



Giotto, "The Adoration of the Magi"

A JOURNEY WITH THE MAGI THROUGH ADVENT

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Universalist National Memorial Church
for the 2010 ADVENT SEASON*

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Published by the

Universalist National Memorial Church

Dedicated to my sisters in gratitude for their encouragement.

INTRODUCTION

This journey that we are taking through Advent will focus on the Magi. We don't know much about them, other than through the Gospel of Matthew's short passage. It was later in early Christianity that a number was put on them and they were named. However, not everyone gave them the same names or had the same number of Magi. Some had three, while others had up to twelve.

In Matthew, we know that they “came from the east,” but we don't actually know where they came from. Scholars have been looking into who they were and where they came from since early in the Christian story. In 2004, the Anglican Church of England decided that the Magi should not be classified exclusively as men. The following is information gleaned from what both scholars and early Christian writers told about the Magi.

First of all the Magi were very likely Zoroastrians from Iran. Zoroastrianism was one of the very first monotheistic religions. Its founder was Zarathustra, who lived sometime about 600 BCE. He was most likely born in Mazar-I-Sharif, Afghanistan. It took him a long time to accumulate converts, since most people worshiped a myriad number of gods. Finally a ruler in what is now Iran found his religion believable and so urged his court and subjects to convert.

Up until modern times there have been Zoroastrians in Iran. However, when Islam became the dominant religion in Iran in the 7th century CE, most of the followers fled to India. There they are known as Parsees (Persians). Zoroastrians are now scattered all over the world.

In the beginning, Zoroastrians didn't have any other entities that they worshiped, only Ahura Mazda, the Wise God. Later on, they added three other minor gods, who judged the dead. The Zoroastrian culture in Northern Iran was very forward thinking for its time.

Women, in particular, were an important and visible element in their society. They were employed outside of the home in various jobs, some highly skilled. Men and women were paid on an equal basis, especially in highly skilled occupations. Women were also given paid maternity leave. Zoroastrianism advocated that both boys and girls be educated. Girls were not restricted in the subjects in which they were educated. Using the mind in positive ways was highly valued, whether it was by females or males.

Magi were the most educated and intelligent members of Zoroastrian society. They were astronomers and astrologers, at a time when astrology was considered an important part of daily life. Their education was inclusive of mathematics (as much as was known at that time), literature, religious and civic knowledge. Though history does not specifically record women as Magi, given their outlook on women, they could have been.

The setting in this Advent Devotional, is in what is now the country of Iraq, Mesopotamia, just before or just after Jesus was born.

Of course, Biblical scholars don't agree on the exact date when that happened, so we will assume that it is sometime between 3 BCE (Before the Common Era) and 7 CE (Common Era), which is when most scholars seem to think Jesus was born. The Magi are attending a gathering (today we'd call it a "convention") from around Mesopotamia.

In attendance are both women and men Magi. True to the biblical story in the Gospel of Matthew, a delegation from that "convention", commences on a journey to find this Savior. Included in this delegation are three Magi who we have come to know well, that is: Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar. However, there are a few that we haven't met, until now.

And the gifts they brought to Mary, Joseph and Jesus? Gold, frankincense and myrrh are surely among them, but perhaps a few other things are included. There is a standing joke that surrounds this meeting: If it had been three wise women instead of three wise men who commenced this journey they would have asked for directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole and brought practical gifts! Well, there are many men who would have done the same thing, but let us begin this expedition now and see what happens.

Sunday ~ November 28 ~ First Week of Advent

“Um, Master Mechior? What are you doing? You've been staring at the sky for almost an hour,” Azara remarked. She was old Melchior's young, seventeen year old apprentice. When she had turned 13 years old, she had been apprenticed to Melchior, who was a well-known and beloved Magi. Melchior had had many apprentice's in his long life, but none quite so intelligent and astute as Azara. He felt all of his many years of being a Magi were going to be paid off in this one young apprentice. That made him feel very good. He was passing on all of his knowledge and skills to the next generation.

He finally replied to her, as he pointed at the sky, “Well, Azara, there is something new in sky that I have been looking for my entire life. I see a star that tells me that a new ruler has been born in a far away land. A Saoshyant, a Savior for all the Earth.”

