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St. John's Episcopal Church

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Christmas II

PILGRIMAGE

In March of last year, NASA launched an exploratory mission into outer space called the Kepler Mission. The spacecraft began a pilgrimage that will last three years and allow the powerful Kepler telescope to stare at more than 150,000 stars as it searches for signs of other earth-like worlds.

The spheres that light up the night sky have always been important to human beings as a means of finding direction for pilgrims and nomads in the desert or for navigators on the high seas. For some, the stars are a way to navigate life. They also give comfort to shepherds and those who keep night watches. Stars have inspired countless myths and stories about who we are, where we come from and what guides our existence. The myths about Greek and Roman deities are directly associated with constellations, planets and the moon.

During the reign of Caesar Augustus, Romans believed, or were supposed to believe, that Caesar was a direct and immediate descendant of a union between the Goddess Venus (Planet) and a human being. Caesar: half-human, half-divine. No one else in the empire was allowed to hold this claim of origin, a fact that the gospel writers, Matthew and Luke, defy and challenge in their birth

narratives. Jesus, Son of God and “Son of Man”, conceived by the Spirit and birthed by Mary. These gospel writers also make clear that, unlike Caesar, Jesus arrived poor, helpless, uninvited and imperiled from the very beginning.

King Herod, Rome’s surrogate, was threatened by what the wise men from the East told him. He had heard that they were following a star to a place where a baby who was called “king of the Jews” had been born. After all, Herod was supposed to be the king of the Jews himself. Historical records show that Herod was paranoid and brutal. In today’s gospel, recalling his encounter with the wise men from the East, he represents darkness, evil and violence. A central and dramatic purpose of darkness in myths and stories is to reveal the light. Luke Skywalker would be a dull hero without Darth Vader. Feigning curiosity, Herod asks the wise men to return to inform him where the Messiah is so that he can go and “pay him homage”. But he means to kill him.

The story does not say how many wise men came on the journey. Like most stories rich with imagery, this one lends itself to lively and numerous permutations, such as three wise men, three kings, and three astrologers. Their names Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar are part of the imaginative gold they bring.

Interpreters of Matthew’s gospel say that the wise men come from Mesopotamia, which is Gentile territory. Matthew wants to show that Jesus came not only for the Jews but also for Gentiles. Not a national deity, Jesus is a light to all peoples. Indeed, Matthew’s gospel concludes with the “Great Commission”, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.”

We find sacred journeys and pilgrimages in today's readings from Jeremiah, Psalm 84 and, of course, the gospel. In Jeremiah, pilgrimage means the return of exiles to Jerusalem. To the exile, immigrant, deportee, and to the soldier overseas, home becomes a sacred place and return to home becomes a sacred journey, a pilgrimage often accompanied by dangers.

Psalm 84 suggests the feelings of an exile who has finally come home. The temple in Jerusalem is the object of adoration and praise for the pilgrim who arrives there.

“How dear is your dwelling, O Lord of hosts!...

Happy are the people whose strength is in you!

Whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.”

It is intriguing to me is to understand the wise men as pilgrims. Pilgrims are travelers with a sense of mission who leave the routines and structures of everyday life in order to see in a new way, to find a new path, or to change directions in their lives. They travel on sacred and often ancient paths or roads. The path provides changing vistas, ups and downs and encounters with other pilgrims. The road itself is part of the pilgrimage symbolically, physically and geographically. In Northern Spain, the 1000-year-old route to Santiago de Compostela is actually called “El Camino”, “The Way”. This name bears intimate meaning for Christians, whose earliest antecedents in the first century were known as followers of the Way. In John's Gospel, Jesus refers to himself as the Way.

All major world religions have holy pilgrimages and shrines. Pilgrimages are ancient and archetypal. They spawn legends, myths

and stories of miracles. While spiritual in nature, they are often free of the pious formalities, duties and doctrines of institutional religion. All travel may have an element of pilgrimage. Pilgrimages may also have an element of tourism. (*Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* by Victor and Edith Turner) Rigid parameters of definition should be resisted here.

