

Zion's UCC at Taborton
January 7, 2018
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The Journey Begins

It was 10 weeks ago that I first stood in front of you and asked you to take a break from all that was going on in this congregation. It was agreed that we would spend the time until Epiphany concentrating on ways to love God, love our neighbors, and maybe even learning to love ourselves. Epiphany seemed a long way off, didn't it. But, here it is. Has what we tried to do helped? Are you less angry, less worried, more positive about the future? I hope so because I can see a difference. Everything hasn't been resolved. You couldn't expect that to happen in 10 weeks. I am sure that if I were to poke you in the right places, I could still find a bruise or two, couldn't I? I often think that Congregational ills are like having the flu. It can really get you down. But, now the symptoms are easing and the fever is down. If we behave ourselves, get plenty of rest, and continue to take our medicine of compassion and reconciliation, we will recuperate. Still, it will take time and it will be a Journey. But being journeyers, being pilgrims, is what our faith is all about.

Abraham was called by God to make a Journey from his home in Ur of the Caldees to a new place to found a new people. Joseph journeyed down to Egypt. Moses led the Hebrew people on their greatest journey, out of Egypt to the promised land. The Jews journeyed into exile in Babylon and later back to Palestine. Mary and Joseph journeyed from Galilee to Bethlehem. Jesus journeyed, St. Paul journeyed. St. Peter and all the other apostles journeyed. Being faithful to God often means moving.

There is no better example of that than the Journey we celebrate today. You know that everyone, including us, do our crèches, our manger scenes, all wrong. To really follow the story, we should just have Mary, Joseph and the animals there during Advent. We should add Jesus on Christmas Eve (when he was born!), along with the shepherds. Then we should take away the shepherds (they couldn't stay, they had to get back to their sheep) and just leave Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Then, at Epiphany, we should add the Magi. Then take it all Down until next Advent. Got all that? Or maybe we can just keep doing what we have been doing and remind the pastor not to be so picky.

We don't know very much about the Magi. The traditional names given in the European tradition are Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior. But if you're Armenian you might know them as Balthazar, Gaspar and Melqon. The Ethiopians name them Basanater, Hor, and Karsudan. In Syria they're Larvindad, Hormisdas and Gushnasaph. In other parts of the Middle East they are Manathos, Alchor, and Gaspar.

The Chinese even claim that their great astronomer Lui Shang was one of the Magi. But, In Taborton, we know their real names to be DJ, Ben, and Gene.

Neither do we know how many there were. We guess 3, because of the three gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but some traditions say there were as many as 12. We do know they weren't Kings to start. That tradition came later when the church was playing up to royalty. Originally, they were Persian astrologers and magicians. They were the philosophers and scientists of their time. They were wise men.

But they did have to make a long journey. It would have taken at least a year and maybe two for them to get to Bethlehem. That's why the shepherds had left, and why Matthew has Herod decide to kill all the male children up to 2 years old. By the way, there is no historical evidence to prove that the murder of the innocents ever happened. Not that Herod wasn't capable of such an atrocity, it's that the Romans would have noted and reported on something like that and they did not. You have to keep in mind that the Christmas stories are not CNN reports. These are stories designed to reveal theological truths.

There are four theological points Matthew makes that I think can be useful to us as we continue our own Faith journeys. First, of course, is that Jesus was born for all peoples, not just the Jewish people. These Three magi are foreigners and they represent all the non-Jewish people of the world. They come from a place that was not even part of the Roman Empire. Matthew is declaring that Anyone, even us, can become a follower of Jesus, join us on the journey, and be a part of our community.

The second point is that they came a long way. Faith journeys may be long and may be difficult. The Magi were not sure where they were going when they started. I am sure they expected that Herod's palace would be their destination (Where else would a new king be born?). However, They discovered that faith journeys don't always end up where you think they will. You and I need to keep that one in mind as we begin our own journeys here at Zion's.

The third point was that when their plans changed they kept faith and kept journeying. They didn't give up. They didn't turn away. They remained true to the journey.

Finally, they went home another way. They had to do that because they weren't the same people they were when they set out following that star. The journey had changed them. Don't be surprised should that happen to you during our journey.

Here at Zion's we need to set out on that journey. We need to follow the star into a new place. We don't know where that is yet, and we don't know how long it will take us to get there. But, like Abraham; like Moses; like Mary and Joseph; and like the Magi, God has called us and we must respond.

Our journey, like the magi's, will take time and it cannot be rushed. Each phase of the journey is important. Each stopping point along the way is necessary. Each crossroad and fork must be fully considered.

The Sufi mystic, Rumi once asked his followers: "What are you doing to move your story along?" That is a question we should be asking ourselves throughout the year. We need to decide what we want to be 5 years from now, 10 years from now. What will you do to become that thing? I know from experience that successful churches are ones that look outward, rather than inward. When someone say, "oh Zions, they're the ones who..." How do you want that sentence to end? God isn't asking you to do everything, but God is asking you to do something. We must always be in the world even if we are not of the world. It is not enough just to take care of our own.

You know how to mobilize. You proved that in building the church hall. Now is the time to take that wisdom and apply it to something new. What might you want to make own? Maybe ecological problems are our thing. Maybe we would like to help children in some way. Maybe the homeless. Maybe it's food that gets us going. There are certainly no shortage of problems in the world today. There is much to be done and we are the body of Christ. What this community chooses to be is entirely up to us.

I've even got a new tee-shirt suggestion. A picture of the church on the front with Zion's UCC underneath. On the back it reads: "God's people doing God's work in God's country." That will be a true statement once we've reached consensus about what this community is all about. Over the next year, we have a lot of praying, thinking, debating, and journeying to do. It will not always be easy, but if we keep the Christmas spirit, it can be interesting and sometimes even fun.

As we said in our call to Worship, the work of Christmas now begins.