

On Being a Pilgrim
Psalm 72: 1-14
Matthew 2:1-12
January 5, 2020
Epiphany Sunday

Arise, shine--for your light has come! I will admit I am one who hates to see Christmas trees on the curbside on any December day after the 25th. How many of you still have your tree up? I am one who keeps the tree up and the lights on until Epiphany. I would keep the lights on even longer if Mark would let me. I love how light in the darkness makes a statement of hope for the world. I especially like the candles in windows to help travelers find their way and offer a safe place to dwell. That is what the star does in our story today. The light of the star prompts the Wise Men to arise and go in search of the new King of the Jews.

While the story is about the incredible sign that is the star, it is also about kings. But not the wise men or three kings as the hymn sings. Herod is the bad king and Jesus is the good, infant king. The king mentioned in the Old Testament reading today is good, all the things that every king should be, yet only one can be that good--and that is the Messiah King. We hear echoes of this psalm in the story from Matthew's gospel as gifts are given and the King is worshipped by all kings and served by all nations. That would be heavenly, would it not? One king is hostile, the other is humble. One king is worried, the other king is worshipped.

Jesus Christ, the King, is the light of the world, the one who comes to shine in the darkness. Light is needed for the Wise Men to find their way to the newborn king. When they draw nearer, they stop to ask King Herod as if they have lost their way, but if anyone is lost, it is Herod. He becomes furious and tries to hide his fear behind a promise to also worship the newborn king. Herod is the darkness. He makes the story real because only a king like Herod would kill innocent children to achieve his self-centered desires. Herod loses his way. All who are like Herod will also lose their way. We still know this today as we watch the final StarWars and wonder about the possibility of war.

The wise men or Magi as I prefer to call them, were not kings, but most likely astrologers or Zoroastrian priests, men who studied the stars and knew the Zoroastrian prophecies about a coming king of the Jews. When compared and contrasted with others in the gospel of Matthew, we might view the Magi not as wise men either, for later in Matthew it is the Pharisees who are called wise men, and who do not see or understand.ⁱ Better yet these Magi are more like the infants who have received revelation from the Fatherⁱⁱ and who praise God with their voices.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Magi are also pilgrims in the earliest understanding of the word—"a traveler (literally one who has come from afar) on a journey to a holy place, typically a physical journey (often on foot) to some place of special significance to the adherent of a particular religious belief system."^{iv} The Magi traveled far to follow the star—to come, to see, and to worship the King.

Isn't that what we do every Sunday here? We come to see and worship the King. So like the Magi, we already know the King is born. The King is already here. The expectation is to see this wonder-filled thing that has happened. And they see a star like no other in the sky—they witness that creation is revealing the birth of a new King. So they pilgrim together. They travel in expectation. And then they lose sight of the star and ask for help. It is dark where they are. "In Bethlehem" is the answer. They traverse on and find the infant king and worship him. This kind of worship they perform is one of humility before the king, they prostrate themselves as low as they can go to show reverence for the King of the Jews, who is in that moment the King of humanity and of the whole creation.

What happens next is where we are today. What do we expect now that Christmas is over and we have seen the King and worshipped him? What do we do when the Herods of this world distract us from worshipping the King and sharing his love? What do we do when Herod kills the children?

The choice for us is like it was for the Magi. We can return home the same way as any tourist, or any follower of Herod does. Or we can return home another way as the Magi pilgrims do because they pay attention to their dreams. In his book *The Art of Pilgrimage—The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* author Phil Cousineau describes the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim as he tells the story of his very first travel trip being named a pilgrimage by a neighbor in his apartment building.

Phil was planning a solo trip of his childhood fantasy to see and explore the world of the pharaohs. His neighbor Ahmet was from Egypt and asked him why he wanted to travel to his homeland. Phil told Ahmet that he had seen an exhibition of "The Art of Egypt's Sun Kings" and it haunted him. He now wanted to see it with his own eyes. He also noted a photograph in which he remembered the face of archaeologist Howard Carter when he opened the tomb of King Tutankhamen. He described Carter's face as one of "radiance from the revelation of a sacred mystery." Ahmet appreciated Phil's response and gave him these words:

