

Follow Your Heart!

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Three strangers in a caravan loaded with expensive goods marched onto the dirty streets of Bethlehem that day. Dressed in purple and scarlet robes, they surely stuck out like sore thumbs. Bethlehem is a poor, rural community, nine miles south of Jerusalem, where mostly shepherds, farmers and peasants live. These three foreigners are rumoured to be astrologers, or astronomers, or scientists and others still think they belong to a royal class like kings who practiced a different kind of religion. That's why we love to sing that carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are". And speaking of kings, there's nothing in the text to indicate that the Magi were kings. Later Christian tradition, under the influence of Psalm 72 and Isaiah 49 and 60, refer to them as kings, which is why when we portray them in tableaux or pageants, these wise men are all wearing crowns.

Matthew says that they are "from the East," perhaps from different parts of Asia, Africa, or Europe. They had gifts that no one else in Bethlehem could afford. They had one purpose in mind that no one could even understand. They followed a bright shining star in search of a noble birth. In the ancient world, the occurrence of a star was often associated with the birth of a notable, very significant person. The Wise Men, as we have come to know them, are referred to in the Greek as Magi, believed to have come from a priestly tribe among the Persians. So, they have followed that star to a stable in Bethlehem, where they worship the one who, even in infancy, is already called a king. I love Matthew's sense of humour, don't you? Matthew is the only gospel writer who thought of including the magi in the nativity story. And I guess you noticed too that Matthew never tells us how many wise men visited Jesus. But since Matthew mentions three gifts: gold for a king, frankincense for a Deity, and myrrh as a sign of death to come, Christian tradition came to identify three. In the late sixth century Armenian Infancy Gospel, the Magi were even given names: Melchior, Balthasar, and Gaspar.

Now it's time for trivia. Do you know what would have happened if it had been three wise women instead of three wise men? They would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, brought practical gifts like casserole and bake

goods, and would have asked Mary and Joseph to go on a date while they look after baby Jesus!!

Back to the wise men - even before they reached Bethlehem, the Magi first stepped into Jerusalem, the centre of politics and religion, like three fools wandering naively into a snake pit, asking with a megaphone in hand, "Where's the baby king?" They thought they would be welcomed with a big hug from the hosts, instead came face to face with danger. When Herod the Great, one of the five Herods mentioned in the New Testament, who at that time was the ruler in Jerusalem, hears of this unannounced visit from the Magi, he was frightened. "What? A baby King?". Like a wonderful story line, a new king is a threat to Herod and the status quo. If the three wise men might be considered as mythical figures, Herod "the Great" is real. Herod had been given the title "King of the Jews" in 40 BCE, and after consolidating his power he ruled over Judea for 33 years. In this particular story crafted by Matthew, Herod asked the magi to come back and to give him information where this new king is to be found so he could also come and worship him. But we know as Matthew had told us – that Herod is just putting on his old tricks – Herod has his own selfish agenda that would endanger the safety of the baby Jesus.

So the Magi leave Herod, the threatened one; and they followed the star until it stopped over the place where the child was. And Matthew tells us that "when they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy." I can promise you that when the Magi experienced that joy, they were struck by contrast. They were struck by how different that joy felt from the feelings they had experienced in that meeting with Herod. One felt so right. The other felt so wrong. The joy they felt when the star stopped was the inner confirmation that they had arrived at the place. They had followed their heart! Anytime we experience following our heart, that kind of deep joy, then we know that we have arrived in God's place.

Have you ever had such a moment? A moment when things seemed to really line up for you? A moment when you felt so at home in your own skin, so at one with yourself and everything, that you knew the place at which you had arrived is the place where you belong. A moment when you can say, "This is me. This is why I'm alive. This is who I am. This is where I am meant to be." Do you feel like the magi experiencing a "follow your heart" moment when they followed

that star and you find yourself overwhelmed with joy? That is the moment I wish for you. That is the moment God wishes for all of us. And what I also wish for you is that all of your moments could be characterized by that kind of joy in this New Year and in whatever years may follow for us. I hope and pray that life could be the delightful experience of being flooded by and overwhelmed with “follow your heart” moments. That joy happens, when like the Magi, we find ourselves at the place where we can freely and truly be who we really and truly are. Where is that joy for you?

There is a ruler in this Gospel – Herod - who lacks empathy for others, and he is by no means shown in a positive light. Herod has a thousand faces. We can name him in so many ways – he could be the face of arrogance, enmity, fear of the unknown, despair, pain or anxiety. Herod is alive today in anyone or anything that leads you away from being overwhelmed with the joy God wants you to have, the joy that comes from following your heart, where you really want to be, and doing what you truly want to do. I know what it's like to experience encountering Herod and what he symbolizes. But I also know what it's like to be flooded by joy and love and spark of life. And I think that any fear I have of Herod is not worth comparing to the delights of trusting my inner experience of joy that is the gift of God.

So what do we make of this Magi story? How is this relevant to our everyday living? God’s radical grace is wondrously mystifying. To think that the Magi were scientists who practiced another religion, to realize that they were not of the same Jewish culture as that of Jesus and his family, to think that they would travel from another part of the globe to find a significant baby, push me to expand my understanding of overwhelming ways, the spirit of God reaches out to all kinds of people; to announce the good news and what it means for us to put our faith in action – to be able to proclaim that we believe in an inclusive, welcoming, inter-faith, intercultural, universal God. This profession of faith means a lot in a time when the issue on refugee and immigration is increasingly dangerous and politicized and those with different customs and faith traditions are increasingly marginalized.

The Magi did not come looking for the Christ-Child through rituals or preaching or sacrament or traditions-- things we hold dear in our faith journey. They came seeking the Christ-Child

after observing the night skies and following their heart. God's work of embracing all people is more of a "mystery" than a "formula," much bigger than our own understanding. The pictures and depictions of the Magi are also really significant. A lot of times they are depicted as coming from different continents, which shows the universality of Christ, the Gospel, and the Church.

New Year is upon us. May we be as determined as the Magi in following our heart leading to abundant life. May the light of the Epiphany enable us be more welcoming of those who are traveling across borders. May we put a stop to the cruelty of rulers and leaders who abuse children and the vulnerable in the name of politics and religion. May we be more appreciative and understanding of those are physically, mentally, spiritually, emotionally different than us. Epiphany is a light we need in our time. May it shine all the more brightly on all of those who encounter it even those who fail to recognize it. May it shine to those who follow their heart. Thanks be to God. Amen.