**“Journey” 12/30/18 Sue Black**

On the church calendar Epiphany is celebrated on January 6 and commemorates the visit of the Magi or wise men from the East to the house in Bethlehem where Jesus lived with his mother Mary. Most scholars believe that Jesus was a young child around two years old at the time of the visit. The word epiphany means “to reveal” as God made known His prophecies to these Gentiles and guided them using a star to worship the newborn King. This was a birth announcement - Jesus was to be the Savior not just for the Jews but for the whole world.

The scripture reading for this morning comes from Matthew 2:1-12. It’s entitled “*The Magi Visit the Messiah.”* Listen now for the Word of God.

*“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the One who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star when it rose and have come to worship Him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.’ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the Child. As soon as you find Him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship Him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the Child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.*

*On coming to the house, they saw the Child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.”*

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Scripture tells us the Magi came from the East from places and cultures that worshiped other gods. Magi were learned men from a priestly class, interpreters of dreams and through the study of writings and the stars, predictors of future events. Most were skilled in magic and astrology and respected for their wisdom and counsel.

We don’t know if the wise men were sent by their kings to work for continued peace between the nations or if they made the long journey on their own out of curiosity or as believers in the one true God. We do know that because of the Israelite exiles, knowledge of the Hebrew prophecies was known well beyond the boarders of Israel. Scripture tells of the history of the people and of God’s promise of a Messiah. Numbers 24:17 let the Magi know what to look for and where to go when the Savior was born. *“I see Him but not now. I behold Him but not near. A star will come out of Jacob. A scepter will rise out of Israel.”* They knew the star they saw in the sky was what they’d been waiting for.Arriving in Jerusalem, the Magi quoted Micah 5:2 as they sought information from Herod about the Child they were seeking. Bethlehem, a tiny insignificant town, was the chosen birthplace.

Deciding to journey and pay homage to the new King, the wise men prepared for the trip gathering suitable gifts as was the custom in the ancient world. We don’t know how many Magi visited Jesus or how many servants or camels they brought. We don’t know if the wise men coordinated their choice of gifts, if they traveled to Israel together or if they even knew each other before their arrival at the palace of King Herod. We do know that the gifts they brought were worthy of a King who was God Himself. Precious gold, symbolizing royalty, frankincense that when burned provided a pleasing aroma that was thought to carry prayers to God symbolizing Jesus’ role as our High Priest, our intercessor and myrrh used in embalming, symbolizing the death that was to be His sacrifice for our sins. To us these may seem like very strange things to bring to a baby but these gifts told the story of who Jesus is and what He sacrificed for our salvation.

On the counter by our church office is a beautiful scene of three wise men with their camels. On their knees with arms and eyes raised to heaven, each man holds a treasure chest in offering. They are worshiping Jesus. But even as they present their gifts, I sense the artist was also depicting a response from each man, a receiving spirit resulting from the encounter with Christ. Each has a look of wonder and amazement.

The wise men followed the star, the Light of Christ, which is the gift of Christ. The Magi put their lives on hold and with great cost left their families for the uncertainty and danger of a trip to a foreign place. They sought the Child because God Himself put the need for this journey in their hearts, the need for a journey that we also choose to make with God. Let us too, be reminded to focus on the star, to receive and open the gift, which is Christ.

Let us pray.