

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Bucket List: Traveling"
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January 6, 2008

(Epiphany)

Perhaps you've heard of the new movie where two men meet in the hospital. One is a retired mechanic and the other is a billionaire. They are meeting in the hospital and they both realize that there is a lot more in life that they want to do before they "kick the bucket." Thus they devise a "bucket list" of things to do before they die. One seems to have more ideas than other, but then the other has the resources to carry them out. Now this is not an endorsement for the movie, which I haven't seen, but it is an endorsement of the idea of thinking about a bucket list for your life. Have you thought about the things you want to do before you die, whether you are a teenager or have already had many years of retirement...have you thought about it? Have you written it down, and told your friends to hold you accountable?

CBC Radio locally took up the challenge and had a call in show asking people what's on their bucket lists. The main guest was a woman who wanted to circumnavigate the island of Newfoundland, in a kayak. And, yes that wasn't nearly enough, she wanted to also kayak the Labrador coast from top to bottom. These things were to be wedged between her climbing the highest seven peaks in the world including Everest. So clearly she had a fairly high expectation of her Bucket List for Traveling. What's yours? What do you expect to do with your life, travel wise? What do you expect to do with your life? Write out your thoughts. Share them with someone who will appreciate them and give you feedback.

There was a woman I met in the Presbyterian Church in Saskatoon in the late '80s who had booked her plane tickets to the last of the seven continents on her list, it was Antarctica. She was ready to bring closure to her traveling list.

There were travelers who had made it their preoccupation to understand astronomical occurrences. They watched the constellations and the seasonal and other stellar events in the night sky with their own bucket lists. They decided they would be guided by a celestial occurrence to find an ultimate king, one who would rule in a small, but consequential realm in the middle of the Middle East. The Bible calls them the Magi, the wise men. Our tradition has counted them as only three, and has given names, although the

Bible account we read only refers to three gifts. There could have been more or less. We do know that these travelers were well enough off to take time away from their own responsibilities to find the new king. We know they were probably well to do by the expensive gifts they gave. And I always like to think that these gifts were the way and means by which Jesus and his family escaped the slaughter of the innocents by wicked Herod.

But what happened to these travelers' motives was a manifestation of the importance of the One to be born. By the way, there is nothing in the Bible of those visiting travelers being kings, only that they were interested in visiting the King. They used their common sense and went to the current ruler in Jerusalem, Herod, to find out about him.

Herod, commonly referred to as "Herod the Great," I suppose to distinguish him from his relatives, lived between 37 and 4 BC. He was the grandfather of Herod Agrippa I who killed James, put Peter into prison and was struck down by an angel in 44 AD (see Acts 12: 1-24).

He was a non-Jew, an Idumean, who was appointed king of Judea by the Roman Senate in 40 BC and gained control in 37 BC. Like most rulers of the day, he was ruthless, murdering his wife, his three sons, mother-in-law, brother-in-law, uncle and many others (not to mention the babies in Bethlehem). His reign was also noted for splendor, as seen in the many theaters, amphitheaters, monuments, pagan altars, fortresses and other buildings he erected or refurbished—including the greatest work of all, the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, begun in 20 BC and finished 68 years after his death.¹

Herod was much more interested in politics, personal accomplishment and short term power than he was in a bucket list that would benefit humanity. So when the Magi came and spoke to him, we see the devious and perverse side come out in the lies he spoke about worshipping the newborn King as well.

But once again, revelation came to the Magi through a dream. And once again, unlike our time where we think vivid dreams are mostly the result of pizza or spicy foods, the Magi took their dream seriously and went home without informing Herod.

¹ NIV Study Bible, revised 2002, note on Matthew 2:1, p. 1467

Many have asked, "Why is this account in the Bible?" What do astronomers or astrologers, probably from Persia or Southern Arabia and definitely centuries before Islam, have to do with the Messiah of the Jews?

Clearly, Matthew wants his readers to know that this event was for a much larger audience than just the Jews in and around Jerusalem. Bethlehem, by the way, is only about five miles south of Jerusalem. This event was to be of interest to everyone, across every culture. That is why Epiphany in some ways explains Christmas better than Christmas itself. We know that Christmas is about the Messiah of the Jews, but we don't know that this One is to be the Light of the World for all nations and all cultures until the Magi lead us to this teaching. God uses many and creative ways to draw us to Himself.

Here we find an unusual celestial event used of God to lead this group of travelers and all of us to the One. No one is certain what this actual celestial constituted. Some say it was the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn which came together. Others prefer a comet. Still others simply say it was a supernatural occurrence which we still don't understand astronomically. Whatever it was, it was bright and remarkable. And it didn't happen like we often say when we have our little manger scenes, at the same time as the baby was in the manger. Matthew 2 happens when Jesus was a child (Greek word *paidion* under the age of 2, which we know by Herod's orders later on in the story (v. 16), but older than an infant), and the child Jesus was with his mother Mary in a house, not a stable. So this probably takes place at least a few months after the shepherds came and the animals were all around.

So what should we do with our manger scenes? One Minister I worked with in Cornwall, chose to only bring out the Magi figurines on January 6, on Epiphany, or the Sunday just before it. And he would add them and their gifts and camels. Of course there were three, but he usually didn't get into that.

As for us, we simply remind ourselves that the manger scene tends to be a harmony of all the various gospel traditions, but doesn't actually do justice to the Biblical account. The main point of the Epiphany, is

indeed the manifestation of Jesus Christ as the hope for the whole world, across every tribe, language, custom and ability. Jesus is for those who have everything, and for those who have nothing.

Jesus is for you and for me. Are we for Him? How do our bucket lists reflect our commitment to Jesus and to His ways? Are we committed to Christ for the long term or do we simply act more like Herod who did both great and appalling things?

Every Epiphany, we are to examine ourselves to see again in the New Year to whom we belong, and to be encouraged to long for the things and activities to whom we belong. We so easily get off track.

I've suggested we start meeting Wednesday nights to explore together this faith we need to learn more about and grow into. I won't suggest this Wednesday as the Board meets, but I will suggest the following Wednesday at 7:30, as a beginning for the Exploration of the Faith. Here we will explore together, using resources such as the small screen and books and one another's experiences to look into what we believe.

Come and explore.

The Magi made the effort to meet the One. Let's make 2008 a renewing of His acquaintance, and a year full of wonderful surprises.

Let us pray.