

2nd Sunday after Christmas
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84

January 3, 2021
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Matthew 2:1-12

Do You Know Where Your Wise Men Are?

It's 10:45 in the morning.

Do you know where your Wise Men are?

If you set Wise Men out with a Nativity scene this year,

Where are your Wise Men today?

Perhaps they have been carefully packed away.

Perhaps they are standing vigil around or close to the creche.

Perhaps they are still on their way and placed

A little distant yet from the birth scene,

Since the Feast of Epiphany is still to come, January 6th, Wednesday.

A funny cartoon has been circulating on social media.

Maybe you have seen it.

It looks like the three wise men are in line at Trader Joe's,

With duct tape measuring out the appropriate social distance

And each one in their space waiting to move forward,

Gift in hand.

When I saw it, I could not help

but give one of those poignant, bitter/sweet chuckles

That are so common for me these days.

My wise men and their one camel...they have to share,

Are on the entryway bookshelf, one shelf above the rest of the crew...

Mary, Joseph, shepherds still hanging around,

Baby Jesus, angels and of course, the star.

As I let sermon thoughts meander through my head these past days,

I came to the conclusion Thursday that everyone,

But especially the wisemen with their gifts and star

Might need to stay out for a while longer this year...

Indefinitely perhaps...at least until Lent.

I heard that word indefinitely used frequently this past week.

It may just become a common phrase for the days ahead

As we continue to move into

The unknown future of this virus that has powerfully taken hold.

Did you get to see the line up of Jupiter and Saturn in the western sky Christmas Eve?

Many friends and others on social media

Saw their conjunction as a sign of hope

Of good things to come for our unknown future.

Matthew's wisemen started their journey not knowing many things;
But drawn, pulled evidently by a similar sight up in the sky,
A sign of something new breaking forth,
A new ruler perhaps, some other wise people predicted.

It was not like my planning a journey to California,
But a tad more like our family camping trips of yore
When we ventured into Bureau of Land Management forests
With just a general idea of where we might camp
Heading south from Winslow
Drawn by the promise of a good catch of juniper wood for the coming winter.

The wisemen had to have been important to Matthew.
His is the only gospel that includes their mention.
Their story follows immediately after the story of the Angel appearing to Joseph in chapter 1.
And that chapter ends with these words:

"When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the Angel of the Lord commanded him, he took her (Mary, of course) as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

In the Gospel of Matthew there is no mention of a census, a journey for Mary and Joseph,
There being no room at the inn, shepherds, etc., etc.
There is just the story of journeying wisemen, following a star
A story wrapped in the trickery and treachery of King Herod.,
Which they thwart.
They leave their gifts and return home another way, after being warned in a dream.

That telling takes 12 verses and then Mary and Joseph are on their way to safety in Egypt
And we're on to the rest of the story.

So what's going on here?
My New Oxford Annotated Bible notes: "The visit highlights the conflict between the king of Israel chosen by God, Jesus, and the King of Israel chosen by the Romans, Herod.
Well, yes.....

But if that's all the story was for Matthew and the early followers of Jesus;
a dry political/theological contrast...

Wow! Has it not it grown and blossomed and borne the fruit of such much more than that?

This strange tableau of kings and camels kneeling before a baby in a stable
Has for centuries been caught up in the imaginations of people all over the world...
Kept alive and wonderfully embellished with imagined details,
Long lasting myths, and songs,
Operas, symphonies, paintings, drawings
Church pageants.

We three kings of Orient are
 Bearing gifts, we traverse so far....
 How many Christmas pageants have you watched
 Help prepare, been part of over the years???
Was there ever one without the entrance of the three wisemen?

In our strange time of unknowing,
 We're given this living, bursting at the seams, pregnant story of
 Journey into the unknown
 Following a star, a beckoning towards hope, something new
 Not without the world's trickery, arrogance
 danger and death even...
We must not forget the Herod's killing of all the children around Bethlehem
 two years old and younger ...

but the hope of Emmanuel, God is with us.

Dare I say...we are all on a journey into the unknown
 We journey toward death
 Pulled by forces way beyond our control
And of course, this blasted indefinite time of covid
 Just holds that right in front of us, doesn't it?
That's why I'm being pulled into this idea
 Of not putting my wisemen away until Lent.

I believe this is the time to find God with us in the story of the wisemen.
 So many questions swirl in my head.

Where are my wisemen right now?
 Are they maybe not physically, but spiritually already put away?
 Are they still on their way?
 Are they headed home, having left me gifts?
 What are the gifts they left? Maybe its just one or even more than three.
 What might I want to do? What might God want me to do with the gifts?
 Might I need to look for King Herod, pay attention to forces of darkness
 And evil that want to thwart God's will?

That's just for right now...what about the past?

Who have been wise men and wise women in my life?
 What gifts have they brought?
 Have I used them well?
 Have I put them on the shelf and forgotten them?
 Have I regifted them?
 Am I grateful for them?

What began this whole train of thought around wisemen in our lives
Is a old sermon from 1994 that referenced a 10 year old memory...
Which takes us back to 1984.
I was 37 years old, living in Winslow, AZ
Active in the Episcopal Church there
And in that spread out deanery.

The memory is of a person, Dr. Verner Dozier,
a highly respected lay leader, author, theologian
in our Church who especially flourished
when educating and encouraging people to live out their call to ministry
as the sons and daughters of God in the world.

She is one of the wise that have come to me over the years
And laid at my feet gifts of inspiration, hope, courage, passion,
trust in our Emmanuel, Jesus, God with us.

I am blessed to have a long list of such gifts from God
And more than likely, you are also
You, too, can take the time to think, reflect, consider....
Not just today....but indefinitely.

Who are the wise that have come to me?
Who are the wisemen, the wise women in my life today?

When I first tumbled to a sermon title for today
I shared it out loud with my friend, Jay.
He would be the first to tell you that he's not "religious".
His best experiences of church were as a teenager
being part of the paid choir of a large Presbyterian church
in a wealthy Los Angeles community

But when I asked him playfully: "Do you know where your wise men are?"
He immediately answered,
"Yes, Doug is in Pleasanton,
Gil is up in Marin
And Angie is out in Washington DC."
He got it...Those people bring him gifts
Not only of the wisdom gleaned from lives well lived,
But also of acceptance, truth telling, and laughter.

The gifts of God;
Inspiration, hope, courage, passion and trust in God;
To name just a few,
Are laid at our feet by people God has made present in our journeys.
But as we have also seen in the morphing of Matthew's simple story,
By poetry, music, art, nature,
A myriad of sources.

God is with us.

And most profoundly as Jesus,
flesh and blood baby born of Mary and Joseph
worshipped by shepherds and wisemen
And for that I am so grateful.

And we are God's

as so eloquently proclaimed by Paul in his letter to the Christians in Ephesus.

"...he has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing

He chose us in Christ to be holy and blameless before him in love

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.

So that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, (by the gifts of wisdom and revelation) you may know what is the hope to which he has called you."

Which brings us to our final ponderings...

How is God calling you and I into the future?

What light shines for us, tugs at us, pulls us on the way

As we journey into the unknown accompanied always by our God.

Jesus was blessed by wisemen bringing him gifts as he began his journey in the world.

The wisemen were blessed by their journey of searching, finding and being in his presence.

The world has been and continues to be blessed

by Matthew's telling of this wondrously strange story.

May we be open to receive God's blessings in this indefinite time of uncertainty.

And may we not rush to put away our wisemen.