“Really?”, said Azara, with astonishment in her voice. “Show me what you are looking at!” Azara knew that this was a very special heavenly body; Magi had been looking for it for centuries. As Melchior showed Azara how to find it in the night sky, she realized that what she was looking at was a once-in-a-lifetime event.

“Aren't you going to tell all the other Magi?” she asked, as she caught sight of the brilliant astronomical phenomenon.

“Oh, yes,” he replied slowly. This was not something that could be kept to himself.

Reflection

Now we start the journey to Christmas. What is it we want to do? Do we want to become closer to God? Are we lacking something in our spiritual life? Are we looking to add a practice that will fill that hole in our lives? We want Advent to count for something, but just like the presents we open at Christmas, we're looking for many things. Let's just settle in and see where this journey takes us.

BIBLICAL READING: ISAIAH 60

Prayer

O God, who we come to by many paths, help us find the one that will lead us spiritually to Christmas. Guide us as we tread this path, well worn by many others, to find You and to find Jesus, the Messiah, who conquers the world. Lead us as the Magi were lead by a star to find what we need to celebrate this most special holiday. Amen

Monday ~ November 29 ~ First Week in Advent

As Mechior walked into the large meeting hall where all of the Magi in Mesopotamia were meeting, there was a noticeable hum in the room. Many Magi were excitedly talking in small groups. Melchior's appren-

tice Azara was in an animated discussion with three other apprentices, all of them seeming to be conversing at once. Suddenly, the room quieted as an older woman walked to the front of a raised platform. Everyone turned to look at her.

“Welcome!” She said loudly, smiling broadly. “Welcome to our gathering!” Everyone clapped and cheered. Then, she turned to a young man who had just walked up beside her.

“My apprentice Cyrus will give the opening blessing.”

Just as he started to speak, a young apprentice tugged on Azara's sleeve and whispered, “Who is that lady, Azara?”

Azara whispered, “It's the Head Magi, Asefeh Dinak.”

The young apprentice nodded her head. Just as Cyrus finished, Asefeh (which means Wise Woman) Asefeh Dinak began to speak.

“It is so good to see you. It has been a long time since we have had a chance to gather.” She went on to outline the details of the three day assembly. Azara looked at the young apprentice beside her. She was quite young, but was attentively following Asefeh as she gave information about what was going to happen in the next few days. Azara glanced around and knew that others, too, had seen what she and Melchior had seen.

Reflection

This is the season when we often attend large gatherings of friends, family, even co-workers. Sometimes it's hard to feel the holiday spirit. But remember, we are always bathed in the love of God. Reach out to others rather than drawing inward. Find a way to help someone who perhaps needs a helping hand.

BIBLICAL READING: NUMBERS 24:14-17; 19

Prayer

Holy Spirit, touch us today as we start this journey to Christmas. Touch us to let us know that we are loved. Touch us so that we know we are not alone. Touch us for healing. Touch us in a way that let's us know that there are others in this world who need you. Touch us so that we reach out to show your love and healing. Amen

Tuesday ~ November 30 ~ First Week of Advent

After the opening session, Asefeh Dinak gathered with the other leaders. She hugged Mechior, Balthasar and Asefeh Sholeh, a woman Magi who worked with Balthasar. They were old friends and had spent many years as Magi, so they had many things to discuss. As she went around the room greeting everyone, the Asefeh Dinak realized everyone was talking about the same thing.

Finally, she came to Gaspar, who was going to lead the discussion for this session of the gathering.

“Ah, Gaspar! Finally I've found you! Are you prepared for this?” she asked, with a wide smile and an un-subtle wink?

He smiled back, and asked, “What do you mean, 'Am I prepared for this?' I've been preparing for it for weeks!” he winked back at her.

Gaspar was youthful, though he had finished his apprenticeship with her just over ten years ago. She still thought of him as a very young man, though he now had his own apprentice. As Gaspar quieted the crowd down and began leading the session, Asefeh Dinak, thought, how far he had come and how wonderful it was that he was now being considered for a leadership position.

