

Sermon Title: The gift of guidance.
Texts: Matthew 2:1-12
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The Magi invite us to be pilgrims also.
To receive and open up to the Spirit's gift of Guidance so that we too may encounter Christ.
In order to receive the guidance of the Spirit, let us:

- pay attention to our inner life
- come before God with humility, curiosity & surrender to Christ, saying yes to life.

As we prepared for Christmas and package the treasures we are giving to others – whether a card, a homemade item, or a store-bought find – they are not yet gifts.

They are merely parcels with intentions.

“Gifts, are only gifts when they are received”.

(Brother Curtis Almquist (Society of Saint John the Evangelist) The 12 days of Christmas)

And so, it is with the gift of guidance. The Spirit of God desires to guide us on our way.
Lighting up the path for our every step. But her desire is not yet a gift. It only becomes a gift when we, you and I receive it and open up to it.

Matthew writes a gospel primarily to a Jewish audience.

And yet he commends the spirituality of a few Gentile travellers, to his audience.

These travellers are from the East (Magi suggests Persia, their astrology suggests Babylon and their gifts suggest Syria).

They are pilgrims, wise ones, royalty, priests, or astrologers.

And they are given to us in this narrative as guides.

For they demonstrate a way to receive the gift of God's guidance.

A gift that leads us on toward Christ. To the light of the world.

To One who Shepherds us, who will never leave us, who reclaims our pasts and gives hope for our future. One in whom there is great love, peace and reconciliation for all humanity.

These travellers invite us to be pilgrims also. To receive and open up the Spirit's gift of Guidance so that we too may encounter Christ's presence wherever we go and in all we do.

I am struck by their wisdom.

Wise people pay attention.

Rachel Naomi Remen writes: “My grandfather taught me that a teacher is not a wise man, but a finger directing our attention to the reality that surrounds us”

(In: The Five Invitations: Discovering what death can teach us about living fully, by Frank Ostaseski)

In order to see a star that is moving – you would need to know the layout of the cosmos. These travellers were aware, awake – they heeded to what was around them and were able to notice when it changed.

They read the stars and we are told later in the narrative that they read their dreams also.

Mystics tell us that when we embark on our inner journey. We find it is an expanding universe. (*Pro Mundi Vita Material, intro by Brad Pickens*).

And it is a place for us to receive the guidance of the Spirit toward the light of Christ.

Mystic Etty Hillesum – a dutch author who wrote of her religious awakening in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. She said that “Through every being single space extends: outer space within.”

Etty deepened her inner journey during the time of the Nazi regime. And it was costly. But her writings are a gift to humanity.

The Magi were led directly to the point of National tension between a cruel appointed King, and the One born King. And their journey is a gift to humanity.

Ilea Daleo writes that the mystics help us realize that when our inner universe becomes strong, then the soul has a depth of freedom and light that shapes how we see the world and how we creatively contribute to the world.

(*Ilea Daleo: A Hunger for Wholeness*)

As we begin this new year, let us set a goal of strengthening our inner lives – this is called spiritual formation – that is to focus on experiences that lead us deeper into Christ’s light, to deepen faith and to shape us. With the ultimate goal that this spiritual shaping is for a larger purpose— for the ongoing action of God in the world and in our communities.

May I invite us to embrace a simple daily spiritual practice at home alone or with our partners, friends and children?

The Examen:

(*Adapted from “Examen of Consciousness: Finding God in all things” by Phyllis Zagano*).

The Examen is a popular way of praying and was developed by St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus (The Jesuits). The Examen only takes about 15mins to complete.

The Examen is a simple prayer, a prayer for busy people who are continually seeking to follow God.

It enables us to open our heart more fully to God in our lives and recognize God’s presence in everything, as we go about our daily tasks.

When we make The Examen a daily habit, it allows us to see God’s light in us and to discern the path we need to take.

There are 5 simple steps and the prayer can be made anywhere.

