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Matthew 2:1-12

Isaiah 60:1-6

Psalm 72:1-7,10-14

Ephesians 3:1-12

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The Epiphany of Our Lord

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6 miles. That's how long it takes to drive from Goochland Courthouse to Crozier. 6 miles.

I am sure every one of you drive that route a few times each week. Going into town, running errands, maybe going to work. You can almost drive it with your eyes closed it's such a familiar road. You probably know every turn, every hill, every spot a deer may cross. You know the houses, maybe even some of the folks who live along the way. You also know that if you don't get gas at the Exxon on the corner then it will be exactly 6 miles until you get another chance once you arrive in Crozier.

And, if you drive the distance you know that it will take you less than 10 minutes. If you walked, it would take you between 2 – 3 hours depending on your motivation. However we get there, we mark these miles with a distinct knowledge and familiarity.

Here's another interesting fact...did you know that there is only 6 miles that separate Jerusalem from Bethlehem? That's it. The distance between here and Crozier. In fact, if you are standing in Jerusalem you can almost see Bethlehem in the distance just over the hilltops.

On Epiphany, we focus on the journey of the Magi, those acclaimed Wise Men from the East who come from great distances to see this Messiah who has come to be with us. Guided by a star, a light, they recognize something miraculous in their midst and as a result, they leave everything they know to discover who this Messiah might be. And so we tell the story each year of how they arrived in Bethlehem with gifts in hand for Jesus, to praise him and honor him.

That's the Christmas pageant version of the story but there is so much more to it than just the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. There is the fascinating portion of their journey that has truly caught my attention this year...it's those last 6 miles. Not the endless days of exhausting and treacherous travel in unknown lands. Not the arrival in Bethlehem and the completion of our image of the nativity. No, this year what stood out to me were their last 6 miles.

What we know if this...the Magi have traveled from the East – it's understood that their journey was rather long possibly from Persia (modern day Iran) or maybe the Arabian peninsula (modern day Yemen). Regardless, it was a long journey guided by this star they had seen. But along the way, when they are almost there, they stop in Jerusalem to ask for directions – where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? Eventually Herod catches wind of their inquiries. And Herod, being the ever paranoid king, was so unsettled that a new king had been born that he gathered all of the chief priests and scribes to help him find this Messiah. They tell Herod that this baby had indeed been born in Bethlehem.

Take note...the religious leaders already knew that Jesus had been born – just 6 miles away. But we aren't told that anyone – none of the religious leaders and none of the other people in Jerusalem had traveled to see Jesus. In fact, from what we are told, the wise men are the first to make that short journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. And here's what else is important to note...when they go, no one follows. Only the wise men go to see Jesus.

Think about that – right there, in their midst is the long awaited for Messiah and only 3 wise men make the effort to go and see him. The distance between here and Crozier. Doesn't it seem strange?

The Magi on the one hand had traveled so far, given up so much, encountered difficult travels because this was something they couldn't ignore. So much faith, so much hope, so much sacrifice. And yet, everyone else? Those last 6 miles were just too much.

Were the people of Jerusalem lazy or indifferent? Were they apathetic or maybe just too busy? Were they scared? We don't know but my guess is that we can all relate to their immobility. How many times have 6 short miles kept us from doing something important?

And why is it so hard? Maybe because taking those final steps in any journey challenges our comfort and our identity. It challenges our stability. It challenges our faith and our courage. And it can be absolutely terrifying. So you may find yourself asking...Is that light that I see really worth following? Is God really in my midst, right now when I need God the most? Can I trust God to be with me when I make that journey?

What is your 6 miles?

Maybe it's getting help for addiction walking those last 6 miles to ask for help and trusting that your family is going to love you through it – day after day, step by step.

Maybe it's leaving an abusive relationship and trusting yourself enough to know you have the strength to get through every difficult day ahead remembering that Jesus is working hard to hold you up.

Maybe it is simply opening your heart to someone who needs you even though you feel you don't have the time or the skills to be the right kind of friend or partner or neighbor.

You know what your 6 miles are.

And look, we have to be very careful not to judge those folks who didn't go to Bethlehem even though they had heard the Good News taking place in that little village. We also can't praise blindly the wise men who did make the journey. People go and people stay for so many reasons.

Sometimes we don't go because we feel shame. Shame to speak up about whatever we have gone through and so we turn away from following that great light.

Sometimes we don't go because we carry guilt. Guilt over what we should have done or could have done but didn't and so we don't feel worthy of any gift of God's grace.

Sometimes we don't go because we are absolutely debilitated by fear. Fear of retribution. Fear of the consequences even though we know in our hearts what we ought to do and God is calling us forward but can't move from where we stand.

If anything, the story of the Magi reminds me that 6 miles can mean a lot of things to each of us. Whatever situation you may find yourself in – you know the reality. There is no perfectly crafted answer or solution that I can give you. The journey, especially those final 6 miles can often be the most challenging. Taking the step. Trusting God. Having faith in yourself. Relying on your community.

But that is what our journey together as Christians is all about...the willingness to wait alongside one another until we know how to begin that journey. The knowledge that Jesus is right there encouraging us, waiting and supporting us. The faith that grace and mercy have been showered down upon us whether we go today or tomorrow or next week or next month. The light will still be signing. God loves us and knows that each of us will walk those 6 miles when we are able. Amen.