Even before their long pilgrimage begins, the wise men are persons who already see in a spiritual way. We might call them intuitives or dreamers, perhaps shamans. They recognize something new and different and respond with vision, wholeheartedness and purpose. They see a new star at its rising, at its birth. Perhaps they felt like we do when a full moon on the horizon takes our breath away. The light they saw called them to set out on a great journey, leaving home, leaving everything familiar behind. The wondrous light in the night sky leads them westward towards a sacred destination and destiny, which is Jesus in Bethlehem. On their night journey, this star leads them first to Jerusalem and to Herod who attempts to enlist their help in locating the long-awaited Messiah. Unlike the wise men who move with purpose, Herod remains static, stuck, not leaving his royal compound, perhaps because he is terrified. He is in the dark.

It is not unusual for pilgrimages to be paths of healing that include encounters with grief or darkness, even the pilgrim's very own. I remember a 51 year old Spanish pilgrim on the Camino whose name was Javier. His wife had died two months before we met. Overcome with the darkness of grief and loss he decided to walk the Camino, seeking healing and light.

Like Jesus himself, the star that guides the wise men is extraordinary. It too seems to have a sacred destination. When it

comes over the place where the Christ child was born, it stops. When the wise men see this they are overwhelmed with the joy. After their long and arduous journey, they do what pilgrims who have reached their destination often do, they kneel down and worship. They offer gifts as acts of praise.

About a week ago, Bob Hentzen, the 73-year-old founder of *Christian Foundation for Children and Aging, (CFCA)* left the headquarters of this remarkable non-profit in Guatemala. He began an *8000-mile journey by foot* that will last about a year and a half. He will visit numerous CFCA villages in many Latin American countries, coming close to 182,000 children and aging members. Many will join Bob for segments of the journey.

He says, "People ask me why I am doing this. The answer is simple. By walking with sponsored friends, we are saying, 'You are not alone.' During the journey, we will listen and learn from the daily lives of families served by CFCA." This is not Bob Hentzen's first pilgrimage. He began CFCA 30 years ago after a 4000-mile journey from Kansas City to Guatemala. The name of this present pilgrimage is *Walk2gether*. As a symbolic act, pilgrimage may invite our imaginations and prayers into the journey of the pilgrim, in this case Bob. We all have pilgrim hearts. The star that lights Bob's journey is the compassion of Jesus.

As we gaze at our own stars in this new year, imagine what brightness might lead you on pilgrimage. Most of us (dare I say none of us?) can replicate Bob Hentzen's 8000 miles. The odds against his completing this journey seem as high as, say, getting a man on the moon!

But if we see pilgrimage as something we do in order to see in a new way, then we have options that do not require physical stamina. This manner of pilgrimage begins with the intention we bring to who we are and what we do. We do it where we are without changing the landscapes of our daily lives. It can be done. Reading a book or composing a poem, writing a journal, studying dreams, meditating, learning a new language can all result in a change of vision. And these are only a few ways.

The wise men did not return to Herod as he had asked, but left for their own country by another road. One pilgrimage over and a new one to begin. So it may be for us too as we move in spirit towards “our own country”.

I close with a short poem by Frederick Buechner, which was sent to me recently as a Christmas gift by a friend and colleague.

Lord, catch me off guard today.

Surprise me with some moment of beauty or
pain

So that at least for the moment

I may be startled into seeing that you are

here in all your splendor,

Always and everywhere,

Barely hidden

Beneath,

Beyond,

within this life I breathe.

Señor, sorpréndeme hoy.

Soprándeme con algún momento---o hermoso
o doloroso---

para que al menos por un momento

puedas asustarme hasta que yo vea que Tú estás
aquí de veras---en todo tu esplendor,

para siempre, y por todas partes,

apenas escondido---

bajo, y más allá de.....,

y dentro de esta vida que estoy respirando.

Translation by John Leich

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.'" ⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage."

⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And

having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.