

Sunday January 6, 2019
Kirk of St James
Sermon "Courage of the Magi"
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Do you have any moments in your life that at the time felt insignificant but then later looking back were actually rather informative or enlightening? I have one memory from my childhood like that. My family was in Sydney visiting my mother's side of the family. One day while my sister and I were outside playing one of our cousins came over and said she had a contest and the winner would get a prize. Interested we listened to the terms. Whoever was the first one to run around my great aunt Eddie's house would win the prize. I was immediately thrown into a quandary. I didn't know Aunt Eddie, so I wondered if A) I would get in trouble for being on her property? B) Would she yell at me C) was there anything weird behind her house? I stood there going through every possible question and query I could when I suddenly realized my younger sister without any hesitation had not only run around the house but was now wondering if she should do it a second time. I hadn't budged an inch. My sister was presented a bouquet of lilacs and pronounced the winner. I desperately asked my cousin if I could try it now that I knew it was okay, but the moment had passed, and I had missed it. I would have been a terrible wise man.

Today we are celebrating two very special things in our church family. We are celebrating epiphany, and the launch of our capital campaign. While I am going to speak about both I wanted to start with the wise men and the hope they represent in the larger Christian story. While most of our nativity scenes have the three wise men (or kings) present, we know that they did not arrive the night of Jesus' birth. However, we include them in our nativities because they play such an important role in what Jesus came to earth to do. These stargazing outsiders had a place in the story of the Messiah.

These mysterious magi stir the imagination both in terms of who they were and where they came from. "While historically they have often been portrayed as from Arabia or Persia, they most likely travelled from Babylon which was considered the seat of ancient astronomical

studies. These astrologers studied the heavens for portents of significant events." It is well attested by ancient writers that these magi travelled west to visit important kings. They were attuned to the world and the events that were going on around them. In fact, they are so attentive that when they meet Herod, they say "we saw the star at its rising." It was not something they just noticed one evening when one of them elbows the other and asks "hey, have you noticed that star before? I wonder where it came from?" From the moment it appeared in the sky they were aware of its presence. Then they did something remarkable. They felt so convicted that it was important they loaded up animals for the journey, chose gifts to carry with them, and most likely organized a caravan of servants and others to travel with them. It is easy to underestimate this moment and its importance. The magi's willingness to take a risk, to journey, and to seek becomes an important part of the Christmas story.

I often go back to that moment with my sister, where I stand there weighing out the positives and negatives, trying to figure out if it is worth it, or if I should take the risk. The magi never appear to question their journey. Instead they immediately set out. They are seekers. They trust that the journey will be worth it, even if they don't understand it and there is no guaranteed outcome. They know something important has happened and they want to bear witness to it. Meanwhile Herod and the best advisors in the land have completely missed what has happened on their doorstep. When the magi finally fill him in on the importance of the star, he calls the Sanhedrin and best minds in the country together and none of them know what he is talking about. When Herod hears of the momentous event instead of reacting as the Magi do, he withdraws in fear, he lashes out in anger, and fails to act in a way that in any way impacts his life in a positive way.

Meanwhile the Magi find the King of the Jews, and they offer gifts worthy of a King. They give the best of what they have. I don't mean just the gold, frankincense and myrrh. I mean the time and dedication it took to get there, the faith to persevere and the wisdom to evade Herod. Through their dedication their presence is seen as a celebration of the sharing of the gospel with the gentiles. Throughout the Bible God constantly uses the humble, the outsider,

and the broken to share his good news and this is no different. For here the outsiders--the magi, have the faith and tenacity to do what no one else does.

It takes courage to start out on a journey like the magi did so long ago. That is part of the reason we chose to launch the capital campaign on this particular day. We pick up on their theme of hope and tenacity. I have spent so much time thinking about what to say today and the words would not come out the way I wanted. So, I will just speak honestly. When I first arrived here you had taken a risk on me. A new grad fresh out of college, who looked about 12. I am certain there were weeks where you wondered about taking a risk on me. Not long after I arrived the idea of doing the building audit arose. While it is a scary thing to undertake when you are new to a church the reality is, we are to be good stewards of what we have been given and this was the best way to do that. I know the process has taken a while, longer than we may have thought but part of that is because we are a congregation who wants to do what is right and best and we put a lot of time into looking at our options and possibilities. We talked to as many experts as we could, we interviewed other churches, and we had countless meetings. Finally, at general assembly this past June one of the people I respect most at National Office said to me "Amanda, there is no church who has been so diligent with their research." I think it is was also a gentle reminder that much like my sister and I that day a decision had to be made. And we have.

Today we start out on a journey much like the wise men thousands of years ago. We have studied, we have been seeking, and now it is time for the part that takes the most courage--to begin. I know when we do anything new like we are that there are always questions and anxieties. There is also excitement and wonder at the possibilities. It is part of that holy and human mystery. I don't know about you but sometimes I find it hard to give God space to work. Sometimes it feels like everything weighs on us to succeed or we are not quite sure how things are going to look. I am certain the magi must have pondered questions like these as they made their long journey with no real guarantee of when it was going to end and what they might discover but, they trusted that it was worth it.

I know I don't speak about money from the pulpit, and in avoiding that topic it means I have also not done what I should have with stewardship. I have been cautious on those things during my ministry because I never wanted people to feel like that was the thing that mattered. I remember when my cousin started going to church regularly a few years ago he asked me if that was the only thing preachers talked about because that was one of the only topics his minister ever seemed to cover. That stuck with me. More than anything church is about our personal relationship with God and with the community around. It is about the joy and laughter we share. It is about the sorrow we bear with one another. Church is about life. I know we are setting out on this campaign to fix up and improve our building but, it is about more than that. It is about a community who loves one another and loves God. It is about being home with one another. It is also about the possibilities for the future. We will be working not only on the building but also on congregational renewal.

You must know that I trust in our process, I trust in you, and I trust in God who has been with us every step of the way and who I am certain has surprises in store that we cannot yet imagine. Whatever happens we have our faith and we have one another and at the end of the day I give thanks for that. You are an incredible congregation. You welcome others, you love, you care, and you make a difference in the world around you as you live out your calling as Disciples of Christ. One of the best things that could have happened to a young grad fresh out of school and looking like they were about 12 was getting to be with you. You know there are a lot of days I feel anxious about this baby coming and how it will shake up my life, my routines, and my sleep. There are a ton of anxieties, and questions and concerns. But more than any of it is the potential and excitement. I feel the same way about this campaign. I am nervous and anxious but more than anything I am excited to see what God will do with us. He has been working with us for nearly two hundred years and I know he is not done with us yet--we still have things to do! So, may we have courage like the magi as we set out together on this brand-new adventure together!