

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
January 3, 2020
Matthew 2:1-12

“New Beginnings”

Someone once said that nothing packs up and moves out faster than Christmas. And I think that’s true. We spend weeks getting ready for it, and then it’s over in the blink of an eye. Two days after Christmas I was in Target and they had Valentine’s Day stuff on display. I just shook my head. Too soon, too soon, I thought.

I recently read something Peter Gomes, the late chaplain of Harvard, wrote about Christmas:

“It’s very difficult to tear ourselves away from Bethlehem,” he wrote. “There is a time to lay down one’s cares and duties and run to Bethlehem and the manger, a time to follow the star . . . a time to flee for refuge from the troubles of the world.”

But . . .

“There is also a time to return, to begin where we left off . . .”

And so this is what I want to talk to you about today, this idea that it is now time to begin where we left off; or to use the words of Howard Thurman, to do the work of Christmas. As he wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,

to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

We who have been to the manger, who have seen the light, who know that Joy, Hope, Peace, and Love have been born . . . We who have witnessed to the impossible notion that God has come among us, we have work to do.

Now that we have been to the manger our lives should be different. We who have seen the star in the sky are called to bring light to the dark places in people's lives and in our world. The good news in this is that we don't have to do it alone, because we're called to be light bearers with other people. But the hard news in all of this is that we're called to do the work of Christmas not just with people who look and act and think like us, but with people we don't always agree with, who may not share our view of things, and who may not look and act and think like us. And that's hard to do. We're much better at being light bearers with people who think, look, act and vote like we do.

But the message of Epiphany, just as we heard over and over again in 2020, is that we're all in this together; like it or not. Insiders and outsiders, foreigners and citizens, Democrats and Republicans, people whose native language is English and those for whom it is not, we're all in this together, this light bearing business. Why? Well, because it's very hard to find a gospel story that supports those who want to be exclusive. And nowhere is that more true than the story about the Wise Men.

We tend to forget that the Wise Men were outsiders; they wore strange clothes and looked different. And they were astrologers, and people who tend to follow stars tend to beat to their own drummers. If we met the Wise Men today, we would probably be suspicious of them. Truth be told, Matthew's listeners would have been suspicious, and would have been shocked to hear that Wise Men from the East showed up to pay Jesus homage. The Wise Men were likely Persian or Babylonian, and the Persians and Babylonians didn't have a great relationship with the people of Israel. Why, the Old Testament is packed with stories about the Persians and Babylonians oppressing the people. A modern day equivalent of the story of the Wise Men might go like this:

"Nuclear physicists from Yemen, Iran and Pakistan came to Bethlehem to pay homage to a new Jewish king."

We would not believe this tale if we read it in the paper; and TSA agents would likely pull them aside for extra screening. Plenty of people would play Herod in the story and want those Wise Men removed for fear of any threat they might provide.

And yet, when the foreigners arrive in Bethlehem what do they do? They offer the newborn king homage and present him with gifts.

It's hard to over exaggerate just how inclusive the Gospels really are, even though plenty of people would like to believe differently. Why, here at the beginning of Matthew's gospel we have pagans, Arabs really, who are welcomed at the manger, shattering any belief someone may have that Jesus only came for a select few. And before his story is over, Jesus will try his best to tear down the walls we love to construct. He'll welcome all sorts of outsiders: lepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, poor people, women, Roman centurions. He'll keep company with them and eat with them! And, he'll go a step further and scandalize the most pious, the most orthodox, and the most religious with his radical inclusivity. Jesus, apparently, doesn't understand that one of our baser instincts is to exclude people who don't think, look, act and vote like we do; doesn't seem to understand, or even care, that we prefer division over compromise.

And that's tough for us to hear, because we have a harder and harder time conversing with people or reaching consensus with people who don't agree with us. It is, unfortunately, just the state of the world we live in. It seems we argue about everything these days: from life-saving measures we can take to slow a pandemic to overturning a democratic election, there's hardly a moderate voice left in a country that views compromise as an increasingly dirty word.

Twenty years ago, Terry and I travelled to Israel and got to visit the Church of the Nativity where the Wise Men supposedly showed up with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Whether or not it was the actual site of Christ's birth is beside the point, really, because what struck me at the time – and what is still true today – is that armed guards block the road to Bethlehem. They, too, are doing their best to keep some people in and other people out. It's sad to think that a site of inclusion has now become so exclusive; but really, if God could prevent a despot like Herod from killing the Christ child, perhaps God can also work with today's Herods.

Friends, as people who have been to the manger, we're called to include others, not exclude them; we're called to meet people at the table, especially people with whom we don't see eye to eye, and we're called to eat with them, talk to them, and get to know them; we're called to embrace differences, not belittle them.

The Wise Men are a reminder that to kneel at the manger means seeing the human race differently, as one family of God, and the mission of the church is to nurture, promote, work for, and celebrate the oneness of the human family, not to divide it or fragment it more than it already is. Why, it used to be that Epiphany was celebrated as the quintessential mission season, when the Church was tasked with being the light to the nations, and the green growth of the gospel was encouraged. Do Christian people even believe that anymore? What would it mean for Christians to evangelize Afghanistan, or Belarus, or Turkey, or the formerly Christian but now utterly secular nations of Europe? Maybe it would be the Church being the Church, showing that love, listening, and compassion are our hallmarks, and trying not to be so stridently angry or terribly afraid. What if our calling, our witness today is to model reconciliation, togetherness, and not being right but humbly loving—so compellingly that other people down the street notice and want in on it? And then to have that spread all over the place? With social media, you never know...

This is not easy work, my friends. The road to Bethlehem is riddled with obstacles and powerful despots who let their fears get the best of them. But if we're going to take our work seriously and do the work of Christmas, we must find a way to get there. That may make us uncomfortable at times because we don't like to travel unfamiliar roads – but perhaps travelling new routes is just what is needed for such a time as this. "They went home by a different road," Matthew tells us. T.S. Eliot ended his poem about the magi with "We returned to our places ... but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, with an alien people clutching their gods." Once you have met the Christ child, you do not keep plodding along the same old pathways.

And one last thing . . .

I have been thinking about the Wise Men's gifts. Perhaps the three elements of gold, myrrh, and frankincense hold some meaning for us as we go about our work. Gold invites us to ask "what shall we do with the wealth we have been

given, our money and possessions, and also our gifts and our talents? How shall we use them to do the work of Christmas? Myrrh is used for burial. It invites us to ask with the poet Mary Oliver, "What will you do with your one precious life?" And Frankincense is for beauty. How will we both find and seek beauty and how will we make ourselves a thing of inner and outer beauty for God and for others? How may we be a blessing for others?

As you ponder those questions, I invite you to carry the carol "In the Deep Midwinter" with you as you travel these short dark days of winter, to use as a meditation on your "one precious life".

"What shall I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb
If I were a wise man, I would do my part.
What shall I give Him?
Give my heart."

Amen.