

A Sermon Preached by Rev. Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on January 3, 2021.

THE TRUTH OF THE STAR

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life." John 14:6

Today we celebrate the feast of Epiphany. Epiphany is one of the most ancient celebrations of the Christian Church. In fact, during the first few centuries of Christian history, Epiphany was considered second only to Easter in importance. Epiphany was held to be of greater importance than Christmas or Pentecost.

We are reminded of Jesus making himself known to the world.

On the Day of Epiphany itself we focus on the story of the Magi as found in Matthew's Gospel. The story of the wise men is not to be read at Christmas, which tells the story of Jesus' birth in fulfillment of Jewish prophecy, but rather at Epiphany as Jesus is revealed to the wider world represented by these visitors from the East.

The Scriptures do not tell us very much about the Magi. Many of the things we grew up believing about the wise men are not found in the Bible. They were not kings, we do not know how many there were and we do not know their names. Tradition teaches that since the Bible teaches us there were three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh this may indicate that there were three magi. There may well have been three, but there could have been more. The Bible does not tell us their names or exactly where they came from.

Who are these Magi and what can we learn from them today? I believe that the Wise Men can teach us about the nature of truth.

We can be fairly certain that these so called Wise Men were early astronomers mixed with a touch of astrology. These were people who studied the heavens seeking to discover truth. In the ancient world it was commonly thought that truth could be ascertained from gazing at the heavens.

Indeed there were some in the ancient world who believed that the explanation for human beings having the gift of reason is found in the fact that humans walk upright on two legs. Our faces are lifted towards the sky. Life on earth is chaotic, but the heavenly bodies appeared to move in consistent, regular patterns. It was believed that gazing at the heavens programmed human minds. It was the observation of the heavens that gave humans the gift of reason.

Thus many in the first century looked to the heavens for truth about human life and historical events. This continued for many hundreds of years. Shakespeare has a character refute this understanding in the words, "Remember our destiny is not in our stars but in ourselves." This was a reaction to a continuing belief in astrology.

In the first century astrology was considered serious science as part of astronomy and not light fun as it is today. Wise Men at the time of Jesus were those who gazed at the heavens seeking truth. These Magi were looking for truth for its own sake. They were not looking for practical uses for truth, but rather simply truth. When they came to the stall in Bethlehem they paid tribute to Jesus and went home. They believed truth was its own reward.

We also learn from this passage that the Wise Men were willing to sacrifice for the truth. They had seen a new star in the sky. They knew that this indicated something significant was happening, that some new truth was being revealed. They did not just sit back and hope that the meaning of the star would be reported in the local paper.

They packed up supplies and set out to follow the star. They followed the star to see where it would lead. They left home and family behind to follow. They began to travel, which in those days meant danger from robbers, disease and other risks. These Magi risked all to learn what truth the star had to teach them.

We also learn that their search for truth led them to Jesus. The Wise Men followed the star until they came to Jerusalem. There they were told of the Old Testament prophecy concerning Bethlehem. They continued to follow the star and it was in Bethlehem that their long and difficult journey came to an end. In Bethlehem they found the infant Jesus.

The honest search for truth led the Magi to Jesus.

What does this story have to teach you and me? I believe that this incident in the life of Jesus teaches us about our own search for truth.

First it teaches us that the journey towards truth begins with believing in the reality of truth. You and I live in a time when even the concept of truth is under attack. Movements such as deconstructionalism undermine the belief that truth even exists. There have been many movements in our culture that teach us truth is merely a personal construct. You have your truth and I have mine but there are no universal truths. Shortly before he was elected Pope in 2005 Cardinal Ratzinger said in a speech:

We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desire.

What Pope Benedict said in 2005 is even more true today. We live in the age of fake news and manufactured events. Even an event that is caught on film is no longer accepted as fact. The Magi challenge this abandonment of truth. The Magi are considered wise because they sought ultimate truth.

The Wise Men ask us,
Do we believe in the reality of truth?
Do we hunger for fundamental answers to questions of meaning?

Socrates told us that an unexamined life is not worth living. The Magi challenge us to begin our journey by believing in the reality of truth.

The journey towards truth continues with sacrifice. The Magi teach us that the search for truth calls for sacrifice. The sacrifices demanded for truth are real. Are we willing to support an educational system that encourages people to seek truth? Are we willing to assist our own children and those in our Church to seek the truth? Are we willing to help teach Sunday school or support our Christian education program in some other way?

But even more risky for us is our being willing to entertain new ideas and to give up old ways of looking at the world. A search for truth forces us to give up old misconceptions and cherished ideas that are comfortable to us. We are to believe that there is more to life than trying to accumulate the goods and experiences of this world.

One unknown author tells us:

If, as Herod, we fill our lives with things... If we consider ourselves so unimportant that we must fill every moment of our lives with action, when will we have the time to make the long, slow journey across the desert as did the Magi? Or sit and watch the stars as did the shepherds? Or brood over the coming of the child as did Mary? For each of us, there is a desert to travel. A star to discover. And a being within ourselves to bring to life.

I want to be clear; again and again an honest search for truth will force us to rethink cherished ideas and concepts. It means change and this is not a painless process. When we think we have all the answers and then discover that some are wrong, it takes great courage to change. I believe that if you have not changed your mind about something in the last twenty years, it probably means you have given up the search for truth. A real hunger for truth will cause us to wrestle with some of our most cherished ideals.

Finally the journey towards truth concludes at the manger. The Magi teach us that the search for truth leads us ever closer to Jesus.

So when young people question everything.

When they reject the answers given to them by some "higher authority",
When they seem to turn their backs on all we have taught them,
When they seem to feel all is doubt and nothing is certain –

May we remember that an honest seeker moves closer to our Lord. This kind of rebellion may be leading them closer to Jesus.

This also can be a great comfort to us. There are times in our spiritual journey that we experience doubt and questions. We each have had times when we question the reality of our faith. We have times when we wonder about the truth of the Gospel. We all have had days when we wonder is God real.

My friends, these times of questioning and doubt are not always moving us away from God. They are an important part of the journey of faith. The Magi had times when hills and mountains and clouds obscured their vision of the star. Yet they continued to journey on seeking the truth of that star.

So our periods of shadows and questions are part of our Christian pilgrimage. We can be assured that a sincere seeker of the truth, a person with honest questions is moving ever closer to the manger in Bethlehem.

Just as the Magi followed a star, we will be given an opportunity to focus on a star. We have as in the past stars available. You can pick them up over the next three days. On these stars is a word. This star word is yours for the coming year. We invite you to put it on a mirror or refrigerator or in your desk or perhaps the place you most often pray.

During this coming year please ponder what new truth this star might be prompting you to pursue.