

**SERMON PREACHED BY  
THE REV. JAN CRAIG  
AT  
SCARBORO UNITED CHURCH  
January 3, 2010 (Epiphany Sunday)**

“LONGING FOR THE LIGHT”

There are two images that have stayed with me ever since Christmas Eve here in the sanctuary at Scarboro. Both occurred at the early Christmas Eve service. The first image is of Sonia Konig and Joey Mailloux (our Mary and Joseph) standing there looking as young - as strong, as uncomfortable, as confident, as unsure, as serene as that first couple while Sonia sang “What child is this that laid to rest on Mary’s lap is sleeping?”

And the second image is of Renee Mailloux and Andrew Leitch looking for the rest of the heavenly host - wandering around these side aisles and transepts ... “Have you found them?” “They’re not over here!” “Not here either!” “Can’t see them!” How like me those words felt - to be lost and miss a big event that was happening right before me. I could feel the feeling in the pit of my stomach that I get when I am lost or can’t understand the GPS and time is running out. And there were Renee and Andrew wandering around the aisles of Scarboro ... searching diligently for the rest of the angels and while searching they found the shepherds and wisemen before those elusive angels. For me it is the searching part of this story that the wise ones is about. It is about the search ... it is about following the star and not giving up. It is about our search, and our longing for the light.

Today we are celebrating Epiphany - remembering the wise ones searching for the child and following the star. This is a story that ranks right up there with the Christmas and Easter stories for sure. Artists, poets, songwriters and storytellers have used this as fodder for their imaginations until we no longer know fact from fiction. It was Longfellow who named the wisemen Caspar, Melchior and Belthasar by the way (but perhaps based on some 4th century comment somewhere). It is not that the facts don’t matter though - it is just that the facts don’t matter as much as the story does and stories can be true whether they happen in a particular way or not. The way to really tell about the truth of a story is to listen to it - really listen to it. You let it come to life inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your own tears and laughter whether the story is true. If you are in any doubt you can also watch other people for their reaction. So this is a story worth really listening to.

Matthew wrote the birth stories long after Jesus lived and he wrote them especially for the Jewish community. Virgin births were not uncommon and were attributed to many famous and infamous persons later in their lives. But whether the story was factual or not does not change it’s truth for us. The important thing is whether the story tells us something about ourselves and our search for light and meaning and our search for new life and what happens to us when we find it. Epiphanies are awakenings - they are aha moments. An epiphany is that moment when suddenly we come to a new realization about ourselves or about life. That is what happened to the Magi on the way to Bethlehem or once they got there.

As the magi (those well educated and very wise men) headed out to follow the star, they knew that it would lead them to someone or someplace of great importance. That star had kept calling to them either individually or collectively for some time and now they set off on a journey together. They almost ruined the whole thing though by stopping at the palace along the way. They stopped to see King Herod - perhaps they were checking out to be sure there wasn't something new going on there, maybe they were trying to seem important but given their knowledge of the ways of the world it should have been obvious that any new king or messiah would be of a rival house to the one currently on the throne. Herod's advisor's suggested they be sent to Bethlehem to have a look around and see if a new king could be spotted there. After all there were rumblings from the Old Testament about this. Herod wanted to know where this new king was and who he was - so he asked them to come back and report in on their way home.

Isn't it interesting that it was King Herod who sent them off on that journey? Is it as true for you that often it is something difficult that starts you on a life changing journey - some chaos or terror, an illness, a death, a job loss or change, a divorce, a struggle with a child, a depression. The list can go on but often for all of us it is the difficult challenges of life that send us along roads that lead us to the greatest moments of AHA!! They take us to the edges where we learn the most and where we are changed the most. Love and joy can do it too but often it is the difficult times that raise the most questions.

