

The Journey

First Congregational Church Branford

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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This part of the Book of Isaiah is situated in the sixth century before Christ, as the exiles from Babylonia return to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was in ruins. *But, Isaiah calls them to look for the good.* And, when Israel finally lifts its eyes from despair, it will not believe what it sees! Jerusalem had thought itself abandoned, but now others are making the journey to be in Jerusalem.

Sidebar - these aren't easy words to say as our Hebrew brothers and sisters have been terrorized in New York. Anti-semitism across the globe happens every day. It's scary how much hatred there is for our Jewish part of the family... there's a lot of hatred, period - with a possible threat of war now. In our bulletin quote, Howard Thurman wrote, *to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people.* We pray for peace today. Lord, hear our prayer.

Returning to this scripture and the Jews, we must believe that the very Jewish Isaiah calls out to his family today *to bear light in the darkness.* We read today's scripture with an eye on the Hebrew community of 2,600 years ago, and we read it with the other eye on our Jewish friends of today:

Hear Isaiah prophesy: Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms. Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been

born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage. 'When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage. '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 was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Word of God for the people of God.

This Hispanic stole was a gift around 13 years ago. I wore it last Sunday, and on my journey through Pilgrim Hall on the way to worship I was with some fellow travelers, one of whom said something, and I responded by looking down at the stole and saying, *yes, that's just like the journey to Bethlehem*. That was the first time I noticed there's an actual road on the stole. I hadn't seen that in 13 years.

I appreciate the word, journey - *traveling from one place to another*. Maybe I'm drawn to the word because I'm an interim minister! But, all of us are always on some kind of journey - from youth to adulthood, career, marriage and family, health, retirement; and, there's the journey you're on with God.

(pointing to stole):

This journey begins with the cross, as a sign that Christ *was in the beginning with God, in whom all things came into being*. Then we go down the road a little and we have the angel who announces the good news - *there's the star from the get-go - the sign - the birth of the Messiah*. Joseph and Mary would be here on the road to Bethlehem, and here they are with their baby Jesus under a palapa, with

animals close by. This is the baby Jesus in a traditional Mexican baby basket with the sun rising over him. We see the magi have begun their journey to Bethlehem because they saw the star rising, that *omnipresent* star! Down the road, out in the fields were the shepherds with their sheep. And, then later on, the new family had to be on the run like refugees because King Herod was going to kill their son. Actually, it looks like Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem - down here instead of here. I guess you could say it's the artist's prerogative to tell the story! Just like all four gospel writers told the story their way! The point is, it's all there - the cross, the angel, the star, the parents, the baby, the shepherds, the sheep, the magi. Jesus' journey will continue and many more pictures added. I was thinking, you might consider what pictures would be on a stole of *your* life. What would you choose to display to tell your story?

Epiphany means the manifestation of Christ to the Gentile world, represented by the magi. It's the season of light, of *following* the light, and *bearing* the light. The season is 7 weeks this year and each Sunday the scripture passages will be marked by signs that point to the divinity of Christ. Next Sunday's sign, *which could be another picture on the stole*, will be the baptism of Christ with the appearance of the heavenly dove as Jesus rises from his baptism and God says, *this is my son, my beloved, listen to him*.

For our Magi, the lighted star was their sign that a divine being had been born. And, they were compelled to follow the star. That's what we love about the magi. They followed, boy did they follow! The distance from Persia, what is now *Iran*, would've been a thousand miles to Bethlehem. At the least, it would've taken them a few months by camel to get there. Some say it took 2 years for them to get to the child - because the scripture says, *on entering the house* - they were no longer in the stable.

These wise men were actually priestly philosophers and scholars from Persia, who were experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. They may have also served the rulers of Persia. The Western church decided there were three magi. The Eastern Church says there were 12. Other traditions recount there were *many* magi who made the long journey. The *point* of the story is that the Magi represent God opening the gospel to the rest of the world to journey to Jerusalem and know the one true Hebraic God, Yahweh, El Shaddhai.

I believe God looked far and wide for just the right foreigners to make this revelation. What God found in those magi was, first of all, a knowledge of the stars, right?! - they had to understand *what* they were seeing! But, God also knew... these magi were pure of heart, humble, and would have the willingness to follow a star, to worship and adore a baby in a palapa.

Would we do *whatever* the star asks of us? Journey a thousand miles on a camel? Find a new job, volunteer for something new, journey to church *every*

Sunday!, forgive someone, get into a 12-step program of recovery for alcohol, drug, gambling or sex addiction, feed the hungry at the Food Pantry, find a way to support refugees, pray for peace.... Wherever the star leads, right?? To look up and wherever it has stopped, look and see - maybe that is where you're supposed to be, doing what God wants you to do. Follow the star.

I adore the last three words in the reading, *by another road*. The magi had to go by another road to escape Herod. In 2020, we may need to go by another road. I read a marvelous quote - *every next level of your life will demand a different you...* Like when you became a parent. You had to go by another road. *Every next level of your life will demand a different you*. When you've lost someone, the old life, the old road isn't going to fit the new one. *It's a whole new journey, isn't?* When you retire, it demands growing into a different you. If your health is such that you may not return to the health you once had, it's going to demand a different you. When I leave the church it's going to demand a different you as you adjust to a new minister. You'll have a new journey, going by another road.

God bless you on each journey you're on in your life. You can be sure that that star is above you *always*, watching, pointing, shining light - it says, yes, go in this direction - *follow the light*. Go where there's light. Trust the light.

As you *follow the light*, may it make *you* shine so you can help illumine this dark world. Peace. Shine. Amen.