

Sunday, January 6, 2019 (Epiphany) – Matthew 2: 1-12

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

A week ago, on my Sunday off, I heard a sermon (by Rev. Bobby Schuller) that started out by citing the classic work of Joseph Campbell, who described the pattern of the Hero's journey, a pattern followed in ancient mythology and modern adventure stories. The way the gospels tell of life of Jesus mostly fits this pattern, and one could argue that the lives of Mary and Joseph also fit, but today I'd like to view the journey of the Magi/Wise Ones through this lens. I've got a 2 ½ -minute video here that does a terrific job at describing Campbell's model. There is some violence in this video clip, but nothing that goes beyond the typical Hero story, so with that bit of forewarning...a video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1Zxt28ff-E>

Before going any further, since today's message will be immersed in Matthew's story of the Magi, I should state up-front that this is one of those places in the Bible where I am not too concerned about whether the story is taken as an eye-witness accounts of a factual event that happened exactly as told, or whether parts of the story or the whole thing come from the early Church, as it tried to explain the significance of the risen Christ for his people and for the whole world. Today, we step into the story as presented, to glean what it can tell us about Jesus, and the human condition, and ourselves.

What really grabbed me last Sunday, as I was re-introduced to Campbell's *Hero With a Thousand Faces*, was what the Magi's lives were like before the trip to Bethlehem. My sense is that they didn't need this journey – or at least, nobody looking at their lives from the outside looking in would say, “what you really need is to leave home, go over to that powerless little fiefdom known as Judah and find their newborn King.” We don't know with any certainty where the Magi came from – while the general thought is that they came from Persia, other thoughts have them coming from somewhere on the Arabian peninsula, and traditions eventually developed suggesting they may have come from as far away as North Africa or India. (cf. Hare)

Wherever the Magi lived, we can surmise that it was probably a stronger, more self-sufficient nation than Judah. Led by Herod the Great, a man whose craftiness and brilliance were overshadowed only by his paranoia and cruelty, Judah was completely under the thumb of the Romans. Herod had managed to feather his nest extraordinarily well, but his people were heavily burdened by taxation and one false move – by either Herod or the Judeans – would be answered by swift, bloody, efficient Roman violence.

The **Status Quo (starting point)**, then, for the Magi, was a pretty good one. Whether they were regarded as nobility in their homeland, or as religious leaders (perhaps within the Zoroastrian religious tradition), or as scientists/astrologers, is not clear to us, but what is clear is that they were esteemed people of some sort. Their CVs didn't need a trip to Bethlehem added to them, in order for these people to be highly regarded.

And yet... there was something unsettled in them, for when a particular star in the sky issued its **Call to Adventure (i)**, the Magi assembled their caravan and left. They left a life that didn't need leaving, because of some urging. Did they feel a spiritual urging in their hearts, calling them to a new understanding of truth? In their lives as scientists/mathematicians, had they always hoped for the one big breakthrough which would define their lives, and thought this might be it? Did this beckoning star awaken within them a wanderlust to see more of the world? Is something in our lives calling us to something like this today?

One way or another, the Magi received “a mysterious message, an invitation, a challenge” which called them forth. Carrying their three royal (and perhaps ominous) gifts of Gold, Frankincense and

Myrrh, the three-or-more magi would have assembled a sizeable caravan – for their own safety, crossing through desolate and potentially hostile territory – and headed off on their quest.

In Joseph Campbell's model, before leaving on such a quest a hero seeks **Assistance (ii)** from someone older or wiser. This may have been as simple as consulting with one another, as they may have had varied types of expertise, but I have another thought here, which might mess up the order of things but is worth considering.

In the second chapter of Matthew, the Magi are summoned to see King Herod after they have arrived at Jerusalem. Those of you who heard Richard LeSueur's Bethlehem presentation before Christmas, will recall his pointing out the physical proximity of Herod's luxurious fortress at Herodium and the common Palestinian town of Bethlehem, and the intentional irony in contrasting an earthly despot's power-thirsty ways with the humble birth of the Prince of Peace.

