

Feast of the Epiphany (transferred): January 8, 2017

The Episcopal Church of St. Mary the Virgin, San Francisco, CA

Text: Matthew 2:1-12

Title: Stepping Stones

Happy Epiphany! For many Christians around the world, *this* is the primary celebration of the incarnation, marking not Jesus' birth but of our recognition of him as the Christ. It is particularly fitting that we celebrate a Baptism today, as Orthodox Christians have historically commemorated Jesus' baptism on Epiphany, but our own tradition has always focused on the richly textured, colorful visit of the magi.

It is a wonderful story, with all the trappings of a fine feature film: the majestic star, an epic journey, an evil villain, the adoration at the manger. There's so much going on, in fact, that it can be a little hard to remember who is at the center of all the action; to draw our focus attention back, again and again, to the baby around whom swirls all this activity, and to whom *everyone* is being drawn. This is a story of that journey - about how the entire universe conspires to bring us closer to God, and the ways in which we discern the signs along the way.

I was recently reintroduced to the concept of "Deliberate Practice:" the disciplined honing of particular skills through focused repetition. Even if you haven't heard of the term you are probably familiar with the concept. Imagine someone calling up a teacher for lessons and saying, "I really want to become a professional pianist, but I don't have time to practice. Maybe you could just recommend a few books, perhaps some youtube videos, and I'll learn the theory of piano that way, maybe write a few papers, and then get really good at it." (That totally works, right, Eric?)

As anyone honing a skill can attest, progress is the result of a great deal of time and discipline. *Practice, practice, practice*, as the saying goes. We know this about our growth in so many different areas of life - learning an instrument, getting in shape, public speaking - and yet we don't often think of our spiritual development in these terms. We all want to feel closer to God, but how much time do we devote to prayer, to actively drawing near to our source and sustainer? How often do we read scripture, or engage actively in service? And how diligent are we in pushing the limits of our comfort and trying something new?

One of the essential elements of deliberate practice is identifying a skill that is just beyond our reach and working toward that. Having a big goal is great but the key to getting there is figuring out the next step. (After all, someone who has not yet figured out how to float need not concern themselves with the perfect form of a flip turn.)

Now, it's important to note that as far as progressing towards God goes, we are not the only one putting in effort. If Christmas and Epiphany remind us of anything, it is that God is also, always, coming to us, seeking us, surprising us, giving us stars, guides, feelings, and dreams, among other interventions and intuitions, to show us the way. But progress toward God is a dance, and we are called to do our part.

Today's Gospel starts with the star, a sign of the miraculous birth that has taken place. Think about it, though. This wasn't exactly a private invitation sent through some secure server. It was a star ... in the sky ... you don't get much more public, more universal than that. We might be so focused on the wise men that we forget to wonder, where was everyone else? Why weren't there great crowds following this blazing light? God gave the star, but for some reason

only the wise men noticed and followed. They were curious enough to pay attention, and willing enough to go.

Now in the children's book version of this story, the star leads the wise men straight to the baby. But in Matthew's Gospel, it takes them first to Herod, who consults with the priests and scribes on where the messiah is to be born. (Ironically, these religious experts were apparently so sure that their books held all the answers that they, too, didn't bother looking up to see the cosmos radiating God's glory.) Then, and only then, does Herod direct the wise men to Bethlehem. Now this, again, should give us pause. Herod was the king of Judea, a representative of the Roman Empire, the worldly, political power in occupied land, oppressing and exploiting the Jews. Still, the wise men were humble enough to ask for help when they needed it, from whoever it was God had placed right in front of them. And the group managed, despite themselves, to give the wise men good advice.

So off they head to Bethlehem, and – surprise! – the star reappears, light the path ahead. When the star stops, they are overwhelmed with joy. Now we might think they were happy to have arrived at their journey's end, anxious to put their feet up and have a spot of tea, or perhaps something stronger. But I don't think so. I think the joy was about something else. Something more. It was the moment when the light of the star, about which we will hear not another word, illumines their hearts. It is the moment they realize why they have been led on this journey, the moment they see not a baby in a manger but the savior of the world. And seeing things so clearly, seeing before them God's great gift to humanity – God own self – they kneel, and before offering him frankincense, gold, and myrrh, they offer their best gift, their first gift: themselves. They kneel down and pay him homage, which means literally prostrating themselves before him, an act of total vulnerability and devotion.

Like all pilgrims, the wise men must eventually journey home. So God gives them one more stepping stone, one more sign: a dream, warning them not to return to Herod. Now, we know practically nothing about the magi – where they were from, what they believed, and we have no reason to think there were just three of them. But we do know a thing or two about Herod: he was powerful, and brutal, and totally intolerant of insubordination. So choosing not to return to Jerusalem, as he had requested, was a risk. It took courage to seek another road, to take a different way home.

Now if this seems like too much to take in in one day, one story, one sermon, you can be sure that it is! Which is why the Church, in her great wisdom, observes Epiphany as a season. In the coming weeks, God will continue to reveal Godself to us in and through Jesus. So I invite you to think of the virtues demonstrated by the wise men as entry points into this season, maybe even practices worthy of your focused attention: cultivate curiosity, the capacity to notice God interrupting your routines; willingness to follow, once the way forward is clear; humility to ask for the help you need, and trust enough to take it; generosity with all you have and all you are; and courage to step onto an unfamiliar road when called.

You won't necessarily go in this order, but my guess is at least one of these resonates with each of us this morning. And if you're feeling stuck or simply ready for the next adventure, maybe reach for one that is just beyond you and find ways to practice that, too. If you, like the magi, are being drawn to Christ, God will give you the signs you need to keep going, and you'll know the journey's end by your joy. **Amen.**