

Equipped with gifts for the journey

A sermon preached by the Rev'd Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Second Sunday after Christmas, January 4, 2009.

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. Once again we pack away our Christmas decorations. Before I store away these decorations, I always take a last look at the manger scene and reflect on the figures of Joseph and Mary with the Christ child, the angels, the shepherds, the animals and the wise men or three kings with their gifts.

Of the four gospels, only St. Matthew records the arrival of the wise men. The Bible doesn't say how many there are, only that there are three gifts. Tradition has even given them names: Gaspard, Melchior and Balthazar. We are not sure exactly who they are, but more than likely they are 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 arrival at the birthplace of Jesus, the scriptures say the Magi, as they were also known, presented the Christ child with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold is appropriate for Jesus' kingship, frankincense for his role as priest and intercessor and myrrh to be used as a balm in anointing his body at death.

King Herod is understandably threatened at the news of the birth of this newborn child 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 return home by another way to avoid the wrath of Herod. 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.

There is a legend that while Joseph and his family are on their journey to Egypt, two thieves set upon them to kill and rob them of their valuable gifts. One of the thieves suddenly catches himself when he sees the child and refuses to allow any harm to come to them. According to legend, that thief is Dismas, the same penitent thief on the cross whom Jesus will forgive and assure of his salvation in Paradise.

For the next two years, everything in the lives of this refugee family is tentative. Joseph and his family abandon their life and home in Nazareth to live in exile, remaining in Egypt until after the death of Herod when it is safe to return to 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 the new Moses, liberating God's people from slavery to sin.

Both the Wise Men and Joseph are warned of danger in dreams by angels. 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 may be a way of getting in touch with our inner self as well as a way for God to communicate with us. Could there be spiritual beings superior to us in power and intelligence

who act as guardians? I was quite skeptical until I encountered a real people who appeared at the right time to help me out of difficulty. Most of them I had never seen before and never saw again. With incredible sense of timing, God helps us out of difficulty and warns us of 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 in 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 by messengers of God guarding and protecting us.

As Joseph was forced to move on with his family, so we in this parish move on in our life together as we seek to accomplish God's will and mission for us. What kind of parish we want to be largely depends on how we are willing to take the risk of living out the mission to which God calls us. We stand boldly for justice and fairness for all of God's people. We want to imitate Christ in all things. One of our country's founding principles was to welcome those fleeing oppression. This means treating immigrants fairly and justly. The reality is that even legal immigrants experience rejection from the very people whose own immigrant ancestors were treated badly.

The church can protect those seeking refuge from domestic violence and neglect. We can provide support for those suffering from physical and emotional abuse. We provide a place for those who are recovering from their own compulsions and addictions. We welcome those who are alienated because of their sin and lack of faith in God and in themselves.

Take time for yourself and those who mean a great deal to you. Let this New Year be a time of rebirth, a time for new discovery of Christ at the heart of all that is true and loving, of all that is just and right. As the wise men brought the Christ child their gifts of value and meaning, find meaning in making yourself a valuable and useful gift to God in service to others.