**Sermon "Finally the Magi Have Arrived! & How is God calling us to spread the light of Christ?”**

**January 5, 2025**

**Squamish United Church**

**Gospel Reading:** Read by Pete Spiller: Matthew 2: 1-12 – The Visit of the Magi

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise menfrom the East came to Jerusalem, 2asking, “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.” 3When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiahwas to be born. 5They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

6‘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 shepherdmy people Israel.’”

7Then Herod secretly called for the wise menand learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8Then 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.” 9When 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. 10When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11On 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.

12And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

 Happy Epiphany Sunday! Our focus is the story of the Magi, the guiding star, and their giving of gifts to the Christ child, their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Our *particular* focus today is to answer the question, what are we to do now that we have heard the Christmas story through the eyes of Mary? What is our unique vision and how are we going to spread the light of Christ in the world?

 Epiphany Sunday marks the end of the 12 days of Christmas and it is a critical celebration. We know this because the liturgical colour is white, a symbol of Christ so this one is not to be missed. Today is the day when we get to add the wise men to the creche. The day when Christ is manifested to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi. Up until the 19th century, the Day of Epiphany was more important than Christmas Day. It was often called the festival of the three kings. The gifts given by the wise men were symbolic of Jesus’ birth; the gold representing his royal standing, frankincense his divine birth and myrrh his mortality. The Epiphany season lasts for six Sundays and are a time of manifestation that leads to Transfiguration Sunday.

There are several key phrases to pay attention to in today’s scripture. The first is that the Magi were journeying to see a CHILD. The star stopped “over the place where the CHILD was.” The King James Version says, “young child”. You see, despite the songs, poetry and beautiful nativity scenes, there were NO MAGI, WISE MEN or KINGS of any sort on the night of Jesus’s birth. The only people to witness the birth of Jesus Christ were his mother Mary, the shepherds plus some animals. It is likely that the Innkeepers wife was the midwife so she would have been present after she sent Joseph on his way to the local tavern to wait it out. How fitting that the one who would be the lamb of God should be welcomed by the shepherds. “From Jesus shall be a shepherd tomy people Israel.” So, for those of you who still have your nativity scenes in your homes…then today is the day to add the wise men. Today is the day that their gifts and ours can be brought forward.

(ask Three WOMEN to come forward carry the Wise Men figurines!)

 Set in the opening pages of Matthew’s Gospel, the account foreshadows what will become clear in the narrative yet to unfold. These Magi are Gentiles from distant lands. Yet they recognize the importance of this child and who he will become. This story in the Gospel of Matthew introduces us to the announcement that this child, Jesus, is to be Savior and Lord for Israelite and Gentile alike. In this story, we also find the Magi who are an example of what it means to welcome the Christ child. The Magi undertake an arduous journey from afar, compelled by their earnest desire to come before this newborn king.

The actual journey of these people could easily have taken a long time. It would appear from Matthew 2:7 that the star, which the Magi had seen, had appeared at the moment of Jesus’ birth. But they had arrived after the birth. If they saw the star at the moment of Jesus’ birth, then it would have taken many months for the wise men to arrive.

We should note that Herod wanted to know the exact time the star had appeared, presumably so he could pinpoint the exact moment of this special child’s birth. He later proceeded to have all baby boys killed who were two years old and under (Matthew 2:16). This would indicate that Jesus had been born up to two years previously. So, the Magi did not arrive at the same time as the shepherds, who arrived the same day as the birth (Luke 2:11). Indeed, Jesus’ family was no longer in a stable; the Magi enter “the house” and NOT the stable.

Upon seeing Jesus, the wise men worship him. Their actions parallel those of others throughout the gospels who respond to Jesus with almost immediate trust and devotion. We will do well to remember this story, for it announces that Jesus is Savior to all humankind and celebrates those who embrace Jesus with eyes and hearts of faith.

