Sermon on the Feast of Epiphany
(Matthew 2:1-12)

On January 1st, the New Horizons space probe, which you might remember from its spectacular 2015 mission to Pluto, zipped by a tiny peanut shaped hunk of rock and ice, 21 miles from tip to tip, in a matter of seconds, snapping pictures and collecting scientific data on an object that is, by dint of its distance from earth, 4.5 billion miles, the most extreme object ever encountered by human kind.

Because of where it is; it’s an object that has been unaffected by the energy of the sun; it’s basically unchanged since the formation of our solar system; and because of this scientists hope to better understand how our solar system and how our own earth was formed.

All of that might be interesting but I find the process of this tiny object’s discovery even more fascinating; it was discovered via use of the occult!

No, you say, and you’d be right! Actually a process called “occultation” which means astronomers, using highly sophisticated telescopes were able to see this object pass in front of starlight that orignated 25,000 light years from our own.

And as the starlight “blinked out” for a brief moment, scientists were able determine that an object had passed in front of this distant star; and from that tiny bit of information were able to program the computers aboard New Horizons to chart a billion mile journey to take a look!

Today, of course we celebrate the Feast of Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas and in the early Church an even more important celebration of Christ’s birth than Christmas Day proper.

This because today we begin to celebrate the effect of this birth, the spreading of the light to the nations; the great glorious journey of the meaning of this message to one and all; the beginning of the fulfilling of the great promise to Abram and Sarai that we read at Lessons and Carols that all the families of the earth would be blessed by what God was beginning to do with them.

To draw the contrast with my opening story: today’s story comes by way of the magi, wise men of the ancient near east who divine the unveiling of light (not an eclipse of light) by means of the occult, the practices of astrology.

Astrology is the practice of trying to determine by means of the configuration of the stars the fate of lives and the times.

The early church, indeed the church throughout time has been against the practice of all such occult activities because they tend to assign fates rather than point to the genuine open future that God gives to the world by sending the Holy Spirit.

These practices also, generally, seek to align people with forces other than God and so tend to push people away from the first commandment which is the whole-hearted worship of God in contrast to anything that might become an idol, that might become something we think we control for our immediate wants and needs.

So it’s something very surprising and arresting when on the grand celebration of the spreading of this great message of God’s reign in the birth of his son for the whole world we read that this discovery is made, initially at least by means of occultic practices.

Now, of course, we quickly note that these men are called wise because they notice very quickly that whatever is going on is not what they’re used to: some fate that has been determined by slowly shifting constellations.

Rather something genuinely new, a new star, a new star that seems far more “local” than anything they’ve ever experience; is it a comet, a meteor of some kind; we’re not told because such distinctions were not given.

It may be, this is purely speculation on my part, something of a shared mystical vision; this would help explain the appearance, then the disappearance and then as they get closer, its reappearance.

All we know for sure is that this anomaly is enough to send these men on a great journey, something that may have, in total, taken several years. We’re left to wonder what they’re respective families made of all this; how people may have called them crazy or worse!

We’re left to wonder what it meant for them as the years passed; presumably they didn’t live long enough to learn of Jesus’ death and resurrection and yet here they are, front and center, part of God and Israel’s amazing story.

As I’ve pondered their story in light of the New Horizons event of this past week, the very name of the space craft, standing as an evocative challenge to churches everywhere! Maybe especially parishes like ours in 2019! My thoughts led me in several directions.

Science may be able to help tell us something of where we’ve come from but we need more; we need God calling us forward on a journey of “becoming;” where we come from is important but what is more important is where we are called to go and how we’re to get there.

What the story of the wise men teaches us is that wisdom concerning this “becoming” comes via “journey,” the ongoing learning that is open to God’s newness.

This journey will include our best thinking, it will take the knowledge of the scriptures (you’ll note that the seeing of a star was not enough; the wise men sought out the best biblical scholarship of their day).

But the journey of Revelation also takes us beyond the rational; this is more mysterious: it will take the integrating of our unconscious and rational minds.

Decades later, Peter predicts at Pentecost that people will “dream dreams;” we see evidence of that in this story; at crucial points God uses the unconscious processing of a dream to interrupt rational plans.

My dear partner in clergy crime, the smartest clergy person I know, Rev. Denise Doerksen takes her dreams very seriously, writing them down, dialoging about them with her spiritual director and others that she trusts.

Over the years they have helped her a lot, not as talismans, not exactly like the dreams here but as reinforcers that help her take a step of courage.

Yes, courage. The story of the wise men is not about men cloistered in a room but about taking risks of faith, stepping out to learn, to experience, to adventure even, with God. To experience God one must experience life!

And to experience life a person, a community shares gifts liberally. We see this in spades with these non-Jewish magi. What are our gifts for if not to share; that’s how they become gifts!

The great gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, were not a “sacrifice” but the very delight of the intrepid travellers; the giving of their gifts was the very climax of their great venture of faith, the very act of worship they intended. *(As an aside, did these gifts enable the Holy Family to survive their refugee years in Egypt?)*

Faith means very little unless we put our work and our treasure into it; indeed as we define our faith not just as a feeling, but as a life in which sharing becomes central, we become more open to love, more open to things God wants to show us.

God could reveal to these wise men the divine plan because God could see their willingness to share their gifts of time, talent and treasure with the new born King and through him with all of us!

All of this together is the journey of revelation! A journey, we also note, not taken up individually, but as a community, a small community to be fair, but not a singular enterprise.

Wisdom in our day is often framed as the crafting of individual spiritual practices that “work for me.” But the journey of Epiphany, the journey of Revelation into God’s Newness is unveiled as a “joining together,” a sharing our common gifts and struggles.

What is the good news in this text? ***None of what I’ve just said without God’s will to communicate with us!*** God wants to help you, us!

God will communicate with us in ways that requires all our learning, our insights and indeed, our “best efforts” even if, upon reflection those efforts were in some way mistaken.

That’s the dignity of the journey God grants us; ***but the journey itself can’t happen without the glorious good news that God wants to share the light;*** God wants to communicate with us the truth, the beauty and the goodness of what God is up to in bringing newness to all things.

The second part of the the good news is that ***whenever God communicates, it works! It has an effect! The light of revelation changes us!***

It’s highly unlikely, given all that they experienced that these wise men went back to “the east” and resumed the same practices, at least in the same way at least.

It’s far more likely that they now continued to worship the King, that they now continued to study their newly purchased scrolls of scripture.

Perhaps by sharing these stories with their children and grandchildren they paved the way for the gospel when some other intrepid adventurers came their way, decades later, proclaiming the radical and transforming message of a King crucified and resurrected.

What New Horizons will the light of Christ unveil in us in 2019? What journey will the Holy Spirit lead us on? Let’s be wise; let’s let the light lead us! Amen.