The subject that was on everyone's mind came up for discussion. Gaspar smoothly directed the Magi on the various aspects of this sighting. What was it? Where in the sky was it located? What did it mean? The excitement was palatable as more and more Magi joined the conversation about what this heavenly body was and what it meant. Just as the discourse began to get really fervid, he coolly asserted that the time was up and they all needed to move on to some other topics. He promised to appoint a working group of experienced Magi to look into this phenomenon. Asefeh Dinak heard her name being called out and found herself the head of this group, who included Melchior, Balthasar and two others.

Reflection

We sometimes don't want to be noticed because we're afraid that we'll be asked to do something we fear we cannot do. Sometimes it's hard to hear our name called; especially when it may be to begin a journey into the unknown. We have to take a deep breath and let God be our guide.

BIBLICAL READING: MICAH 5:1-5

Prayer

O God of peace, as we follow the Magi into the unknown, let us gather our strength for the days to come. Let us find peace within ourselves so that we can share that peace with others. Help us to take the path that we know we must travel. Amen

Wednesday ~ December 1 ~ First Week of Advent

“Well, shall we begin then?” Asefeh Dinak looked at the four other members of the small working group. This celestial phenomenon was the talk of the gathering, and they wanted some answers – quick. It had gotten to the point that many of the Magi had not been interested in any other meetings and events, except those that were held under the night sky.

It was the task of this working group to figure out what it was and then decide what the Magi should do next. Asefeh Dinak called on each of the members to say what they had seen and what they thought it was. As they went around the small circle in the tiny room, it appeared that they were saying the same

thing.

“So it seems that we all think that this is a sign of the Saoshyant?, asked Asefeh Dinak as she looked at each person.

Mechior spoke, “I would have to say, that this is a very important decision, so no one should feel any compunction to agree with everyone else.”

Asefeh Dinak looked around the small circle again. “Yes, Asefeh Ensiyeh? You have something to say?”

“Ah, thank you Asefeh Dinak. I would just like to say that I believe it truly is a sign of the Saoshyant. If we do all agree, then perhaps our next task should be to decide if we want to send a delegation to find the Saoshyant.”

“Thank you, Ensiyeh. Master Zamyad, you have something to add to what Ensiyah has said?”

Zamyad was the oldest of all the Magi attending the gathering. He was considered the most knowledgeable Magi in all of Mesopotamia.

“Thank you, Asefeh Dinak. You are very indulgent of an old man. Yes, it appears that we all do agree that it is a sign of the Saoshyant. I would also agree that our next task is to determine if we should send some Magi to find this Saoshyant. I would, unfortunately, not be able to go on this endeavor.”

“Thank you, Zamyad. Anyone else wish to add comments on this topic? Bathasar, you are taking notes on this?”

“Yes, Asefeh Dinak,” responded Balthasar with a sigh, writing furiously on the parchment in front of him.

Reflection

Ah, committee work. Hasn't everyone served on at least one? Working with others can be difficult, but only if we are looking out for our own needs. When we consider that everyone has to work together and that our needs can be taken into consideration as well as the needs of others, then we can get somewhere. Our life is a long journey. It is supposed to be taken with others.

BIBLICAL READING: PSALM 147: 1-11

Prayer

Holy One, who watches everything we do, we pray that we are on the right path. We pray that each day we are washed clean of inequity and start again fresh and bold. Our lives sometimes become so bogged down in minutiae, unburden our souls so that we may clearly see you. Amen

Thursday ~ December 2 ~ First Week of Advent

Just as the working group disbanded, the first stars were beginning to appear in the night sky. The area around the meeting hall was packed with Magi talking excitedly and looking into the heavens. It seemed

that everyone was outside. So, Asefeh Dinak decided that tonight, the meeting of all the Magi would be held outdoors. Someone found a large wooden box for her to stand on. Gaspar held in his hand a large lantern.

In a very loud voice, Asefeh Dinak brought the gathering to attention and began speaking about what all of the Magi were concerned about – the sighting of the heavenly body that predicted the birth of the Savior, the Saoshyant. A hush fell over the large crowd – now they all were listening closely to her words. Azara and her fellow apprentices had been eagerly waiting for this news. Word had leaked out that a few of the Magi-in-training might be accompanying some of the Magi who were asked to go on the expedition.