I wonder, if the Magi's visit to Herod also fits Campbell's idea of seeking Assistance, "getting some help from someone older and wiser". The Magi knew the heavens but Herod had all the local knowledge, so when summoned by the King they may well have been honoured and relieved. He would certainly know where this new King, this Messiah was to be born, wouldn't he? For all the Magi knew, it could have been one of Herod's wives or concubines who was giving birth. But what we know, is the scheming intentions of Herod. He had no desire to actually help, he wanted to use the Magi for his own purposes... and subsequent generations are reminded, with a combination of wariness and weariness, that this is all too often how the world works. Sometimes, those with power and wealth and influence are willing to have their hearts softened by new, more humane ways of viewing the world, but often new, more equitable ways are viewed as a threat, and brutality ensues. I offer specific prayers at this moment, for progressive Christians in the Philippines, who are under threat of imprisonment for acts as simple as attendance at a peace rally or vigil, as that nation's version of Herod has his way.

Skipping ahead in the Magi's quest, they "cross the threshold from [their] normal, safe home and enter the special world" (**Departure, iii**), they "solve a riddle" as to the meaning of this star and the location of the holy family (**Trials, iv**), and they **Approach (v)** the Christ Child. While this is the part of the journey that the video depicted as the hero confronting the monster, sword in hand, the **Crisis (vi)** of the Magi's story is of a different sort.

With Herod pacing and brooding and hating, just off screen, the Magi are overwhelmed by what they experience. Though they have come from a different land with different religious traditions, they recognize what Rudolf Otto later called the *mysterium tremendum*, the "mysterious, awesome and urgent" (cf. Britannica) presence of the Holy. A couple of you have described such experiences to me, times when you felt the indescribable presence of the power of God, a visceral experience of mind and body and spirit in which a deep sense of belonging and purpose and challenge and joy intertwine and change you. And in the presence of that, the first thing you want to do is bow down and the second thing you want to do, is offer the best that you have, meagre and humble as it may seem. If you happen to have gold, frankincense and myrrh handy, those would be good things to offer, but for most of us it is other things: our time, our prayers, our financial and physical resources, our willingness to learn and ask – to challenge and be challenged, our commitment to stand with those whom this Christ child would stand in his adult ministry. In the case of this particular hero's journey, the **Treasure (vii)** is both the transformative presence of Christ, and the way that it spurs us to live in grateful and generous ways.

As we see the Magi progress through the key journey of their lives – starting at their comfortable, settled status quo, then being called out of that and ending up in the very presence of Jesus, the light of the world, the Word made Flesh – we may see *our* lives in a new way. I'm not suggesting

you head out and get fitted for a superhero costume, or that you start seeing your lives in the self-aggrandizing way that is basically ruining the world today; but what I am suggesting, is opening yourself to the possibility that in this moment, and in this year, God is calling you to step across a threshold, from status quo to something that fits the call and ministry of Jesus Christ. Or perhaps it is all of us, together as a congregation, who are being called to this adventure, more directly addressing the needs of the poor and marginalized in our community and our world, in the name of Jesus. Although the word “hero” may make this sound like somebody else’s life, this pattern of being shown new horizons and entrusting our lives to God’s gracious and powerful desire for a world made new, is everybody’s calling.

The remaining steps of the journey - the **Result (viii), Return (ix), New Life (x), Resolution (xi)** and resumption of a new, higher-level **Status Quo (both xii and a new zero)** – were summarized by Matthew in one simple verse – verse 12, as it turns out: “And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.” (RSV)

As we live into a very different kind of year together – with me taking three months of Sabbath time in February, March and April as you explore new ways with Rev. Bill Millar – we are very much on the cusp of God’s new thing being done in us. We are those who have encountered Christ and are now discerning what the “other way” will be for us as we take the next steps. This is a year in which we will need to reach deep within and decide if the “Affirming Ministry” designation describes who we are and who we want to be. Sometime soon we will need to broadly engage how the physical structure of this Church building equips us to do Christ’s work, and how it limits the mission we have been given to do, and determine the steps to address that. And alongside these more formal things, we will need to do what we always need to do: to love God and allow ourselves to be loved by God; to recognize the needs of our neighbours, and bring our love and God’s love into their lives. We leave what was, we encounter the loving presence of God, and we see and hear and feel life in a new way that demands new responses.

There would have been no story for Matthew to tell, if the magi were content with their status quo and simply stayed at home with their comfort and their status. But that state of comfort and well being was simply the beginning of the story. May God continue to write amazing stories, in your lives and in our life together, in this coming year and beyond. Amen.

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See also:

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