

Feast of the Epiphany 1/8/2012 Isaiah 60:1-6; The Revelation of the Magi 11:1-7; Matthew 2:1-12

'Traveling mercies' is a phrase that was not familiar to me before Marin County author Anne Lamott wrote her book of the same name in 1999. I've since learned that it *might* come from the Southern Baptist tradition as a prayer for God's mercy to be with you in the potential inconveniences/difficulties/dangers that one can encounter while traveling. It says more than just 'have a good trip' and is especially appropriate for those traveling because of sad or stressful reasons or going into danger.

I don't know where Anne Lamott got it, but as she describes her journey of faith, 'traveling mercies' is the perfect prayer. If you've read her books or her blogs on the Salon website, you know that she's all about living your faith in the real world, not relying on easy answers, learning instead (as one reviewer said) "to shine the light of faith on the darkest part of ordinary life, exposing surprising pockets of meaning and hope."

The phrase 'traveling mercies' appeared as I was thinking about the Magi. In the Christmas pageants, the birth stories from Matthew and Luke get conflated, and we get both the angels/shepherds/no room at the inn and the wise men all together in the stable. But it's only in Matthew that we meet the mysterious strangers from the East. And tonight we've switched from Luke's Nativity story – the story of Christmas Eve - to Matthew's story – the Epiphany gospel.

I was writing my blog yesterday and thinking about this. And I was listing some of the reasons why I love Epiphany so much:

- The fact that the Epiphany gospel brilliantly illustrates the boundary-crossing nature of God, which we'll see revealed in the life of Jesus. The Magi were from a foreign land and adherents of a different religion. They represent the wider world and remind us to look beyond our narrow enclaves of country, ethnicity, tradition, etc.
- Because they were of a different religion, probably Zoroastrian, Epiphany is the perfect time to highlight interfaith relationships in our communities. Following the lead of the Magi, we are able to cross over into the realm of a different tradition and then go back to our own. The Magi didn't become Jews; Mary and Joseph didn't become Zoroastrians.
- Then there is the fact that the Epiphany story reminds us that the realm of God is not like the realm of Herod – or of any other political system. We need to pay attention to our dreams when they tell us to beware of politicians' promises and hidden agendas.
- There is mystery inherent in a star. Just as we don't have to read the Nativity story as a historical document, neither do we read the Epiphany story as such. It's possible that Matthew's tale is a midrash, an interpretative story, of Isaiah 60. In that case there is no need to speculate about whether the star was a supernova or a comet or the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. None of those explanations would account for a star starting and stopping the way Matthew describes anyway. But just because we don't take it literally, we can still appreciate the wonder of the tale. Light guides us through the darkness; divine light guides us through life.

Epiphany is a mystical event. It's all about revelation. I received a book for Christmas called the *Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem*. We heard an excerpt from it tonight. The book includes the first English translation of an ancient manuscript, written in Syriac, called the *Revelation of the Magi*, possibly from the late 2nd century, and purportedly narrated by the Magi themselves.

This is a very different account from the one told by Matthew. In this story, the Magi are not foreigners; they are members of an ancient mystical order, the descendants of Seth, the third child of Adam and Eve, who have inherited from Seth a prophecy: that a star of indescribable brightness will someday appear, heralding the birth of God in human form. When the time came for the birth of Jesus, the star did appear. The difference in this story is that the star guiding them on their journey was, in fact, the celestial Christ. The strangeness of this story reminds us that Epiphany is a mystical event. And again, just because we don't take it literally, doesn't mean we can't appreciate the wonder of the tale. Light guides us through the darkness; divine light guides us through life - traveling mercies.

The Magi received traveling mercies in both Matthew's story and in the *Revelation of the Magi*, which were more than wishes to 'have a good trip'. There was a star, a divine presence guiding their path. There were dreams that helped them make decisions about the way to go. There were prophecies about the promises God made to bring light into the shadowy places of the world. There was an experience of meeting Jesus and seeing something of the fulfillment of those promises.

These same traveling mercies are offered to us on our journeys. We don't set off alone; we don't travel alone. This is the season when we are perhaps a bit more attuned to the mystical realm. We look for revelation, for divine guidance and inspiration. We pay attention to dreams, both those that appear from our unconscious and those that we consciously envision for ourselves, for our world.

And so as we travel now into Epiphany, it's a good time to ponder where we are on our journeys. Last week I talked about asking for a word for the coming year, and both discerning that word and living into it are part of this question. What new direction are you possibly feeling drawn to go? Is there something perhaps that you need to let go of in order to take the next step? Is there something you're hoping to find? A dream you hope to see fulfilled? A word you need to hear?

We know, as the Magi did, that the journey can at times be difficult, the way forward blurry, the road at times treacherous. There is even a hint of danger in this wonderful Epiphany story. The Magi are warned in a dream not to return to Herod. As the story unfolds later in Matthew, we learn that Herod will do everything he can to destroy Jesus, who he sees as a threat to his power. So Matthew is not offering a sugar-coated fairy tale for his readers then, nor for us now.

