our lives -- for the sake of it. It's because sometimes

we need a nudge. We need direction. We need God to say, ‘Hey, you. I have something for you to do. I have something for you to see. So go over there and do it. Go over there and see it.’ Because church, there is much goodness and much despair to act on. There is much goodness and much despair to see.

Children are dying in detention centers in our country. Our government is partially shutdown. 309 people were murdered in Baltimore in 2018. This is not a drill. I am tired of hearing the people of Jerusalem saying, “It isn’t really that bad.” I am tired of the people of Jerusalem saying, “We just need to wait it out.” It is time. The Messiah cannot be worshipped if you don’t get out there and seek him. The Messiah cannot be saved from genocide unless you pick him up and seek asylum. The Messiah cannot return safely home until the tyrants are removed from their seats of power.

Sometimes it is the first step that is the hardest to take. The one that takes you down a road that you have never known before.