 At the same time, it is also important to note that in our remembrance of the Magi we have tended to add several elements to their story that are actually **not** found in the Gospel of Matthew, the only gospel which tells us about them. In Christian tradition, the Magi are commonly regarded as Kings, even though there is nothing in Matthew’s Gospel to suggest this. We also commonly remember the Magi as being three in number, but quantity is never mentioned in the gospel. The gospel simply says wise men. And we all know that where there are men, there are always women and children, so it was more likely wise people. We can thank John Henry Hopkins JR. for that the king’s reference for it was he who composed the Christmas Carol “We Three Kings" in 1857. He decided that the Magi were not only men but wise ones at that. The Gospel of Matthew doesn’t tell us either one of those things. There many have been hundreds of men and women who recognized the significance of this birth and made the journey together. Might not sound as good to sing “we a thousand wise people”.

 Many theologians have resisted the identification of the magi as kings, but it is the identification of the magi as "wise men" that may ultimately be more problematic: a major theme in Matthew is that God **does not** reveal things to "the wise and intelligent" (11:25). But rather to the meek and lowly. If the magi are not kings or wise men, what are they? In Matthew's narrative, kings are contrasted with servants (20:25-28) and wise men are contrasted with infants (11:25). The magi in Matthew 2 are depicted as persons who do as they are instructed, who seek no honor for themselves, and who gladly humble themselves, kneeling before a woman and a child. Clearly, they fit the image of servants better than that of kings. So perhaps we should sing, “We three servants of Orient are.”

 So, what now? What do we do with this Advent, Christmas and Epiphany story? Have you seen new things this year…do you have a newfound understanding of waiting, expectation, hope and delivery? Each year, this journey is meant to help us to discern what our collective mission will be moving forward and how each of us can play a vital role in being Christ's hands and feet in the world. So, the question is, how are we going to carry the light of Christmas forward and take it out into the world? What is your vision for this church in the world? What are WE going to accomplish in 2025? (pause…)

I would like you to each take three minutes to think about one thing that you would like our church to do this year. One concrete program, group, ministry or action that we can set in motion to carry Christ’s light into the world. One gift that we can share with the world. Once you have it the idea, write a few words on the papers that are being handed around. It can be one small task or a very big dream… Don’t get wrapped up in the how or whether it will work or if there is money or space. Don’t be afraid, God is with us. Let’s reach for the stars.

Give 3 minutes of silence.

Thank you for your dreams…we will collect them now and we will post them next week as the foundation of what our vision might be for the coming year. Thanks be to God. Amen

**Let us pray…**Scripture tells us that following their encounter with Jesus, the Magi had to find a different path home. So, it is with us. We, too, will be changed by our spiritual encounters with God and our resulting visions. May all our actions bring glory to God! Glory to the Creator who inspires us with vision! Glory to Christ who teaches us how to live out our vision! Glory to the Spirit who breathes life into our vision! Let us receive and reveal God’s vision through the grace of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. May the blessing of the Holy One be with us all. Amen!

**Prayers of the People**

O Holy One, we gather here in this house of prayer to give thanks and to celebrate your incredible presence in our midst. We lift up to you our songs of praise, the prayers of our hearts, the gifts of our resources. We gather here in your name, ready to listen to your presence stirring within our lives—moving us, shaping us, leading us. God of Grace, we offer to you our lives, in the name of Jesus, our light.

Gracious God we lift up all the names and situations that have been shared this day…

We ask for your blessings, your healing and your love.

Gracious God, deliver us from evil. Deliver us as we share with you the moments when we turn away from you, and from each other—our neighbours, families, friends, co-workers, strangers, and enemies; as we share with you the moments when we abandon our own integrity and faith for whatever reasons; as we share with you what we hoard for ourselves as if we can protect what we think of as our stuff from being shared in your name. In silence, we share with you our prayers of confession....

**Assurance**

God of reconciled relationships, God who knew us before we were formed in our mother’s womb and who will remember us long after we pass from this earth, forgive us, restore us, renew us. Let your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven, so that we will realize humility to accept forgiveness from you, from others, and for ourselves. Share with us the courage to forgive one another so that we can break bread together, reconciled in your name. Now and forever we trust in you and you alone, in you in whom we find rest for our soul. In thanksgiving and praise we pray as Jesus taught us… Our Mother and Father who art in heaven… Amen