What he wants us to know is that for those who will step out onto the path, who will brave the journey - there is a star, the celestial Christ that will guide your path. There are dreams that will help you make decisions about the way to go. There are still prophecies about the promises God has made to bring light into the shadowy places of the world. There still are experiences of meeting Jesus and seeing something of the fulfillment of those promises. Traveling mercies.

Finally, a blessing for the journey:

**For Those Who Have Far to Travel: *An Epiphany Blessing***

If you could see  
the journey whole  
you might never  
undertake it;  
might never dare  
the first step  
that propels you  
from the place  
you have known  
toward the place  
you know not.

Call it  
one of the mercies  
of the road:  
that we see it  
only by stages  
as it opens  
before us,  
as it comes into  
our keeping  
step by  
single step.

There is nothing  
for it  
but to go  
and by our going  
take the vows  
the pilgrim takes:

to be faithful to  
the next step;  
to rely on more  
than the map;  
to heed the signposts  
of intuition and dream;  
to follow the star  
that only you  
will recognize;

to keep an open eye  
for the wonders that  
attend the path;  
to press on  
beyond distractions  
beyond fatigue  
beyond what would  
tempt you  
from the way.

There are vows  
that only you  
will know;  
the secret promises  
for your particular path  
and the new ones  
you will need to make  
when the road  
is revealed  
by turns  
you could not  
have foreseen.

Keep them, break them,  
make them again:  
each promise becomes  
part of the path;  
each choice creates  
the road  
that will take you  
to the place  
where at last  
you will kneel

to offer the gift  
most needed—  
the gift that only you  
can give—  
before turning to go  
home by  
another way.

## **Isaiah 60:1-6**

*This passage has lent itself to popular artistic portrayals of the story of the Magi following the star to Bethlehem. The unknown prophet of the Babylonian exile whose poetry and that of some of his disciples was included in Isaiah 40-66 actually expressed this promise of Jerusalem reconstructed after the exiles returned home. He envisioned it as the dawning of a new day and a glorious new beginning which would attract international attention.*

It is written . . .

Arise, shine; for your light has come! The glory of YHWH is rising upon you!  
Though darkness still covers the earth, and dense clouds enshroud the peoples,  
upon you YHWH now dawns, and God's glory will be seen among you!  
The nations will come to your light and the leaders to your bright dawn!  
Lift up your eyes and look around; they are all gathering and coming to you -  
your sons and your daughters journey from afar, escorted in safety;  
you will see them and beam with joy, your heart will swell with pride.  
The riches of the sea will flow to you, and the wealth of the nations will come to you -  
camel caravans will cover your roads, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah;  
everyone in Sheba will come, bringing gold and incense, and singing the praise of YHWH.

## **The Revelation of the Magi: The Lost Tale of the Wise Men's Journey to Bethlehem 11:1-7**

*In the first English translation of an ancient manuscript, probably written in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> or early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, the 'Revelation of the Magi' claims to be the personal testimony of the Magi themselves of the events of Christ's coming. One thing of note is that the 'Revelation of the Magi' stands alone among early Christian writings in its positive appraisal of non-Christian religions.*

It is written . . .

Then, when the time and fulfillment of what was written in the books happened, concerning the revelation of the light of the hidden star, we were indeed thought worthy for it to come in our days and to receive it with joy, as we were commanded by our fathers and as we ourselves read in the books. And each of us saw wondrous and diverse visions that were never before seen by us, but their mysteries were in these books that we were reading. And each one came from his dwelling place according to our ancient custom to ascend the Mountain of Victories (*text missing*) to wash in the Spring of Purification, as we were accustomed. And we saw (*text missing*) in the form of an ineffable pillar of light descending, and it came to rest above the water. And we were afraid and shook when we saw it. And we cannot speak about the brilliance of the star of light, since its radiance was many times greater than the sun, and the sun could not stand out before the light of its rays. And just like the moon looks in the daytime in the days of Nisan, when the sun rises and it is absorbed in its light, so also did the sun seem to us when the star rose over us. And the light of the star, which surpassed the sun, appeared to us ourselves and the sons of our mysteries, but it did not appear to anyone else, because they were removed from its mysteries and its coming. And we rejoiced and glorified, and gave unmeasured thanks to the Father of heavenly majesty that it appeared in our days and we were thought worthy to see it.

## **Matthew 2:1-12**

*Matthew's much-loved story of the visit of the Magi bringing gifts to the infant Jesus may well be an*

*interpretative story, or midrash, based on Isaiah 60. This in no way denies its importance for the early Christians for whom it was written or for us who hear or read it twenty centuries later.*

*It is written . . .*

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn ruler of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay homage."

When Herod heard this, he became greatly disturbed, as did all of Jerusalem. Summoning all the chief priests and religious scholars of the people, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

"In Bethlehem of Judea," they informed him, "for so it was written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the leaders of Judah,  
for from you will come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Herod secretly called for the Magi and found out from them the exact time of the star's appearance. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, after instructing them, "Go and search diligently for the child. When you have found him, bring me word so that I may go and offer homage too."

When they had heard the king, they set out. And there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child lay. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy, and upon entering the house, they found the child with Mary, his mother. They knelt down and paid homage. Then they opened their coffers and presented the child with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.