

Feast of the Epiphany  
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*Cultivating the Heart of an Explorer*

In the past week we have been exposed to some amazing pictures from parts of the solar system never viewed before. Images of an icy sphere shaped much like a snowman nicknamed by NASA scientists, “Ultima Thule,” which means “beyond the known world”. It is believed to be the most primitive object pictured by any spacecraft. On the following day China announced that it successfully landed a space probe on the far side of the moon opening a new chapter in human lunar exploration. I think these stories and images in particular caught my attention because I had just finished watching a documentary on the final week of the almost twenty-year Cassini mission to Saturn. In September 2017 the spacecraft which had completed 293 orbits of the planet, snapped 400,000 photos, discovered seven new moons, descended into the famous rings and made its final plunge into the atmosphere of Saturn before burning up. The documentary follows Julie Webster, the spacecraft’s creator and chief engineer who also had been one of a handful of women working on the mission when its journey began in 1997. These final days of the mission were bittersweet for this seasoned NASA employee, recalling wistfully, “I didn’t start out to be a rocket scientist. Actually, I wanted to drive eighteen wheelers. I bounced all around so many different things and so many different places. I’ve never been one to have a five-year plan or a ten-year plan. I didn’t even know that this was what I wanted to do. To have now worked on this spacecraft for twenty-three years. It’s beyond my wildest dreams. It’s been a convoluted journey, but a marvelous one on which I look back and am in awe of.”

As I hear again the story of the Magi and their journey following a star, I think of Julie Webster and all other rocket scientists whose life’s work and passion is to explore places never seen before, to embrace mysteries yet uncovered and changed by these experiences, changed in unexpected and deeply personal ways. I can imagine one of the Magi sitting in his comfortable palace after the grueling journey to Bethlehem and back, reflecting on his experience while using some of the same words that Webster used to describe her Cassini work. Spiritual writer, Enuma Okoro, says about the wise men: “I love their story because it’s about people who have already ‘arrived’ in life and are comfortable by all cultural standards, but who remain open to risk-taking, adventure, humility and being transformed by mystery they may not fully understand. The Wise Men were intelligent men used to thinking for themselves and basing decisions on logic and reason. But they traveled to a stable to visit a child born to a poor couple because they believed that anything was possible with God, even the things that seemed to

make the least sense or were the least plausible.” Leaving the comfort and safety of all they knew was itself seemingly foolish. It doesn’t make a whole lot of sense as they set out on their adventure. And yet like all great explorers they were drawn to something beyond themselves, invited into a new opportunity, a new challenge, a new mystery. As preacher Barbara Brown Taylor shares in her sermon on the journey of the wise men: “They were all sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the right eye of each of them. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imagination, but they were wise enough to know that it didn’t matter. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.” (Home by Another Way, Taylor, 1999).

This kind of risk-taking, of being able to acknowledge you don’t have all the answers but are eager to pay attention to what lay before you, responding to the invitation with curiosity and courage is what the Magi have to teach us. It involves the willingness to take one step and then another and then another, unsure of where each step will lead us but excited by how the journey unfolds. And when we get to the place where we think we have arrived at our destination, we realize we’ve made a wrong turn and there’s more road to travel. Any good explorer will tell you that it is in the wrong turns, even the mistakes where the journey gets really interesting and where true discoveries are made. The Magi’s’ star had brought them to a dead end, and so they asked Herod if he knew of any other kings in the area. Yes, there was to be a new king born in the city of Bethlehem, according to the prophet Micah. Herod sent the men in search of this king on the condition that they report back to him. With no intention to return to Herod, he still managed to serve as an instrument for their guidance. The wrong turns and dead ends can lead us closer to the mystery.

The reasons why we are called to be explorers are often not clear at first. On the surface we may seem the least likely candidates to go where the stars lead. We may have thought we were going to drive eighteen wheelers and instead up as a rocket scientist. The Magi came from far off, exotic lands and worshiped different Gods than the people of Israel and they had been the ones chosen to pay homage to Israel’s new king. I wonder if when they arrived at the stable part of the reason they knelt before the child was because they were in absolute awe of where they had ended up, paying homage both to this newborn and to the incredible journey that led them to him. Not in their wildest dreams could they have imagined the star would bring them to this place, and especially this child, the hope of the world. The story ends with the Magi returning home by another road. They would not dare return the way they had come, risking the wrath of Herod. But these words offer so much more. The journey has changed them. The child has changed them. Transformed by the light, not of the star, but what they

had discovered through the star, they must begin anew. Another road awaits them with the light shining from within each of their hearts.

It's the first Sunday of a new year, a time to start fresh, maybe to embark on a new road, eager to behold yet unseen and undiscovered mysteries. If nothing else a new year gives us the opportunity to reflect for a moment on what we want for ourselves in the coming year and how we want to make it happen. It is also a time to reflect on what we need to let go of and to embrace as we begin again. The Magi's invitation involves a different kind of resolution. To cultivate the heart of an explorer, worrying less about creating the map that will get us to our destination and focusing more on what's right in front of us. Putting one foot in front of the other, unsure of where each step will lead, but appreciative of the journey itself and how it unfolds. Trusting that this life, and this road, is given to us for a reason. The path that will be utterly unique to each of us, but all safe in the heart of God. We set out to follow our own star and discover we are not alone. We need not know everything to follow its light. We need only to trust the invitation and the One beckoning us to the journey. Amen.