After explaining all that commenced during the meeting of the five head Magi, Asefeh Dinak asked Master Zamyad, the oldest Magi, to come forward and share the names of those who would be leaving on the journey to find this savior. Master Zamyad, despite his age and infirmities, stepped up onto the large box and began speaking in an unwavering, though not very audible, voice. The entire gathering seemed to lean forward to catch his every word. After stating that he would not be going, he spoke each name with firm articulation, “Asefeh Dinak shall be the leader. Magi Mechior and his apprentice Azara, Magi Bathasar, Magi Gaspar and his apprentice Artan. Asefeh Ramina and her apprentice Havva. Thank you.” With that, he gingerly stepped down from the box and slowly made his way to the side, where Melchior held his cane. Suddenly the entire crowd was cheering and whistling!

Reflection

How many of us have been asked to do something extraordinary? Perhaps we all have. Our daily lives can make it seem as if nothing ever changes. Miracles don't necessarily happen every day or to each of us, yet we have all experienced something unusual going about our day-to-day lives. Seek out that which goes beyond the usual. Find the miracles that are right in front of us.

BIBLICAL READING: JOB 38:4-21

Prayer

O God of miracles and everyday life, help us to see the wonderment of your universe. We ask you to open our eyes, open our hearts so that we may see you and your daily miracles. Amen

Friday ~ December 3 ~ First Week of Advent

As her name was read Azara's mouth dropped open and she looked at the young apprentices standing next to her. As the other apprentice's names were read, they in turn, had shocked looks on their faces. Of all the young apprentice's who were in attendance at this gathering, the two young people on either side of Azara were going with her. On her right was the girl who she had been talking with earlier, Havva. On her left was Artan, Gaspar's first apprentice and a young man Azara knew well. They were jumping up and down and screaming in their excitement!

As Asefeh Dinak began to quiet the crowd once again, she was smiling broadly, seeming to be as excited as Azara. Then she said, “Now that we know who is actually going on this very exciting expedition, I would first of all ask that all of you support those named as they prepare. And secondly, that you would keep all of us in your prayers.” A spontaneous shout went up from all those assembled listening to her.

Then she continued, “And now I would like to call on all those named for an initial meeting in the small room at the back of the meeting hall. Good-night everyone. We are adjourned for the day.”

The three apprentices made their way through the large crowd, which was in a very festive mood, stopping every few steps to receive the congratulations from other apprentices and Magi. Some slipped gold coins into their hands. At first they were confused about people they didn't know giving them money, but Gaspar told them to accept it graciously.

Finally Melchior caught up with his young apprentice. She was smiling broadly. He clapped her on her shoulders and grinning widely himself, said, “Well, Azara, what do you think about this?”

Reflection

Called. Jesus was called. His Apostles were called. Prophets were called. We are called to faith, to belief, to mission, and to God. Often, all we need is a little shove to build the realm of God on earth. And to do that, we must nurture justice in this broken world. Too big a job, you say? No, it is possible. With God, with others, with ourselves working a little bit at a time.

BIBLICAL READING: MARK 6:1-12

Prayer

Beloved Friend, be with us as we figure out what we are supposed to do. Be with us as try to find our true path, be it in this world or in your space. Help our weary minds to sort out what it is we are called to do. And hurry, please. Amen

Saturday ~ December 4 ~ First Week of Advent

“Oh, Dinak! I haven't seen you in so long!”, Asefeh Ramina rushed up to Asefeh Dinak and enclosed her in a hug.

“Well, Ramina, we are going to be seeing a lot of one another!” replied Dinak.

Like two school girls they embraced again laughing and talking excitedly. Ramina had been a Magus for nearly as long as Asefeh Dinak had been a Magus. They had many things in common, even living close, but with family and work, they rarely got to see each other.

Mechior, Gaspar and the three apprentices walked in together, happy and excited. “Well, let's begin then.....where is Balthasar?”

Asefeh Dinak was looking around the small room.

Gaspar replied laughing, “He probably has to explain to his wife what he is doing. She's not going to be happy.”

“Oh, I'm sure she realizes that this is a very important event,” Ramina hastened to add. “Besides, he has Ensiyeh to look after things and his apprentice Dariusz is still with him.”

