

“Something Magical Happened That Day”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

For Epiphany Sunday January 7, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Ephesians 3:1-12

Matthew 2:1-12

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

If you want to make something seem important and special, coin a phrase or word for it. If you want to make it very special, use an ancient language as the basis for that phrase or word. About 60% of scientific terms and probably even more of anatomical terms of the body come from Greek. To show why that is powerful just think of referring to someone as an “A-type” personality, versus saying that he is an “Alpha male.” All of a sudden images of power and circumstance become clearer.

Various translations as to who were the visitors on Epiphany – “kings” or “Wise Men” or even “Visitors from the east” – fail to capture the mystery of the term from Greek: “Magi.”

Now Magi were unique individuals, and they include in their being aspects that are displayed by an image generated from all of the above terms. Yet the mystery of their presence can only be captured, even if, at best, just in part, when the word used to denote them is itself imbued with mystery and magic.

Magi were people with unique talent and insights. They combined the best of scientific, religious, spiritual, psychological, even magical thinking. They were the renaissance creatures of their day long before the renaissance was a gleam in a historian’s eye.

That is one of the reasons we cannot dismiss or jump over the role of the Magi in Jesus’ birth. They symbolize a significant reference to the east, a place often associated with unique wisdom, and so the inclusiveness shown by Jesus to engage in a worldly spirituality that went beyond the Jewish faith that was so foundational to his teachings and being.

The Magi also bring together science and religion – a necessity today as we see all kinds of struggles with religion and science being at odds with one another. Yet even in the struggle there are many who see that faith in God and belief in scientific principles are not so far apart as some in our culture would suggest.

Years ago as we anticipated the Y2K event in the western world, Margaret Werheim, author of the book *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace*, remarked in the *Tampa Tribune*: “We need to correct the idea that a person cannot believe in science and religion at once. This is important because at the beginning of this century many people thought religion would die out, but the opposite has happened.”

I found it interesting that Ms. Werheim put the order as “believe in science and religion,” but the truth is it always has been that way. Genesis begins with a story of creation trying to understand how the world was created. God is intimately linked to that story, yet it begins as a quest for what happened and how it unfolded. The story of creation is not scientific writing, but it is exploring the nature of the world as modern scientists do.

Aristotle wrote a book on Metaphysics which is an early tome on philosophy and the philosophical approach to the world, but the term comes from two words: “meta” and “physika” which literally means “after physics.” Aristotle could only speak about metaphysics and spiritual issues “after” he had written on the natural world and discussed “physical” matter.

The Magi are in that tradition. Their interest in religious matter came after their interest in the natural world and scientific insight, natural matter if you will, but that is not to diminish religion’s importance to their lives, their thinking, and their very being. And in many ways, their outlook to the world has a significant impact on the way that Jesus dealt with the world and people within it.

The gospel stories that we will read in the weeks ahead before Lent talk about the teachings and healings of Jesus. He responds to people’s needs; his life is impacted by what people have to say, and the needs that they identify. So it should be for us all. Living our faith is not a separate, isolated experience. It impacts all of our life, just as all of our life has an impact on our faith and its expression.

The Magi came because they followed a course of action directed by what they saw in the sky, influenced by natural phenomena. Yet they also bring a sense of magic to the whole event.

Why do we decorate trees, bring in stables and mangers, reveal starry lights and share floral crosses? We, too, know that a sense of the magic of the season enhances what we experience in our faith journey at this time of year.

Speaking with a friend last night my ears curled when she spoke about her day. As a devout Roman Catholic who sings in her parish choir, she had been to mass twice yesterday – for a funeral and for Saturday evening mass. As she chatted, she remarked: “It is discouraging because now I am standing in my living room, naked.”

The pause left me wondering what was coming next, but after a pause she continued: “naked from all of the Christmas decorations having been put away.” It was the room that was naked, sans tree and lights and decorations and cards on ribbons and special candles on end tables.

The Magi allow us to see a connection from our decorations and celebrations of the past few weeks to our daily lives throughout the year. We have a chance to make a difference, and an opportunity to see in all of life God’s truth breaking forth into our lives.

Something magical happened on that first Epiphany day, and we hold faith that the magic of the moment will be repeated in our lives in our time: yes, even in this year and in this space.

May we not be disappointed.