

“Journey or Intentions?”

Matthew 2:1-12

Here we are near the end of the Christmas season. While I feel that Christmas extends all the way to the 6<sup>th</sup>, the day of Epiphany, many folks feel that the Christmas season is over noon on Christmas day. It’s really unfortunate that many folks feel that way about Christmas. I think that we should enjoy the season of our Savior’s birth as long as possible. There is such a richness to the Christmas story that we should look forward to all the time that we have in this special time.

When I was in college, I always tried to invite friends over to my room for Epiphany parties. This served two reasons. The first is that I wanted to continue the Christmas celebration into the beginning of the new school term. The second was that it was a good excuse to have people over since we really hadn’t seen each other in several weeks. It was good to have people over to the dorm room for a little while since there wasn’t much else we could do on a January evening in McPherson, Kansas.

Epiphany is a topic that I have preached on before in the past. I’ve taken different angles on the day and have tried to explore various topics that come about in the lectionary readings. This week I choose to focus on Matthew and the story that we now know of as the wise men seeking out the new king that had been born to Mary and Joseph.

There are two themes in this story that apply to us today as Christians. These ideas are of intentions and embarking on a journey. As Christians we hope and pray that our intentions are good before God and that we hope to continue on a journey in Christ that goes on throughout our lives and on into the future, both in this world and the next. Epiphany provides us with these ideas to explore in our time and place.

Focusing on intentions, I think of the many times that I have engaged in helping another person throughout their times of hardship or when they needed help when the times were good. In our story of the Gospel reading today we see two sets of intentions presented by the players in our reading.

The first intention is from the Magi from the east. It's important to understand who they were in order to grasp their intentions in finding the Christ child. Scholarship has worked through the story have determined that these wisemen were more than likely to be Zoroastrian astronomers and aristocracy who would have spent much of their time staring at the heavens. I find it to be critical to understand the religion of these travelling magi, because it gives us clues on how important Christ's birth is in the context of the ancient world.

Zoroastrianism is an ancient religion. The roots of the religion trace back to a man who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC Persia who received revelations from the god of their religion, Ahura Mazda. As the founder of the new religion Zoroaster was considered to be a holy man, full of knowledge and wisdom far beyond the realm of any man on earth. His revelations became the religion of the Persian empire and as the Persian empire grew so did this new religion.

Zoroastrianism through time actual had an influence on what we know of today as Judaism and Christianity. This is key in understanding the relationship between these three religions. Before the exile, the religion of the Israelites did not have a clear conception of heaven and hell. People were thought only to go to sheol, a netherworld where the dead simply went after this life. Zoroastrianism helped the Israelites to define an afterlife, which the Zoroastrianists had figured out already. There was good and evil in the world and your present life dictated the future life and where one would spend eternity.

The wise men that would have sought out Christ would have this idea in the back of their mind as they would scan the heavens. Astronomy and astrology played a significant role in their religious life. Events and people were dictated by the stars above. Decisions on agriculture and war were interpreted from the stars. This would have been serious stuff for the magi.

When the Magi would have observed the heavens and seen the star of David this that same seriousness would have been applied in the situation. The intentions of the Magi would have been established by the stars above. I believe that they had intentions to find this new ruler that had been born. If the stars showed us the keys to life and then the stars above would have indicated a new life and ruler, then it would have been imperative that the Magi act on their new knowledge.

Imagine the situation that the Magi would have been in. Imagine the scene where they would have had to express their findings to their colleagues and fellow astronomers. Imagine how they would have felt seeing that a new King would rise up and take order in their ancient near east. The Magi would have had to defend their intentions of seeking out this new king.

Yet in this story, I find it interesting that only a handful of people were sent to find this king. Instead of a large, diplomatic endeavor it was simply a few men that set out to find this King. Did the fellow Persians not believe that the stars were indicating a King? Were the facts of the Magi refuted by those in power? It's hard for us to tell from this point in history. There are many questions that we don't have an answer to concerning the Magi.

Yet for the most important part of their story, the story of the Christ, we can see that they believed in what they saw in the heavens. They came across a difficult land in order to find this new King. It wasn't like they hopped into the family minivan and went on a little sight seeing

tour of the ancient near east. They were coming in search of a King and ultimately, they found that King in Bethlehem with his family.

Yet in this story of intentions there is a dark side to the intentions of the story. There is no doubt that King Herod had bad intentions. Herod was a ruler that did not always have the people of his domain in his thoughts. He was a man that sought out power. He was man that would try to please the Roman oppressors so that he, Herod, would have a life of pleasure and decadence.

What it all comes down to is that Herod was ruling for the Romans. The Romans had the true power in the region and Herod was merely a puppet king. Whatever the Romans asked of him, he had to do in order to keep at his place in the social structure. He even built a seaport to please the Roman government. Herod was indeed a fortunate for where he was, but it created an atmosphere where little if anything could be just.

It is indicated in the story that Herod wanted to find this newborn King so he could come and worship the child. However, we know that was not the case. We learned that the intention of Herod was less than stellar. His intentions were not to cultivate a new leader. This new leader would actually be a threat to Herod and his family line. There was nothing in this new leader that Herod would find appealing.

We know that from other sources that Herod's intentions about this newborn leader came ever more apparent. The flight to Egypt by Joseph and Mary is indeed indicative of Herod's intentions. For we know that Herod was thinking about himself first and foremost and the people that he was charged to lead.

So here we are with these intentions. The questions that come up now are, how are we to interpret these intentions? How are we to interpret intentions in our lives? Here is when you come into play in the conversation. For I believe the best learning comes through a dialogue.

What are your thoughts on these intentions? How do you respond to intentions in your life? How do you interpret intentions? What are your intentions with Christ?

The next step with this story, the next component that is such a key part of epiphany is the journey. The wise men had a journey that they embarked on far from their land. Where do you go with your journey with Christ? Where can we go as a church community to embark on a journey? How can we as a church community move forward intentionally in our journey with Christ.

It's a new year. God has given us another opportunity to start anew. We have a new opportunity to walk with God and Christ. We have a new opportunity to be the community that we are called to be in our place in this world. May we be the community that intentionally loves God and journeys with Christ in this world. Amen.