Melchior chuckled. “Freni doesn't like Balthasar to be gone for long periods of time.”

“Well,” Asefeh Dinak laughed, “Balthasar and Freni do have a large family. We all can understand her concerns.”

“Yes, that is true,” continued Ramina, “but their relationship is, ummmm,....” Ramina searched for the correct word, “well, intense.”

Gaspar burst out with a guffaw, “That is a good word for it, Ramina!”

Just then Balthasar walked in the door. Asefeh Dinak quickly began the meeting.

Reflection

Traveling far away from home can be very difficult. Many of us travel during the holidays. Sometimes plans go awry, and we don't end up spending Christmas with family or friends as we had hoped. A challenging journey is how the tribes of Jacob found their promised lands. But really, do we need to travel a long way to find that which is promised? No, it might right in front of our noses.

BIBLICAL READING: GENESIS 13

Prayer

Our Creator and Redeemer, bless us as go to work, to home, far away. Bless our going and our coming. Bless us as we journey to paradise. Bless us as we journey to the simplest abode or the most sumptuous palace. Bless us as we journey always toward you. Amen

Sunday ~ December 5 ~ Second Week of Advent

The last two days of the Magi assembly was a whirlwind of activity, not only for those going on the journey, but also for those who were not. There were many meetings to attend: an apprentice's meeting, which was very long, and the Magi themselves gathered together for several extended meetings. There were also assemblages of the ones making the trip and those who were asked to help gather supplies for them.

Some of the members of the traveling group would be going home, while some of the others would stay to finish up any loose ends. Those not starting out from the Magi assembly would meet as the group started on its journey. At the final assembly, all of the Magi and apprentices met for one last time. Excitement was in the air, both with those going on the special trip, and with those who would stay behind. With speeches from several Magi, prayers, and many good wishes, the Magi completed their gathering.

Melchior, Asefeh Dinak and Ramina rushed to get everything done so they could start on their journey from the Magi assembly. Animals for transportation, food, water (since they would be traveling at least through one desert), blankets and tents, clothing for many different temperatures, and, probably the most important of all, money. The Magi had been very generous in making sure that the travelers would have everything they needed, whether purchasing before they left or on the road. Some of the coins were sewn into clothing that they would wear, while small amounts were to be carried on each person. They would be very careful to conceal the gold so that if they came across robbers, they would not lose the precious metal. There had been a discussion of hiring armed guards to accompany them, but in the end, they decided that they would not do so.

Ahura Mazda was their Wise God. They knew that they would all be watched carefully. A few days after the Magi assembly had finished, the journey to discover the Saoshyant began.

Reflection

Planning for a trip can take a lot of energy and time. There can be problems to overcome and last-minute decisions to make. Though most trips aren't fraught with danger, the one the Magi and their apprentices are about to embark on will be. They were traveling into unknown territory. While today, we may not have visited a place before we plan a visit, there isn't much that we can't find out on the internet. The Magi didn't have a computer to find places to stay or to map out the journey; they only had this celestial phenomenon to guide them.

BIBLICAL READING: PSALM 63

Prayer

God, as I travel with the Magi, using the heavenly body to guide me as they did so long ago, keep me always in your sheltering arms. Let no harm come to me or mine. Bless my journey as you blessed theirs. Amen

Monday, December 6 ~ Second Week of Advent

Very early in the morning, before the sun had risen, the caravan of camels and horses left the southern Mesopotamian town of Uruk. There were three Magi along for this part of the trip, along with one apprentice who lived close to the town. The others would be picked up on the way. They would follow the Euphrates River until everyone had joined the group then look to the heavenly body to show them the rest of way. They understood that this would not be an easy journey and that it would be very long. All of the Magi rode horses, with the camels carrying supplies. Ramina's young apprentice, Havva, rode behind her on a horse. Once Havva was settled on the horse with Ramina, she fell asleep.

Three days later they arrived in the small town of Borsippa to pick up Gaspar. He was standing outside his house saying good-bye to his young wife and two small children. Melchior disembarked from his horse and helped Gaspar put his things on one of the camels. With that, Gaspar mounted his own horse and they were off in a cloud of dust. It was afternoon and they still had a long ways to go before stopping for the night.

