

“Realizing the Gift”

Matthew 2:1-12

Have you ever been searching for the light at the end of the tunnel? Have you ever pushed through life wondering what was ahead of you and yet you still pushed forward? In our lives we often experience those moments, where we wonder what lies ahead of us and we wonder if we will ever get there if we know what we are searching for. It's a constant of life, whether we like it or not. We are to push forward in life, whatever might come our way.

Today we celebrate epiphany. Epiphany is the day when the wise men from the east reached the Christ child. In their search of this child they left their homes not knowing where they were going, they were only following a star. They had no idea what they would find, but they were going anyway. It was a journey that required faith on their part.

In Jesus Christ we are given the opportunity for a journey that is far beyond anything we could imagine. In Jesus Christ, we are given the love and joy and peace that come through a relationship with him and with God shaped by the Holy Spirit. It is in Jesus Christ that we are given the strength for the journey.

As I was preparing the sermon this week I was thinking about historic journeys that had ends that might have been totally different than people originally imagined. I actually started thinking about the Oregon Trail and decided to look into it some. I'll have to admit, I'm often fascinated by such a journey, where you moved slowly, but you were going an insane amount of distance. In my mind, it's one of the closer modern equivalents to something the wise men from the east might have journeyed.

The typical journey a person on the Oregon trail would endure would have been a 4 ½ to 5 month journey, eating a monotonous diet of bacon, biscuits, coffee, and maybe tea. It would have been a difficult journey, travelling across a territory barely known. Much of the journey would have been very difficult to complete on your own, so you travelled with a group, also known as a wagon train. The costs and difficulties were high, but the rewards were indeed worth it for many travelers.

The journey would have taken you across the modern-day states of Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, Utah, Idaho, and Oregon. It would have taken you across forests, high plains, mountain ranges, deserts, and all kinds of rivers. It would have been a very scenic journey, but the scenery would have been can at a high cost due to the difficulty needed to traverse it.

In my reading on the Oregon trail I admire those that took the journey, because if it had not been for them, we would not have really been here today or it would have taken much longer for settlement to occur in our part of the world. I believe their spirit plays a very big role in who we are and gives us a modern example of what a difficult journey would have been like indeed.

While the Oregon settlers across the trail had a very difficult journey, the journey of the wise men in the bible was actually far more intense and longer.

In one tradition, the magi were to come from three different places, which would have made their journey very difficult. They were to have to come from Persia, Babylonia, and Arabia. They would have had to come across terrain that would have challenged any traveler today, even in cars and trucks. The wise men had to cross many hundreds of miles of desert,

with little food and water. In reality, it took the wise men two years to reach the Christ child, from the sighting of the star until they finally reached him.

The star they would have sought after is often speculated as to what it might have actually been. Unlike the Oregon trail pioneers who would have maps or guides, all the magi had would have been this astronomical object to follow. Some astronomers have said that they start might have been a planet, which would have moved in such a way that would help guide them to the Christ child. Some have said it might have been a comet or a supernova. Whatever it might have actually been, it is agreed upon that it would have been a celestial object that would have been their only guide and only inclination as where they might have been going. They did not have a GPS or a smartphone to guide their way, only the star and faith that they were on the journey they were supposed to be on.

Once they magi would have been close to the Christ child, they went and saw King Herod, to declare their intentions and to inform Herod that indeed a child who would become a great king had been born in the country that he ruled. Herod was not totally honest with the wise men, for he told them that he wanted to worship the child, but in actuality he had ulterior motives. Herod felt threatened by the child, would have used the location of the child given to him by the magi as a way of finding the child and ultimately doing away with him. Fortunately the magi realized this, and returned to their home a different way after visiting Christ.

The wise men brought three gifts to the Christ child, of very high value. These gifts were meant for a king and they were gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They were gifts meant for royalty and were of such an extreme value, it would have been like giving a gift of a platinum and diamond encrusted watch to a poor former graduate student like myself.

In our song We Three Kings we heard a bit of what these gifts might have been used for in the life of a king. They had specific uses and places. An interesting theory though, is that with these gifts from the magi, it might have been able to fund the trip of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus down to Egypt. The trip to Egypt would have been the trip to escape Herod's terrible decree of murdering all the young boys of the Judean region, for Herod was that jealous of a king. The gifts in that case were life saving and allowed our present day Lord and King to reign for us and live and die for us this very day.

Yet in the journey of the wise men, I believe they were the ones who received the ultimate gift. In searching out the king they found Jesus Christ, the savior of mankind. In finding Jesus Christ they realized the ultimate gift of life.

Their journey was long and difficult, and while the closest thing we have to this journey is the Oregon Trail, the reward the wise men received after finding the Christ child far outweighed any gifts of settlement on the Oregon Trail. The wise men found the source of life and salvation in Jesus Christ, whereas the settlers would have found a new physical home. The wise men found a spiritual home that would last for all eternity.

In our lives we go on journeys ourselves, travelling physically from place to another or beginning a new life in a new place. We all experience these things in some form or other. Sometimes we go on a journey when we face illness or when we face things like a divorce. We know those journeys are difficult and we wonder where the light at the end of the journey might be. But the end of all of our journeys is found in Jesus Christ. At the end of life difficult times, we find God as the source of life, giving us hope for a better tomorrow and life everlasting in Jesus Christ, all guided by the Holy Spirit.

In our lives we are given the opportunity to find the Christ child and realize the gift given to us in his life. We are given the opportunity to share the gift of life with others, so that they might be able to experience the transforming power of Jesus Christ in their own lives. We are given so much in Jesus Christ, the hope, the joy, and happiness found in a relationship with him.

While the journey in Jesus Christ might not always be easy, we always have God on our side. In life we will face deserts, mountains, plains, rivers, and all sorts of metaphors for a difficult journey in the experience of being human. We don't have to get lost on the journey and lose our way. Instead in Jesus Christ we are given guidance under the Holy Spirit to push us forward, so that we can experience God in our lives.

We can realize the gift in Jesus Christ. We can find what the wise men from the east sought in Jesus Christ. We can experience the true king and source of life eternal life. At the end our journey in seeking Jesus Christ we are given life eternal with God the Father forever and ever. We are given a life where we will not experience death but given life eternal. We are given the greatest gift of life, and that is truly life eternal.

It is my prayer that in our journeys in life, that we always seek and realize the gift that is Jesus Christ. May we always seek out Christ in our lives, so that we might live a life in Christ, so that others might know Jesus Christ, and so that we will always have life eternal in Christ. Amen.