(Full version on our website: <https://www.saint-catherines.org/blog/the-gift-of-guidance>)

- (1) Recall you are in the presence of God.
 - a. We are always in the presence of God but in prayer we place ourselves in God's presence
 - b. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you look at your life with love this day.

- (2) Look at your day with gratitude.
 - a. Begin to give thanks to God for the gifts of the day.
 - b. Take special care to notice what you have received and what you gave.
 - c. As you complete the review of your gifts and the particular gifts of the day, pause to thank God for all of these.

- (3) Ask help from the Holy Spirit.
 - a. Look at the ways you have responded to God's gracious gifts and love this day.
 - b. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you look at your actions clearly with an understanding of your limitations.

- (4) Review your day
 - a. What was life affirming for me today?
What brought me joy? When did I give love? What was meaningful?
For children we can ask – what made you smile/laugh?

 - b. What drained me of energy today?
What brought sorrow? What was devoid of meaning?
For children we can ask – what made you frown or sad or feel like crying?

- (5) Reconcile and Resolve.
 - a. Imagine Christ with you or Jesus sitting beside you.
 - b. Tell Christ what you need to. It might be a confession, it might be a gratitude, it might be a surrendering or a letting go.
 - c. Notice if there is anyone who is on your heart who you need to have a conversation with.
 - d. Ask the Spirit for guidance for the next day.

This little exercise has helped me to be honest with how I experience my day to day activities and interactions.

This habit opens me up to receive the guidance the Spirit has to offer and to become more aware of my inner life.

Most recently I found myself giving thanks to God for a resolution I had felt in letting go an early memory of hospitalization. And in the daily giving thanks, I would visualize a particular family member and wondered if it would be beneficial for us to talk about it.

I felt led to initiate a call with him. This is where the 'star' led me to.

The light of Christ shone bright - reclaiming my younger life.

For it is in the mix of everyday life that God guides.
And how will we notice, if we are not paying attention?

For it is here we will see the ‘moving star’. And be prepared to receive the gift of guidance that will lead us on the way to Christ. For the Light has come.

Wise people pay attention.

Wise people travel with a sense of curiosity and uncertainty.

The first recorded words are a question. They asked.
They put aside their status from a foreign land – Matthew accentuates this by naming Herod, King numerous times. And they asked about The One born King. This One.
This Christ Child for whom there was and is a star. A light that guided them and guides us.

The gift of guidance is given to those who ask.

In her book “Eat, pray, Love”, Elizabeth Gilbert journals the first time she remembers praying.
It went something like this:

“Hello, God. How are you? I’m Liz. It’s nice to meet you.”

She says she was speaking to the creator of the universe as though she had just been introduced at a cocktail party – and she nearly said: “I’ve always been a big fan of your work!”

She went on...

“I’m sorry to bother you so late at night, but I’m in serious trouble. I am not as expert at praying, but can you help me? I don’t know what to do. Please tell me know to do”

And what unfolds is her faith journey.

The gift of guidance is given to those who ask.

Wise travellers journey with curiosity and a sense of uncertainty.

They journeyed to a birth and carried the awareness of death with them.

Heading into the unknown – we would do well to grow comfort with the sense of uncertainty.

To admit we do not know. There is a humility in this posture.

“And these wise travelers knelt down and paid him homage”

Surrendered. Letting go these three strange gifts they were entrusted to carry.

We too are offered the gift of guidance.

For the light has come.

During Advent we anticipated the coming light.

During the 12 Days of Christmas the Light was born in Christ.

As we enter this season of Epiphany:

The Light is manifested to each of us in different ways. Pay attention. Amen.

For Those Who Have Far to Travel
An Epiphany Blessing

If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it;
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.
Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping
step by
single step.
There is nothing
for it
but to go
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:
to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more

than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;
to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions
beyond fatigue
beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.
There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.
Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road

that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel
to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by
another way.
Jan Richardson