Their next layover would be in the ancient city of Babylon, off to the east and more than a day's ride away. Melchior led the way as they approached the outskirts of the great city of Babylon. They would be resting here for two days as they obtained more supplies and picked up apprentices Azara and Artan, who lived close to one another. Artan was the best friend of Azara's younger brother.

When the caravan was sighted by Azara, she began waving madly and jumping up and down. Since it was close to evening, they would stop there for the night. The next morning as Asefeh Dinak and Ramina obtained more supplies, Mechior and Gaspar talked with Azara's father, who traveled to the city of Damascus frequently as a merchant. He drew them a rough map on a bit of parchment and gave them advice about what lay ahead.

Reflection

What is in our future is unknown. We do have some ideas about what could happen to us, but really we are in the dark. Our future is up to us. Our behavior can determine which direction we take. Our thinking can direct behavior to take us down one path or another. We know when we are on the right path. We can feel it in our bones. .

BIBLICAL READING: EZRA 5:13-17

Prayer

Almighty God, in whom we live and move and have our being, help us to labor for you and yours. We don't ask for award or honor. We do what is right because we know that is what you want us to do. We are ever so grateful for your love. As we welcome Jesus this Christmastide, we welcome all of your children. Amen

Tuesday, December 7 ~ Second Week of Advent

As dawn broke the next morning, the caravan pulled out. This time all three apprentices were along in addition to Magi Gaspar, Melchior, Asefeh Dinak and Ramina. The apprentices were glad for each other's company. Azara and Havva shared a ride on one of the camels and Artan was on a horse with Gaspar.

It had been Azara's idea for her and Havva to ride the camel; Azara had learned to handle camels as a child. Havva had never ridden one before; Azara was quite skilled in handling the obstinate animals. Their last stop would be at least two days ride away in Sippar, where Balthasar lived. Located on a bend of the Euphrates River, Sippar was small but well known as stop for caravans traveling west and back. They could rest, and also gather more information for the journey they were facing.

Azara's great grandfather lived in Sippar. Though he wasn't a Magi, he was a learned man, who often treated people who were sick. As soon as they stopped that morning, Havva transferred to riding on the horse behind Asefeh Ramina. The camel was just too uncomfortable. But Azara liked being on the camel and happily continued the journey not only on the camel, but also taking care of them. No one else wanted to deal with them.

Melchior just shook his head. Azara was always surprising him. He saw Gaspar grinning at him and then laughing. "I think you have found your match in your apprentice, Azara," said Gaspar.

Melchior nodded his head in agreement. "She is my most accomplished apprentice by far. I have never had one who can catch on to things so quickly. I don't think I will want to take another apprentice after she finishes. I'd be too spoiled." Azara heard this exchange and smiled quietly to herself. Ah, this was going to be a grand adventure!

Reflection

An adventure can be an amazing experience. Going to a new place to discover new things is fun to do. But along with that can come a few things we either didn't expect or hadn't foreseen. Going with the flow can lead us to new insights about ourselves and even perhaps new skills or attributes we didn't know were there.

BIBLICAL READING: DEUTERONOMY 18:15-20

Prayer

Mother God, Father God, we thank you for this time of preparation. There is much to do and not much time to do it in. But we will persevere and be better for it. We not only prepare for the feast of the Child of Light, we must prepare inwardly. It is not easy, but we know you are with us always. Amen

Wednesday, December 8 ~ Second Week of Advent

As soon as they got into Sippar and located Balthasar's home, they felt relieved to finally be together. Balthasar and his wife welcomed them with open arms and cups of water. After the pack animals had been relieved of their burdens, fed and watered, all of the Magi and the apprentices could finally relax.

They had a festive meal before going to bed in the large home of Balthasar and his family. The next day there were many tasks to be completed. Melchior and Ramina secured more supplies. Ramina saw many wonderful goods that came from far away and was tempted to buy, but knew that farther along their trip, there would be plenty of opportunities.

