

“Spiritual Adventurers” [Gift Bearers] (Isaiah 60: 1-6; Matt.2:1-12) January 21, 2018
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Some of you travelled out of town over Christmas and New Years. If you did, or even if you just travelled around the county, you were probably part of the large number of people on the roads and at the airports. All those people trying to get somewhere, taking suitcases, boxes and various baggages with them.

One of the things I noticed about the Scripture reading for the Advent and Christmas is that in almost every lesson, people are coming and going on some journey or another. During December we journeyed with Isaiah’s people in exile. We went out to the wilderness to hear John the Baptist preach. And we travelled on the road with Mary and Joseph. The highways were crowded with people on their way to Bethlehem, with angel messengers and with shepherds from the surrounding hills.

Then on Tuesday, January 6, with the arrival of wise men from the East, we entered a new season, the season of Epiphany, the season of light. If ever there is a time for lighting lots of candles in the church, I like to do it during Epiphany. Glorious light shines in reading after reading during the six weeks of Epiphany.

Epiphany began with a bright star shining in the night sky. The star guided the magi on a long and difficult journey through many dark valleys. At first it led them through Jerusalem where they met the current king, who was obviously a powerful and worldly man who was not to be trusted. But the new king, the King they were looking for was further down the road in Bethlehem.

What the magi found in that small town changed them forever. Matthew says that they returned to their own country by another road. To return home by another road is a metaphor for living a changed life. We most often focus on the gifts that the magi presented to the Christ child. But these God-seekers also received a gift that they would carry with them the rest of their lives.

This year St. John’s will continue a journey of transforming as a Christian family. Transformation is a redirection of the congregation’s ministry in response to significant changes in the membership and changes in the community around the church. It is an intentional effort to refocus the congregation’s ministry. But it is also like having a conversion experience. It is a process of aligning the ourselves with a vision of what God is calling us to be and to do.

Like the magi, all of us are called to be “spiritual adventurers.” When people decide to walk by faith and to follow Jesus Christ, each day becomes an adventure. Spiritual adventure calls us to dig into our treasure chests and find the gifts we need for this journey. So during this transformation period we need the gift of flexibility and openness to surprise. And we need the gift of patience – patience with yourself, myself, patience with each other, and patience with the world that doesn’t always live up to our hopes and expectations. And of course, we will need the gift of trust – trust that God is



with us. God is with us when we aren't even sure where we will end up. God is with us when we have trouble imagining how we will get to where we are going. In fact, God is with us even when it is difficult to trust.

When you are on a spiritual adventure, the most useful gifts are the Bible stories that teach us what travelling with God is like. The telling and retelling of Bible stories allows us to travel to new places where we can imagine living in new ways and becoming new people. When we are on the road to someplace else, we are often forced to grow beyond who we were in that place we left behind. The journey is where God prepared us for the new place that lies ahead. As we travel down new roads, we begin to see the world differently. Spiritual adventurers tell stories about the place they are going. We talk about the place we want to be in the hope that ultimately we will be able to live our way into that place.

Geography is important for people of faith. When we gather for worship we tell stories about places, places like the Garden of Eden; the Promised Land that God gave to Abraham and Sarah; the wedding banquet in the kingdom of God; or the vision of a new heaven and a new earth as found in Revelation. Hope and longing leads us to places like these where we can go and try out a different kind of world. That's what happens every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper. When we take communion we attend a banquet in the kingdom of God, and we get a taste of what God's future kingdom will be like. Like the magi, we too may be changed by what we see when we visit these places.

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote that what is offered in the biblical story is a world that is both familiar and unfamiliar. It is a world that is both real and mysterious. We enter into the world of Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Miriam, Mary and Joseph, as if this is our own story. In these stories it may be easier to see and understand the truth than in our own world. By telling and retelling the story, we are able to challenge existing kingdoms and move toward the New World that God is bringing forth around us. Faith stories don't take us away from reality. They take us deeper into it. They have the power to help us rediscover our world. They help us understand who we are. They can give us a deeper appreciation of our life with God and our walk with Christ.

You may be wondering what it feels like when a congregation is transforming. For every congregation it is different. So that is something you will have to learn for yourself as an individual and yourselves, corporately. But I can give you some hints.

You will first recall that it was because of a significant change in the life of St. John's that I was invited to come and work in your midst for a season. It was also because change was determined to be both desired and needed, that I accepted the invitation. I believe that we all knew in advance that this change was necessary for the future of the congregation and to get there was and is not going to happen over night or without some challenges.

Being a transforming church means that you are experiencing change. Even for people who are open to change and ready to change, transformation isn't always easy.

If you are not feeling a little uncomfortable, then you are not transforming.

If your hands are clenched tight to hold on to the past, you are not transforming.

If you are holding onto old grudges, you are not transforming.

If you are holding onto your relationship of love or anger with the previous pastor, then you are not transforming.

If you are not discovering new things about the community, you are probably not transforming.

If you are not present in worship so that you are more lively and uplifting, then you are probably not transforming.

If you are not electing new people to the offices of leadership, then you are not transforming.

If the pastor is seen as the person responsible for most of the ministry, you are not transforming.

If the vision for the new minister is based on your positive or negative memories of the past, you are not transforming.

If the purpose of my ministry here is interpreted to be putting everything back the way it was, you are not transforming.

If the vision of some is to outwait my tenure, then fix things the way some may want them to be, then you are not transforming.

A transforming, Christian centred congregation is learning to pray from the heart and having very honest conversations with God.

A transforming congregation relies on spiritual practices to discern the direction God is leading them.

A transforming congregation is one that balances the intramural and the extramural priorities.

A transforming congregation is taking risks in its mission and outreach.

A transforming congregation is less interested in attracting new members than making new disciples for Jesus Christ.

Nelle Morton writes that a difficult aspect of any journey is a nostalgic longing to return home. So much of who and what we are has to do with the “gatherings” that have helped to create us – the commitments, the connections, all the things we learned to do back there, back when. But Nelle Morton discovered that home is not a place. Home is a movement, a quality of relationships, and a state where people are becoming more and more themselves. Morton claims that the journey itself is our home.

A congregation with an active, living faith will always be on the move. It can no longer live in the same old ways. It must move on if it is to remain alive and growing. God is offering you of St. John’s the gift of new possibilities, a new path, a new map, and a chance to discover new ways of being in ministry. These gifts are cause for celebration.

Isaiah says, “Arise, shine, for your light has come.” May you continue your journey of transformation as people who walk in the light of God. You may be headed for a new, unfamiliar place, but you are not alone. You go with God who is around you to protect

you, before you to guide you, above you to bless you, and beneath you to hold you up.
Seek God on your journey and you will be transformed. Amen.