**Be Safe and Well
Peace, Love, Courage**

He told Phil that "This is the traditional farewell among my people for those leaving on a pilgrimage." Phil just thought he was going on a trip to fulfill his childhood dream, but from that moment on he began to think of his travel as pilgrimage. As time passed on his pilgrimage, Phil ventured into the Valley of the Kings and came across a group of Bedouins sitting in the shade of towering date trees. It was there in the midst of these strangers turned friends that Phil began to understand that a tourist is only interested in seeing the sights, but a pilgrim not only sees but also experiences the holy, the sacredness of those places. The pilgrim is immersed in awe "on the move and is perpetually a soul in wonder."^v

Phil described some of his fellow travelers whom he would say are tourists: an old friend who spent three days at Stonehenge and felt nothing, an Australian wanderer who spent five years

on a 15 mile road and said he hadn't really been impressed; and people who have traveled on cruises to exotic places and never disembarked. These are tourists.

Through all these various incidents of frustrated, weary, and unimpressed tourists he said their faces and voices betray the longing for something more than their travels were giving them. He compared it to a story he read years ago in the *Irish Times* by a Connemara man after he was arrested for a car accident. "There were plenty of onlookers, but no witnesses."^{vi}

Pilgrims are witnesses. They are involved. "In the words of the Rev. Peter J. Miano, founder of the Society for Biblical Studies,

"Tourists pass through places,
but pilgrims let places pass through them,
allowing their hearts to be changed."^{vii}

They are different than before. I think the distractions of greatly commercialized Christmas have sparked the same kind of tourists in the faith. "There were plenty of onlookers, but no witnesses." So this is my call to all of us to be pilgrims rather than tourists.

- Advent is about preparing for the Light that is coming to us. A pilgrim prepares for the journey by packing light.
- Christmas is about the Light that is Emmanuel, God with us. A pilgrim enjoys being with God, the Light.
- Epiphany is about following the Light that helps us find the way to the King so we may worship the King and never be the same again. A pilgrim follows the vision and dreams of God, traveling lightly.
- And in the worship is where God makes witnesses of us, where we become pilgrims with the courage to go home another way to take the light into the world and share it with others.

That is exactly what I hope you will do with your StarGifts.

- Prepare with prayer about your StarGift asking God to empower you with the gift.
- Dwell in the Presence of God with us. Invite God to love you into this gift.
- Pilgrim with God, opening your eyes to persons, places, and ways you are to share your gift.

This exercise is the second definition of a pilgrim—"the experience of life in the world (considered as a period of exile) or to the inner path of the spiritual person from a state of wretchedness to a state of beatitude."^{viii} In other words nothing will ever be the same.

Once the Magi worshipped the King, nothing was ordinary for them from that time on. Jesus Christ came to gather all people unto himself. Christ gathers us in ways we least expect it—a devastating failure, an incredible success, an opportunity of a lifetime, a terminal illness, a discovered cure, an unexpected death, a long-awaited birth, a new friendship, a lost job, a

found love, a restless soul, a StarGift, a shared meal at a welcome table. “But no matter the means by which we come to worship, once we have bowed down, once we have given of ourselves as the Magi gave their treasures, we find that it has always been Christ who lights the way.”^{ix}

Epiphany starts tomorrow, Pilgrims. First stop is the table of the Lord for sustenance for the journey ahead to shine forth our StarGifts as we share them to worship the King.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 11:25 NRS At that time Jesus said, "I thank¹ you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants;

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 21:16 NRS and said to him, "Do you hear what these are saying?" Jesus said to them, "Yes; have you never read, 'Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?'"

^{iv} "Pilgrim" on Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Pilgrim&oldid=931423841> accessed 2020.01.02.

^v Cousineau, Phil, *The Art of Pilgrimage—The Seeker's Guide to Making Travel Sacred* (San Francisco, CA: Conari Press, 1998), xviii—xx.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, xxiii.

^{vii} "A pilgrim is not a tourist" on *See The Holy Land, 2017* at <https://www.seetheholyland.net/a-pilgrim-is-not-a-tourist/> accessed 2020.01.02.

^{viii} *Ibid.*

^{ix} Buckwalter Smith, Kendra, "Epiphany Experiences" at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Buckwalter Smith is the Worship Coordinator at PTS. <https://www.pts.edu/UserFiles/File/resources/Publications/Epiphany%202017/Epiphany%20Experience%20-%20Kendra%20Smith.pdf> accessed 2020.01.02.