Though Sippar was not on the main route of trade from the far east, it did have some items that found their way there from caravans that traveled further south. It was amazing, she thought, what things were coming from so far away. In the afternoon, Balthasar introduced the group to his next door neighbors. It was a Hebrew family. The mother was the midwife for the town. She had helped Balthasar's wife Freni deliver all of her children. She asked them where they had traveled from. When she heard that they had stopped in Babylon before coming to Sippar, she said, "Ah, so you have seen the great city of Beth Aramaye?"

Azara immediately spoke up, "Artan and I live there!"

Upon further inquiry it turned out that the family knew who Azara's father was. He had sometimes

stopped in Sippar to sell some of the goods he had secured in Damascus. They also knew Azara's great-grandfather, since he was the healer in the town. The Hebrew family wished them all well and asked the group to tell them about the Messiah when they returned. Later in the afternoon, Azara visited her great-grandfather. He was a very old man, who she had only seen a few times, but he welcomed her with much affection. He had been the one that spotted the intelligence in the girl and knew that she would, someday, make an extraordinary Magus or Asefeh. They dined together and he gave her a special blessing and some medicines to take with her. Afterwards, she returned to Balthasar's home to sleep in anticipation of their leaving the next day.

Reflection

Celebrations. Some of us have members of our extended family with us. Others of us don't have parents around any more. We miss the good times we had with them during the holidays. Instead of tears, think of how much they loved us. Is there anyone you know of who can't make it home this Christmas? Reach out and invite them to sit at your table; your holiday will be enriched.

BIBLICAL READING: MARK 1:1-8

Prayer

Lighten these dark days, O God of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. We need to see your life-giving light that shown on those now gone to their rest. Comfort us and sustain us as we prepare for your Child. Amen

Thursday, December 9 ~ Second Week of Advent

As the sky unfolded in pink streaks of light, the group, now fully formed, began to put their packs on the camels, under the supervision of Azara. They mounted the animals they would ride and adjusted themselves for the long journey ahead. After a very affectionate good-bye between Balthasar and his wife, Freni, they slowly made their way out of Sippar.

They were still following the Euphrates River. The night before, Balthasar, Mechior and Asefeh Dinak had looked carefully at the heavenly body that was leading them. It was as bright as ever and still could be seen, though faintly, in the dim morning sky. They knew they would be heading west, but were not sure exactly how long they would be traveling to find the Saoshyant. They would be stopping in the major trading city of Doura (later called Dura Europos by the Romans when it became part of the Roman Empire in the first century C.E.).

The Magi and their apprentices would take several days to travel that far, so the break from being on a horse or camel and sleeping under the stars would be a welcome change. The long miles and the meals together, brought a deeper level of closeness to each other. They came to feel that they were a very blessed group.

As they moved further north along the Euphrates, the countryside began to change. Whenever they strayed very far from the river, the land became dry, with few farms. Close to the river, however, there were many farms and villages. People working on their farms or in the village were surprised by the cara-

van moving through, though most people occasionally saw some form of caravans on the route the Magi were following. Mostly they were surprised to see women riding along and not tethered to one of the men, showing that they were slaves. Who were these people traveling together?

Reflection

Strangers. Jesus taught us to welcome them, but sometimes they seem so different from us, and it is hard to welcome strangers. We try to find commonalities; sometimes we do, sometimes we don't. When someone is labeled as "Other," we know, as a people of faith, that we must be hospitable. The core of Jesus' message to us is to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, clothe the naked. How hard is that? Or is it that we put obstacles in the way?

BIBLICAL READING: JAMES 2: 14-20

Prayer

Our God, we know that we have much yet to do to fully follow Jesus. We are weak and we follow the wrong path. But we also know that the only way is to listen to what Jesus has already taught us and do what is right. The darkness sometimes is impenetrable, but we know what we must do. Amen

Friday, December 10 ~ Second Week of Advent

It was the last few moments of daylight when the Magi arrived in Doura. The light had nearly turned into complete darkness when they began to disembark from horses and camels. Gaspar, who had gone ahead to secure an inn for all of them, met them in the courtyard as the horses began to drink from the buckets of water that the stable boys had quickly brought. The big gates of the inn closed behind them and were locked. The owner welcomed them and invited them in for some food.

