

How many of you did some overnight traveling during the holiday season? We made three trips to Ohio between Thanksgiving and the New Year so spent a fair amount of time on the highway. While we were traveling I often distracted myself by checking Facebook and Instagram to enjoy pictures of friends and family in cars, on airplanes, and in faraway destinations. I was especially intrigued by the journey of one Calvin College student, the daughter of a colleague, who traveled alone on the train from Grand Rapids to La Junta, Colorado, an eighteen hour trip through seven states—talk about a journey!

The holidays involve traveling journeys for a lot of us or we become the hosts of those who are traveling. From Thanksgiving until the New Year, folks traverse afar, over the river and through the woods, headed for particular destinations, because those are the places where loved ones are gathering. And even though the way is often familiar, many of us still use our navigation devices to guide us because they warn of us of unforeseen hazards and redirect us on faster routes. Our phones emit a soft glow as they guide us safely towards the ones we love.

Indeed, the first Christmas is a narrative full of travel accounts—some came from fields nearby—the shepherds, others came from neighboring regions—Mary and Joseph who traveled about eighty miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And, then there were the Wise Men who, as was mentioned during the Christmas Eve Service, may have traveled from a region in Persia that was somewhere between 400 and 600 miles away from Bethlehem. And because this is Epiphany Sunday, this is the day we celebrate the Wise Men, their star-guided journey, and the truths they reveal to us about the Christ Child.

*We three kings of orient are, Bearing gifts we traverse afar, Field and fountain, moor and mountain, Following yonder star.*

*O star of wonder, star of night, Star of glorious beauty bright, Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.*

The story of the Wise Men, or Magi, has taken on a life of its own over the course of the last two thousand years. Indeed, I'm embarrassed to admit that it wasn't until this year I learned that nowhere in scripture does it say that there were actually three wise men. It only says "wise men from the East came to Jerusalem." Nothing about there being three. The only mention of three in the scripture is that there were three gifts. But, three gifts could have been brought by two wise men or three gifts could have been brought by twenty wise men. And yet, the legend has developed that there were three Wise Men. Not only has a number been attached, but names, too—Caspar, Balthazar, and Melchior. Again, none of which are in the actual account from scripture but rather evolved from mosaics of the Wise Men Emperor Justinian commissioned for locations in the Italian city of Ravenna in the sixth century. I guess representing them in mosaics bought Justinian naming rights to the Wise Men.

Another detail of the story that gets a little out of line with the actual scriptural account is the time at which the Wise Men arrived in Bethlehem. Scriptures tells us "on entering the house . . ." Not, "on entering the stable . . ." Indeed, astronomical data from the time suggests that the star they followed would have gotten them to Jesus when he was a toddler—not an infant. And yet, I don't know about you but I'm awfully fond of having the Wise Men in my manger scene kneeling next to the shepherds, as if they were all there together within hours of Jesus' birth.

And while that might not be literally true, there is still an important truth to be gained from our popular conception of this mishmash of visitors—at some point the shepherds, the poorest of the poor Jewish peasants,

worshipped Jesus. And, at some point, the Magi, regardless of how many or what their names, the intellectual and cultural spiritual guides of a faraway empire, worshipped Jesus. The journeys they took to get there were very different and yet all of them, in their own ways, Eastern elite or Jewish outcast, left the comfort of what was known and familiar to seek the love of God incarnate in the Christ Child, all of them on a journey to worship the King.

And isn't that just the way of it when it comes to journeys. We often find ourselves being led outside of our comfort zones to encounter new people in new places—people from whom we learn, people who are as different from us as those Wise Men were from those shepherds, and yet people with whom we share the essential truth that we are all children of God, created and beloved by God. Every. Single. One. Of. Us.

*Born a King on Bethlehem's plain, Gold I bring to crown him again, King forever,  
ceasing never, Over us all to reign.*

*O star of wonder, star of night, Star of glorious beauty bright, Westward leading, still  
proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.*

As we contemplate this idea of holiday traveling journeys, we might consider the ways in which they can be understood as metaphors for our life-long spiritual journeys. Indeed, if you've ever driven across Ohio on the turnpike you can attest to the fact that it sort of feels like you're on that road for a lifetime . . . But, unlike our holiday journeys that are primarily focused on the destination—in the case of the Wise Men that manger on Bethlehem's plain—our spiritual journeys are very much about the journey itself. Of course most of us do have a sense that our spiritual journeys are leading us to something beyond our wildest imaginations. We have perceptions about what the *Next Place* we will go after we die will be like or we yearn for the time when God's will is finally done on earth as it is in heaven. While we, like the Wise Men, conceive of some sort of perfect light as a destination, it seems to me that the daily spiritual journey towards that light is topic enough to contemplate on this first Sunday of the New Year, on this Epiphany Sunday.