Now this journey of the magi took a long time (sound familiar) - perhaps up to 2 years before they even arrived in Bethlehem and rumours may well have been running rampant as time went by. Herod's reaction caused real terror. We don't usually read this part of the story. This is the part where King Herod orders all the boys under the age of two to be killed. No trial, no witnesses, just a massacre. It is an important part of the story. It reminds us that not everyone was thrilled with this birth or the news that began to spread and also that sometimes innocent people suffer when powerful people try to fix things quickly and easily while protecting their own interests. It also reminds us that if we listen, God can guide the right people to do the right things at critical times. At some point after the Magi had visited, God came to Joseph in a dream and Mary and Joseph with the baby fled to Egypt and stayed there for several years until Herod was removed from the throne. From the beginning Jesus life was a mix of joy and sorrow, of conflict and peace, of compassion and confusion.

The story of the magi is full of truth for us about what was required of those who were determined to find that star and meet the one whose birth was announced . It is a story of conflict and risk and change. It is about the risk of the journey when they had no idea what the future might hold. It is a story about change and it reminds us how fearful others (and we ourselves) can be of change. It speaks to how we can act when we are afraid and about how God breaks into our world in a tiny baby and changes everything. Perhaps this story reminds us to think about the arrival of a baby when we are facing change. How do we prepare? What are we afraid of? What are the risks? What are the potential joys? What will be the costs of our YES and our NO?

Back in the mid 90's I had the opportunity to go to Israel. It was an amazing experience for me. Our guide kept saying "tradition says ..." and that took away for me all the touristy implications and let me just experience the places that I visited. One of my favourite places was the "Milk Grotto" - a place we were not supposed to go to but we ended up there for a quiet few moments

one day. Tradition says this is the cave where Mary and Joseph stayed with the infant Jesus before they fled to Egypt - perhaps this is where they were when the magi found them. While there I wrote these words ...

Mary, were you looking for a safe place?  
a quiet place, a peaceful place?  
Mary, were you looking for a strong place?  
a private place?  
Mary, did Joseph bring you here?  
to a quiet place ...  
a strong place...  
a safe place...  
Mary, did you watch Jesus grow here ...?  
did you see him  
gain weight here?  
look around here?  
coo and gurgle here?  
reach out to you here?  
did you watch him sleeping here?  
dreaming here?  
did you think of who he would be?  
Did you and Joseph talk of that?  
did you remember your angel visits?  
did you and Joseph speak of saying YES  
to one another and to God?  
Mary, when did you realize  
you couldn't stay here?  
that you had to flee?  
that you had to leave this solid place?  
this safe place?  
When did you realize it, Mary?  
When did you too know that we can  
never stay in the safe places forever?  
Our God is one who sooner or later  
calls us to come out. March 17/96

This story is God's story. The magi arrive in time - they present their gifts and in return they receive great gifts. For they receive not only the gift of seeing the infant but also the gifts of being in God's presence and of being given new life themselves. This amazing experience changes them.

We are told that they return home by a new way. They have to go home a new way for they are no longer the same people. They cannot travel back through the same muck and along the same winding road anymore than we can when we have been through some experience that changes us. They are no longer lost or uncertain. Now they have found the light and the light stays with them showing them the way. Now they are no longer afraid for they return home ready to live life anew with a new story and a new experience of God to share with all those they meet. Now they are no longer waiting for they have found the Messiah and they have good news for their people. There will be new uncertainties and difficult times but they will face them as they have

this one and they will find their way over those roads and along those paths - and they will not be alone. God will be with them.

We too have been to that manger this Christmas. Whatever the road was that took us there, like the Magi, we will receive grace and the opportunity to return home by another way, to go on other journeys and to spread the good news to many people and in many ways. Like the Magi we do not travel alone but we travel together - we have one another for support, encouragement and wisdom along the way.

In this Epiphany season we are called to celebrate that God's light has come into a dark world. We are called to proclaim this Good News with all that we have and all that we are. This is a life long journey that will never end but one in which we will receive the sure promise of God's presence in the babe of Bethlehem, the Christ on the cross and the Spirit who will never leave us or forsake us.

We have a long journey ahead of us. Let us journey together toward and with the light God gives.

Amen