

FAITH IS A VERB
Sermon for Epiphany C-Mat 2:1-12
LPC, 1/6/13

If you are really observant, you will have noticed that the wise men figurines were not in our manger scene on Christmas Eve. They were back there on the farthest window sill. Last week, they were about halfway up the nave. Today they have arrived.

We follow this practice of moving the wise men gradually toward the manger to show the length of their journey. The wise men, as we hear in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew, had a long and confusing trip to find the Christ child in Bethlehem. Jealous, mad, blood-thirsty and duplicitous King Herod was but the last factor contributing to what must have been a difficult passage.

I wonder if we can find relevance for this story in our own lives by considering the journey of the wise men to be a metaphor for our own faith journeys.

Faith journey is a term I have liked since being introduced to it while taking Education for Ministry in the early 80's. I find this terminology fitting because for me, faith has indeed been a journey. I marvel at people who have never doubted, never felt tested, never seen a disconnect between modern life and their Christianity. If that's your experience, God bless you. It has not been mine.

For me, and for many I expect, the faith journey is long and various, as it was for the wise men. What can the wise men tell us about our faith journey?

The wise men were not native to Bethlehem, or even to Judea. They weren't born there. They had to get there. Most of us, too, have to make our way to the manger, so to speak. We weren't born there. Despite our grandmothers' contentions that our manners show we must have been raised in a barn, we were not born in the manger.

My point is that faith typically is not something fully formed in us at birth. It is true that each of us is made in the image of God, and that innocent children, before being programmed with a lot of life's practicalities, sometimes display a deeper awareness of God than adults do. Likewise, we may be born into faithful families and raised in godly and observant households. But if our faith doesn't grow with us, we may outgrow our faith. We are likely to find that the picture of God as a nice bearded man on a cloud is little help against the slings and arrows of a normal human life.

Another lesson the wise men may have for us is that people have different starting places. No two faith journeys are identical. The Gospel of Matthew tells us that the wise men arrived in Judea together, but tradition holds that they hailed from different places, as distant from each other as they were from Bethlehem. Their paths converged on the road because they were following the same star.

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

Not only did the three wise men likely come from different places physically, they came from a different place ideologically. They were pagans, probably Zoroastrians, definitely not Jews. But they sought the Jewish Messiah.

The Greek word translated “wise men” is μάγοι (magoi.) Magoi usually refers to astrologers: people who were the scientists and researchers of their day. Magoi sought truth from the highest and most widely recognized source of knowledge – the heavens. It was the insatiable thirst for truth, knowledge and wisdom that led the wise men far from their starting point.

This point reminds me of a quotation I passed nearly every day when I was at seminary. The words, carved into the entry of the Bishop Payne Library, are those of William Sparrow, who served on the faculty of Virginia Theological Seminary, and as Dean from 1868 to 1874. The words read, “Seek the Truth, Come Whence it May, Cost What it Will.”

What powerful words: “Seek the Truth, Come Whence it May, Cost What it Will.” These are the words of a curious, open-minded, faithful, selfless person. They are not the words of a person who has all the answers already.

The wise men were recognized sages. But even they knew they didn’t have all the answers, and were willing to sacrifice much in an unending pursuit of truth.

I wonder how many of us Christians assume that, because we are Christian, we have achieved the perfection of spiritual and intellectual enlightenment and therefore have to seek no further.

Even the wise men moved on from the manger. They “went home by another road.” Some have speculated that the wise men stayed in touch with Jesus throughout his life, and may even have tutored him in ancient lore. Seeing the infant Jesus changed their lives, clearly. Surely whatever else happened to them in their lives was seen by them in the context of their having seen the Son of God. But their journeys continued.

This too is a lesson of the wise men. Their journey continued past the manger, and so does ours.

Truth is always to be sought. Truth is never to be feared. Learning is never to be avoided. This side of heaven there is always a new horizon on the journey of faith.

Faith is a verb: an active verb at that. Faith is not something you *have*. Faith is not even something you *do*. Faith is something you follow... as the wise men followed their star.