

“An Epiphany Journey”
Matthew 2:1-12

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The coinciding of Epiphany and the New Year is my favorite pairing. The New Year is all about learning from the lessons of the previous year and setting our intentions for the months ahead. The New Year recognizes that we are on a journey - that surely much of last year will spill into the next, but that we have agency about what we do with it, and we can make choices about which direction we will next travel. For this year in particular, we are aware that turning the page from 2020 to 2021 does not mean all is suddenly right with the world.

We are still living with the impact of COVID-19, as evidenced by yet another online worship experience. We are still living with the impact of federal and state governments that prioritizes the wealthy over all else. Systemic racism is not any better today than it was a week ago. The grief of lives and loved ones lost still burns through us as much as it did a week ago. Even those more trivial inconveniences and trials that we liked to attribute to the year 2020 will not magically disappear with the turning of a page in the calendar - my furnace breaking down on January 1st, 2021 can attest to that reality.

Yet at the New Year we rekindle our hope that we will have the resources, the support, and the resilience to make it through another year, no matter what it brings. We rekindle our resolve to work toward systemic change, to amplify the voices of the oppressed, to ground our community in love. This happens individually with every person who takes the time to set an intention or make a resolution for the coming year.

This intention setting and resolution making also happens communally in a similar way

through Epiphany and our annual retelling of the journey of the Magi. This story ties us from Christmas into what is next, and invites us to follow the journey of the Magi and learn from their lessons as we imagine where our journey will take us as a community of faith in this next year.

There is a lot of lore about who the Magi were with many of the details in dispute depending on which scholar you read. What is generally agreed upon is that the Magi were not just three people, they were a whole caravan of folks. And because they came from afar, it is believed that they were of a different religion and ethnicity than Jesus and his family would have been.

I love this detail because it reminds me of our own church - a wild group of people who have come from afar - some of us finding our way to mid-Michigan through school or work, some of us growing up in the area but finding our way to a progressive Christian church after different experiences in other kinds of churches, each of us gathered together as a caravan of people who knows what it feels like to be an outsider in one way or the other, committed to taking the journey of faith together.

A big part of the journey these Magi undertake is journey of discernment. When they encounter Herod, do they listen to him? They follow part of his instructions, to search for the child, but do they trust him? Who or what do they put their faith in if not the ruler of the land?

We know that anytime we are trying to make decisions with other people it takes a lot of discussion, negotiation, and weighing of all possible options. It doesn't matter whether the decision is as small as "What are we going to have for dinner tonight?" or "Are we going to commit treason by lying and hiding from a murderous dictator?" Discernment is the practice of asking deep questions when the answer is not obvious. It's about asking the questions in a way

that evokes your values, your hopes, and your faith. Discernment is a sacred practice that helps us step outside of ourselves and reaches out to God, to the knowledge that our decisions and actions have an impact beyond ourselves.

The magi followed first a star, and then their dreams, trusting something mystical and sacred to guide them on their journey. As a church we are invited to practice discernment as well. At the beginning of the year, in addition to the resolutions that are made, perhaps we should recommit to asking deep questions, to drawing on the mystical and sacred elements of our faith when we seek answers, and to always turning to God, to something bigger than our individual experiences, when looking to where our future is leading us and how we are going to get there.

Today we honor Epiphany, which is a celebration that is less about a one-time “Aha!” revelation, and more of a celebration of a long journey, and so today I invite us to lift up and acknowledge that we too are a people on a journey. 2021 is another chapter on that journey, and I am glad we are beginning it together. I pray that the weeks and months ahead of us will lead us deeper in our commitment to working for justice and growing in discipleship. I pray that each of us will feel the Edgewood caravan surrounding you and accompanying you on your own journey, so that we might remember we are in this together. May it be so. Amen.