

2023 01 08 – Guided by the Light

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12 (The Inclusive Bible)

I have to admit I really enjoyed doing the research this week for today's service. I did quite a bit of Googling as I explored the idea of long journeys and guiding stars. One of the explorers that I read about was Christopher Columbus. As we all know, Columbus sailed across the Atlantic Ocean from Europe to the Americas in 1492. It took him ten long weeks to arrive at his destination in the Caribbean.

The Magi or astrologers also took a long journey to an unknown place. They, of course, had a shorter distance to travel (possibly around 1000 kilometres). But but they were walking and/or riding their camels. They didn't have the wind or the ocean waves to carry them along. It took the astrologers just as long or probably longer to reach Bethlehem than it took Columbus to reach America.

All of us are also on a journey. For many of us, it will be or already has been, a long journey. Even if we never leave Swift Current or Southwest Saskatchewan, our journey of life takes us in different directions, through a myriad of twists and turns. Throughout our lives we have many decisions to make: Where will we go to school? What career will we pursue? Who will we marry, if at all? When is it time to retire? What volunteer organizations will we join? Where do we invest our time and money? Who do we choose as friends? How will this journey of life unfold? How do we know what path to take? How should we navigate through life?

The Magi were, of course, navigating by the light of a star. It was a special star, a star that they had observed at its rising. Even in the First Century, the people of the Middle East had a deep understanding of astrology and were already using tools to measure the location of the stars relative to the earth. The Magi may even have had an astrolabe, a circular navigational tool that had been invented by the Greeks over 200 years before Jesus was born.

Columbus, on the other hand, was using a form of navigation called “dead reckoning.” Basically Columbus would measure the course and distance he had sailed in a day and keep track of his progress by pricking a hole in a chart each night. The course or direction would be set with a magnetic compass and the distance determined by time and speed calculations. In Columbus’ day, the ship’s speed was measured by throwing a piece of debris over the side of the ship and the pilot had a chant to time the movement of the debris past a couple of marks on the ship’s side. These measurements of course and speed were taken hourly. This method was, of course, very crude, so it’s a good thing that Columbus had a really big mark to hit. As we now know, as long as his ship kept heading west, he was bound to find land. <http://www.christopher-columbus.eu/navigation.htm>

As we talked about during our community learning time, we all have people in our lives who have helped us to navigate throughout our journey. As children, we have our parents, our teachers, and other adults who teach us right from wrong and help us figure out who we are in the world. As adults we often have friends, counsellors, and mentors who help steer us in the right direction. As Christians,

we follow the teachings of Jesus as well. We study his life and attempt to live our lives based on principles that he taught and lived. Principles of love, peace and justice.

We also know that our real source, our true source of navigation comes from within. Our guiding star, the light that we follow must come from that sacred place within each one of us, that place where the Holy resides. If we are to follow our true calling, we must be willing to listen to the still, small voice within us.

I don't know how Columbus became a ship's captain or what principles he followed. But I do know that Columbus was sailing west in search of a new route to India, China Japan and Indonesia. He was hoping to bring back rich cargoes of tea and silk and spices. Columbus was looking for a route that would avoid the long ocean trip around the tip of Africa or, the gruelling overland trek to China. As it turns out, his guiding star, or at least the motivation of his sponsors, the King and Queen of Spain, was wealth and the power it would bring them.

The Magi had a different motivation. They were astrologers. Their life's work was studying the stars and understanding their movement. We could argue that when they saw a star that heralded the birth of a King, then in order to be true to who they were called to be, they needed to follow its direction. They weren't going because they expected to be rewarded with great wealth or power. They were following the star so that they could live out their calling and honour this newborn king.

So we could ask ourselves. What is our motivation? What is our guiding star? If we are to follow the Light that is the Holy Spirit, the Essence of Love, then what does that mean for us? Gustav Mahler, a composer and conductor whose life spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, wrote:

The point is not to take the world's opinion as a guiding star but to go one's way in life and working unerringly, neither depressed by failure nor seduced by applause.

As an artist, Mahler recognized that our life choices may not always lead to success as the world defines it, but as long as we are following our own truth, our own way in life and working honestly and faithfully then we will be on our true path.

It's important to note that this path is not always clear and sometimes we do get lost or confused. Yes, Columbus arrived in the Americas, but when he got here he really didn't know where he was. It turns out that navigation by the stars was something that the Portuguese were just figuring out in Columbus' time. He had a couple of devices with him—a quadrant and an astrolabe—but he wasn't skilled in their use. Columbus attempted to use these devices to figure out where he was, in particular, his latitude, but the notations that we find in his log were inaccurate. Columbus had arrived, but as we all know, his navigation by dead-reckoning did not get him where he thought he was going.

The Magi, even though they were following the star as they were meant to do, also ended up in the wrong place. Somehow they travelled past Bethlehem to Jerusalem, and then, by seeking the advice of Herod, they nearly caused the death of the very child that they were hoping to honour. Luckily the astrologers got back on their true path, they caught sight of the star again, and even more important, they followed their dream, their gut, their inner wisdom and, after seeing Jesus, “they went back to their own country by another route.”

We will all get lost and confused along our journey of life. But the important thing is to return to our guiding star:

- to listen to the people in our lives that we trust,
- to look to Jesus’ life for wisdom and inspiration and
- to pay attention to the Holy Light that resides within each one of us.

May we all have the courage and the determination to follow that light wherever it may lead us.