

**Equipped with gifts for the journey**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday after Christmas, January 3, 2016.

Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road. Matthew 2:11, 12

We have passed through the gate of a new year and nearing the end of the twelve days of Christmas. I pack away our Christmas decorations in stages, leaving the crèche to the last. Before I store away that tender scene of the Christ child in the manger, I like to reflect on the figures of Joseph and Mary with the Christ child, the angels, the shepherds, the animals and the Wise Men with their three gifts.

Of the four gospels, only Saint Matthew records the arrival of what are known as the Wise Men, the Magi or Three Kings. The Bible doesn't say how many men are there, only that there are three gifts. Tradition has even given them the names of Gaspard, Melchior and Balthazar. We are not sure exactly who they are, but they are not kings. They are more likely priests of the eastern religion of Zoroaster from Persia and Ethiopia. Being well versed in the astrological signs and the movements of the stars, they are guided in their journey to Bethlehem by the confluence of very bright stars. Upon their arrival at the birth-place of Jesus, the scriptures tell us that they presented the Christ child with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold is appropriate for Jesus' kingship, frankincense for his role as priest and myrrh to be used in anointing his body.

The narrative tells us that King Herod is threatened at the news of the birth of this newborn child who is believed to be the fulfillment of generations of prophecies as king over all Israel. Herod seeks to eliminate this threat to his power by ordering every newborn male under the age of two to be destroyed. Being warned in a dream, the wise men avoid the wrath of Herod by returning home another way. At the same time Joseph flees with his wife and child to the safety of exile in Egypt. Thus, Jesus begins life as a child of homeless refugees escaping a tyrannical ruler, not unlike in our own time.

There is a legend that while Joseph and his family are on their journey to Egypt two thieves set upon them to rob them of their valuable gifts. When one of the thieves sees the Christ child he refuses to allow any harm to come to them. According to legend, that is Dismas, the same penitent thief on the cross next to Jesus who is assured of being with him in Paradise.

For the next two years, everything in the lives of this refugee family is tentative. Joseph and his family live in exile, remaining in Egypt until after the death of Herod when it is safe to return to their home in Nazareth. The journey of Joseph and his family returning to their homeland after their years in Egypt is a parallel to the story of Moses leading the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt. Jesus is seen as the new Moses, liberating God's people from slavery to sin.

Both the Wise Men and Joseph are warned of danger by angels who appear to them in dreams. Most of us give little thought to the presence of angels in contemporary thinking and intellect. How do angelic images of long ago have any relevance in twenty-first century culture and thinking? Psychiatrists tell us that dreams are an indication of what is going on in our subconscious. Our dreams are a way of getting in touch with our inner self. Might it also be way of God communicating with us?

What do we make of spiritual beings who act as guardians? I have to admit that I scoffed at the idea of angelic beings until I encountered real people who appeared at just the right moment to help me out of a difficulty. Most of them I had never seen before and never saw again. With incredible sense of timing, God has a way of sending people to help us out of difficulty and to warn us of impending danger.

Mary received the incredible news from an angel that her child was destined to be the Savior. The wise men heeded the warning of an angel to avoid the wrath of Herod. Joseph heeded the warning of an angel not to return home to Nazareth

where their newborn child would be in grave danger. There are countless stories that can't be explained of people being guided and protected in mysterious ways, perhaps in some way by messengers of God.

As Joseph and his family eventually returned to their home and work, so we in this parish move on with our life together in accomplishing God's mission. How well we live up to our purpose and core values depends largely on how we are willing to take the risk of living out the mission to which God calls us. In striving to imitate Christ in all things we stand boldly for compassion and justice.

One of our nation's core principles is to welcome those fleeing oppression by welcoming immigrants and treating them with compassion and justice. The sad reality is that even legal immigrants experience rejection from the very people whose own immigrant ancestors arrived here in earlier generations. The church stands with those seeking refuge from domestic violence and neglect. We support those suffering from physical and emotional abuse. We provide a safe place for those in recovery. We welcome those who are seeking a deeper faith.

Take time for yourself and those who mean so much to you. Let this New Year be a time of rebirth, a time for new discovery of how Christ is at the heart of all that is true, just and right. As the wise men brought their valuable gift to the Christ child, let each of us be valuable and useful gifts to others in God's service.