

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Today, we are celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany and the visitation of the Wise men to the place where Mary and Joseph were residing with their young child, named Jesus.

Most of us will be familiar with the story of the three wise men coming from the Empire of Persia. These men were astronomers, astrologers if you will, whose job it was to follow the movement of the stars in the night sky and to keep the emperor informed of any celestial occurrences which could be interpreted as predictors of some change in the world order. The emperor would be particularly interested in any predictions of future conflicts between nations, the deaths of powerful leaders, and of course the birth of anyone who potentially would be a future leader of a nation or people. The Wise men, whom we also know as the Magi, had just recently found such an event occurring in the night sky. They had seen a new star appear.

I would like you to jump forward in time, to this present day and a recent celestial event which was visible in our skies over Vancouver Island several years ago. You may remember an occurrence when something happened in the south-western sky, just after the sun had set and darkness began to descend. There were two objects of light which seemed to be moving closer and closer together, with the passing of each night. And then, these two stars seemed to join to become one bright point of light. What we were seeing was a great conjunction, the alignment of two planets. In fact, these planets were Jupiter, and Saturn, coming together in alignment, in their orbits around the Sun.

A conjunction such as the one we witnessed on this particular occasion, only occur every four to six hundred years. The last one which was visible in the night sky to all humanity to see, occurred in the 12th century, over eight hundred years ago. Astronomers today, believe that the star which the Wise men saw some two thousand years ago, was indeed an occurrence of this same great conjunction between the planets Jupiter, and Saturn. And so, they recognized this event as being the marker of the birth of some great leader, a new-born king if you will, somewhere to the west of where they lived in Persia.

Now, there is a twist to the story in the journey of the Wise men to seek this new king, which I wish to share with you this morning. This twist is based on a book, The Fourth Wise Man, written many years ago by Henry Van Dyke.

The passage from Matthew's gospel which I shared with you a few minutes ago, is the only gospel that speaks of the visit of the Magi. Magi is the plural of magus, which is translated as being a learned person. Magi were known as the priestly cast of the Zoroastrian religion of western Persia. The Magi may have come from Persia, about 2500 km distance from Bethlehem; or from Babylon and Mesopotamia, about 1100 km from Bethlehem; or from the Arabian Desert, also a journey of about 1100 km to Bethlehem. Magi were men who believed in God and knew that a Messiah was coming. They understood the importance of the prophecies found in the Old Testament and were prepared to make this long and arduous journey to find this new king. It clear that there were several travellers on this quest to find this new king, and they wanted to arrive at their destination, as a group.

Today, we sing hymns about there being three Wise men, Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthazar. But I would like to suggest that there may have been as many as twelve wise men who set out to make this journey, coming together from many different starting points. I could not find any mention of women travelling in the group, but I would not discount their presence and their influence on the course and outcome of this journey to find a new-born king. After all, women would have kept the journey on track and organized, and made sure everyone arrived at the place the star was leading them to find this new-born king.

There were several different centres in the Empires of the Near East, from where these astronomers may have studied the heavens to predict world events. One such group were the three wise men as found in our gospel reading for today. There are no records of others, not in the scriptures, nor in historical writings, nor any other record of civilization, records of who they were, or where they came from.

Today, I wish to introduce you to one other wise man who may also have made the journey to Bethlehem. His name was Artaban. He studied the heavens from a distant city, away from Gaspar, Balthazar, Melchior, and others. He corresponded with the other wise men with some regularity. It is said that he saw the star rising in the heavens at about the same time as the others. They all agreed to meet at a point on the caravan route to the west, and together they would journey to this far-off land, following the star, and bearing gifts for this new-born king.

Artaban sold all his possessions and purchased three gifts for the new king. His gifts were a ruby, a sapphire, and an exquisite pearl. Just as

he was about to leave to meet the others, matters at home took his attention and his departure was delayed so that he missed the appointed time to meet the others, by several weeks. Undeterred, he set out to follow the star on his own. And this is where his story takes another twist.

Artaban came upon a man who had been set upon by thieves who robbed him and left him for dead. Artaban cared for the man and delivered him to an inn where he could be cared for until he recovered. In payment for this man's care, Artaban gave the inn keeper the ruby. One gift for the new-born king was now gone.

Later in his quest, he came upon a young woman who was being sold into slavery. He bought the young woman's freedom with the sapphire. And now, he only had the pearl left as a gift for the king. But it was exquisite pearl, flawless and of great value. It was indeed a gift fit for the new-born king.

Artaban never did catch up with the other Magi, but he continued to follow the star until he arrived at the place the star had led him. Imagine his disappointment when he discovered that Mary and Joseph, and the baby, had fled to Egypt, when Herod began killing all the first-born boys aged two and younger. Artaban was devastated, but he journeyed onward in his quest to find this new king .

The story goes that he wandered through the lands of the middle east for some thirty years, and finally sold the pearl, his final gift, just to survive. His quest to see the child, born king of the Jews, finally ended some thirty years later, on a hill outside of Jerusalem on a dark Friday afternoon as a huge crowd gathered to watch the crucifixion of three men, one of whom who was said to be the king of the Jews. That day,

Artaban had finally found the king. His quest was now complete, and he worshipped the Son of God, dying on the cross for all humankind.

The story does not make clear what happened to Artaban from that point forward. But that does not really matter. Today, we celebrate the Magi coming to worship the King born so that all humanity might know his name and give him honour. And we, with the Magi of old, give honour and praise to the new-born King of kings, and Lord of lords, just as Artaban, Gasper, Melchior and Balthazar did.

The wise men travelled to meet and worship the new king of the Jews. At this Epiphany, we share in their journey, their worship, and their belief that Jesus is indeed King of all Creation.

May this day be a blessing to you and all those you meet on your journey in faith. Hallelujah. Amen.