*Frankincense to offer have I, incense owns a Deity nigh, Pray'r and praising, all men  
raising, Worship him, God most high, oh . . .*

*O star of wonder, star of night, Star of glorious beauty bright. Westward leading, still  
proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.*

*Myrrh is mine: its bitter perfume, Breathes a life of gathering gloom-Sorr'wing, sighing,  
bleeding, dying, Sealed in the stone cold tomb.*

*O star of wonder, star of night, Star of glorious beauty bright, Westward leading, still  
proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.*

The Wise Men brought their gifts of frankincense, gold, and myrrh, all of them powerfully symbolic and foreshadowing the journey Jesus would take in his years on earth. Gold, a symbol of kingship. Frankincense, an incense that was a symbol of divinity. Myrrh, an oil for embalming symbolizing that Jesus was truly incarnate, flesh and blood, Emmanuel, God with us.

The three gifts brings us back around to this idea of three Wise Men, or three magi. Though there is no record of the actual number in scripture, what we do find is the reassurance that there was more than one traveler from the east who followed the star to pay homage to Jesus. After all, magi is the plural form of magus, a word closely

related to the words magician, sorcerer, or astrologer. And in translations that use wise men, it says men, not man.

And so it was that, no matter how many there were, they didn't travel alone and they weren't meant to. Theirs was a long, arduous, and I imagine much more dangerous journey—what with Herod out to get them—than they had imagined. So, too, with our spiritual journeys. We don't travel alone and we're not meant to. The journey is often much longer, arduous, and dangerous than we had imagined it would be. And so we need each other, we're not meant to go it alone. And yet, I think that the idea that we're all on the journey together can be one of the most difficult truths of this story to absorb—especially for those of us who enjoy thinking we are self-sufficient and can go it alone.

This is a point at which the Way of Christ stands in stark contrast to the way of our Western cultural ideals and norms. We idolize stories of folks who pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and yet such a mentality is antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our civil religion has canonized the phrase “The Lord helps those who help themselves”, often even attributing the saying to scripture. But, “the Lord helps those who help themselves” is not in the Bible and is, again, antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even the Messiah became dependent and vulnerable—being born as a baby, needing the care of his mother and his father. We were created to help each other—not to go it alone and expect others to do the same.

Not only is “the Lord helps those who help themselves” not true, that mentality leads to further victimizing victims of systemic oppression and injustice, it makes some folks think they can excuse themselves from the responsibility of helping the least among us, people like the shepherds in this story. There are those among us who cannot help themselves and it is clearly our duty, responsibility, and opportunity as followers of Christ to help them. I am grateful to serve a church that, while faithful in its stewardship and judicious in its spending, never hesitates to help a person in need and actively seeks out ways to reach out to serve this community in which we find ourselves. You seem intent on letting folks know that they need not journey through times of struggle and hardship alone. You are a congregation of 197 magi—bestowing the gifts you have been given for the journey on those who need your help.

And perhaps one of the messages for us this Epiphany is that it's okay, indeed it's expected, that we will be gracious recipients of the companionship and help of others as we endure times of struggle and hardship on the journey. I know it feels good to be in the position of the one helping. It is a wonderful thing to be able to use our resources to help another. Why then, when we know how good that feels, do we try to deny that opportunity to others by refusing their offers to assist us on our journeys? The vulnerability of being the person who needs help really stinks—I get that. And yet, what a gift it is to others when we admit we need their help. And yet, this other way of being, this way of independence and self-reliance is so ingrained in us . . . My mom tells a story about me as a three year old. I was working on some project, struggling in my efforts. She repeatedly checked in on me to see how I was doing and when she offered her assistance I replied with great exasperation, “I do it my'telf. I tell you when I done!”

Friends, we weren't created to “do it our'telves.” We were created and given gifts for the journey—gifts to use, gifts to share, gifts to treasure in one another. As we journey through this New Year together as a church, as followers of the Way of Christ, as a community seeking to take good care of one another while serving our wider community, my prayer is that we'll offer our gifts generously, accept the gifts of others graciously, and shine Christ's light on each other's paths, helping one another to avoid danger, rerouting when we find ourselves going astray, and sticking together as we journey closer to the one we love, because He first loved us.

*Glorious now behold Him arise, King and God and Sacrifice; Alleluia, Alleluia, Earth to heaven replies.*

*O star of wonder, star of night, Star of glorious beauty bright. Westward leading, still  
proceeding, Guide us to thy perfect light.*