Sermon for The Feast of the Epiphany

Preached at Christ Episcopal Church in Los Altos, CA on January 6, 2019

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Title: The path is made by walking

Not long ago, I caught up with one of my uncles, who is, as they say, a character. Living in North Florida (which is definitively the South), he is the kind of guy who loves hush puppies and crawdads, fishing and hunting, always telling self-deprecating stories so funny you end up doubled over in laughter with a Marlboro Red perpetually hanging from his lower lip. His family has lived in the same quiet neighborhood for over twenty years and they’ve built strong relationships with their neighbors.

Recently, he and the other guys at the end of their cul de sac took up brewing beer. It all started when one guy gifted the others six packs of his own homebrew, then a private hobby, and piqued the others’ interest. Now, months later, they all toil away in their respective garages, and then every Sunday night get together to play corn hole, tinker, talk, and share their bubbly concoctions. And because these are all Bible-loving Christians, they call themselves (wait for it) the HeBrews.

Now this undertaking is, in some ways, not out of character, though I had trouble imagining him fussing over flavor notes and nuance like my friends here who love craft beer. But as he talked more about this hobby, it became clear that this newfound weekly ritual was about beer, but it was also about so much more than beer. The HeBrews had become the center of his week, the highlight, the time when he and his best friends connected and conspired and caught up. They talked about their lives, their frustrations, their marriages. They even prayed with and for each other. It turns out several of the guys don’t even drink. The gatherings were about home brew, but they were really about friendship. I’ve been thinking, in this season of celebration and gift giving, how gifts are like this: they are about the things we give and receive, but they are also about so much more.

A few months ago, as we began our Stewardship campaign, I opened an adult forum by inviting everyone to turn to a neighbor and talk about a gift they’d received that meant a great deal to them and a gift they’d given that meant a great deal to them. About ten minutes of lively
conversation ensued, at the end of which we gathered back into a circle and I asked if anyone would like to share. Several people shared about how warm and happy they felt recalling these memories, and how much more connected they felt to the person with whom they’d been talking, like they had shared something precious, welcomed them into a tender place. Many people said the gifts discussed were not fancy, expensive, big, or impressive by any worldly standard. They were simply gifts that had touched them. And everyone talked about the curious fact that what they ended up talking about most were the people involved in these exchanges, the relationships implicated: who had given or received this gift and why it had meant so much. The stories that filled those ten minutes were not about the details of the things themselves, but the details of the relationships that gave those things so much meaning.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany. It is, for many Christians around the world, the primary celebration of Christ’s incarnation, surpassing even Christmas. And as today’s Gospel recounts, it recalls a wonderful and richly textured story, with all the trappings of a feature film: the majestic star, an epic journey, an evil villain, the adoration at the manger. But if you look to most dramatic and artistic depictions of this tale, like the one of the cover of your bulletin, this story is often reduced to a story about gifts: a story about gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The only problem is this doesn’t really seem like the central plot in Matthew’s text. The real story, the original story, is infinitely more nuanced and more surprising. This is, indeed, a story about gifts, but not in the way we usually think.

It begins, as all of the accounts of Jesus’ birth do in the Gospels, by situating the story in political history. It was, Matthew tells us, the time of King Herod. Now Herod was the king of Judea and, as such, a representative of the Roman Empire. He was a puppet, straddling the uncomfortable and growing chasm between the Jews he supposedly represented and the occupying force reigning and raging over them. And into this delicate situation – this precarious balance - come wise men from the East, asking about a newborn King of the Jews: disturbing news for Herod. We know precious little about these men. We have no reason to think they were kings, no reason to think there were just three of them, and no idea where “the East” really was (other than, you know, Eastward). For a story that begins with such specificity, it quickly open outward; quickly becomes expansive. It was the time of King Herod and wise men have come to Jerusalem, but these wise ones could have been anyone. They could have been your rowdy uncle or curious cousin. They could have been you or me. And perhaps, in a sense, they are.
So while we may not know where they’re from, we can deduce some important things about them nonetheless: that they were reading the signs around them, that they were attending to the natural world enough to notice a star rising, and were also able, somehow, to recognize that star as a sign. To connect this phenomenon to a wider story. They were observant, thoughtful, and willing. But apparently, even with all the information they got from the star, it wasn’t enough to get them all the way to Bethlehem. It was enough to get them moving - like the tug deep within when we know we are being called out of ourselves, being called to another phase of life, another chapter, some new adventure, whether we are ready or resistant. But as so often happens on our own journeys, they didn’t get all the information at the outset about where precisely they were going. Not at first.

So, instead, they go to Jerusalem. They turn, or perhaps return, to the familiar: a site of strength, a center of knowledge. If they are to make sense of this new thing, they will need to consult the tradition out of which it comes. And doesn’t that also say something about how we walk our own paths? Aren’t we always interpreting what lies ahead in light of the past, figuring out where we are going by rediscovering where we have been?

So the wise men come to Jerusalem, and here they run into Herod: the single person most hostile to the new life God is conspiring to bring into the world. The very same Herod whose own son, just a few chapters from now, will conspire with the Romans to finally put this holy child to death. And incredibly, Herod helps them. Perhaps in spite of himself, figuring he will still be able to control things, manipulate the situation, in ways that will work in his favor. And so this story involves a dubious character casting a dark shadow, who nevertheless shapes their journey, even helps them on their way. How many of our stories include similar people? People who have hurt us, disappointed us, let us down, but whom we can’t leave out when we share about our past because they nevertheless played an important role. People we might wish weren’t a part of our journey except we don’t know who would have become without them.

So the wise men - perhaps oblivious to Herod’s intentions, perhaps not - share that they are looking for this King, but they also name for the first time the real gift they intend to bring him: homage. Not gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but the gift of their devotion and honor, their respect and loyalty. This gift is, by worldly definitions, not all that impressive, but it is the kind of gift we never forget: the gift of connection. The gift of relationship.
With the help of the chief priests and scribes, Herod sends the wise men on their way to Bethlehem, and somehow the star reappears, and this time it is much more helpful, a veritable celestial GPS, guiding them right to a house where Mary, Jesus, and Joseph have apparently moved in a post-census sale on AirBnB. And seeing the star stop above the holy place, these wanderers are filled with joy, and they enter the house and meet Mary and Jesus, and, kneeling, they pay him homage, just as they always intended. They offer the gift they brought with them from the start. While much has been made of the gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and all they might mean – like that they foreshadow important aspects of Jesus’ life - they seem here almost an afterthought, as if mid-bow one realized they were essentially uninvited guests, elbowed the others and whispered, “Did you bring a bottle of wine? Some flowers? A fruitcake? No? Well, geese, let’s see what we have in the camel sacks. I suppose these things, random as can be, will have to do.”

They have finally found the child whose star they observed at its rising, but their journey, like that of every pilgrim, is not over. They got where they were going but they still have got to get home. Bethlehem is, in a sense, another beginning, as it always is for us: the beginning of the journey back, a journey that will be strange and unfamiliar, not only because they have been warned in a dream not to return to Jerusalem, but because they have been too changed, too transformed, to take the same road. There is, ultimately, no going back, even in returning to their own country.

So, yes, this is a story about the giving of gifts: gifts of homage, gifts of things, but it is also, ultimately, about so much more: it is the story not only of the gifts given by the wise men but of the gifts they received. It is at its heart a story about God’s great gift – God’s greatest gift - not only to the wise men, the Jews, or the HeBrews, but to the world, to all the people of every nation: the gift of the life of God’s son. The gift of God drawing near to us, kneeling, stooping, bowing, even, to express God’s own devotion, love and loyalty to us: a motley crew of creatures, if ever there was: as wild and diverse a cast of characters as can be imagined. It is the story of a God who gifts us with divine presence, with insight and imagination, who offers signs and stepping stones, who conspires to turn our hearts and take us home.

No wonder we tell this story over and over again. The story of the gifts given and the gifts received. No wonder it fills us with awe and wonder, with gratitude and longing. No wonder it inspires and encourages us, challenges and changes us. It is, after all, a story about
gifts, and in that it is a story about so much more than the offerings themselves: it is about the relationship that gives those gifts their meaning, a relationship that calls us up and out of our ordinary lives to draw ever closer to a God who always drawing closer to us. It is, indeed, the adventure of a lifetime – even of our lifetime. Amen.