As they were served what they all thought was a delicious meal, they talked among themselves. Other customers at the inn began to take a great deal of interest in this very unusual group that had just arrived. They knew they were Persians by their dress and speech, but the make-up of the group was so different than most travelers that stopped here. The women seemed to be on an equal basis as the men. How unusual!

As the women had gotten ready for bed, Asefeh Dinak and Asefeh Ramina talked with the two female apprentices. They gave them an outline of how women in cultures other than their own were treated. The girls had listened with looks of great surprise on their faces.

After a restful night's sleep in real beds, the Magi and their apprentices began to divide up the jobs that needed to be done. Dinak, Ramina, Gaspar and Havva went out to find the market and buy a few supplies and to see what caravans were bringing in. Melchior, Balthasar, Artan and Azara also went to the market, but what they were looking for was information.

The market sold so many things. Much of what was on display came from caravans passing through the city. From the far east precious gems, silk, medicines and perfumes. Closer to home there were dried

fruits such as figs, dates, wheat, horses. The one item for sale in the market that made them all sick was the sight of humans being bought and sold. The young apprentices, particularly, were shocked when they saw them.

Reflection

Let us not forget that slavery exists still. We have not moved beyond that horrible, degrading thinking. It is never right. God detests injustice. It is in our power to end it.

BIBLICAL READING: JEREMIAH 34: 8-18

Prayer

Your justice, God is the business of your people. In our hands lie the tools to dismantle those wicked, immoral, evil holders of human lives. Your demand is our command. We must serve justice as the feast it was meant to be. Amen

Saturday, December 11 ~ Second Week of Advent

“The market is so noisy and busy,” thought Azara, as she walked along with Melchior, Balthasar and Artan. When the two Magi stopped to talk to a caravan leader for information, she used the time to go and look at goods for sale in the stalls. She saw beautiful fabrics, jewels, jewelry and perfumes. It was all so amazing and new to her. Clutched tightly in her hand were a few gold coins her family had given her. But as she feasted her eyes, looking for something to buy for her family, she decided that there were just too many choices.

Artan had never seen so many things and or such a busy market either. But he was interested in hearing the different languages and longed to understand what other's were saying in their own languages. Suddenly, Artan realized that someone was looking very intently at Azara and it wasn't in a good way. He quickly went over to her, grabbed her sleeve and dragged her over to Balthasar and Melchior just as they were finishing up a conversation with a caravan driver.

“Artan! What are you doing?” she said in a loud whisper.

Artan made sure that she was standing very close to the Magi, then answered her in a soft whisper, “Azara, that man over there was looking at you as if he might want to buy you like the people for sale back there.”

Azara looked startled. “Thanks, Artan,” she mumbled.

“Well, then are we ready to move on? asked Melchior as he turned and saw both Azara and Artan right next to him. They nodded yes, and Melchior went on to find more information. Azara stood shoulder to shoulder with Artan and very close to Melchior as he and Balthasar started asking a merchant some questions about his goods.

Reflection

Courage is a powerful word. We use it too often. But turning and facing our demons not only takes courage, but also gives us more courage. Facing what we do not want to face takes bravery, but it gives us so much in return.

BIBLICAL READING: JOSHUA 1:5-7

Prayer

Oh, God, build in me courage to face all of that I am afraid. Steer me on the proper path that I must take. Be with me always, so that when I do take the steps that I must, you are standing beside me. Amen

Sunday, December 12 ~ Third Week of Advent

As soon as they had purchased everything needed for the next phase of their journey, Asefeh Dinak said, “Now, we are going to stop by those baths we passed on the way to the market. Everyone ready for a good soak in a nice hot bath?”

Laughing, Gaspar remarked, “There is a reason why you are called, 'Asefeh' Dinak! Your wisdom is beyond compare!”

Dinak's eyebrows raised and she gave him a quizzical look, “Well, if I didn't know better, Gaspar, I'd think you were trying to butter me up!”

They went in search of the rest of the group and came across them deep in a discussion with a merchant. They appeared to be talking to him about the goods that he displayed in his little store, ones that they had never seen before, such as a very fine, soft, almost liquid material called silk, gold jewelry made with gems they had only heard about and other items from a very long distance from Doura.

The merchant spoke Persian and was telling them about where the merchandise he displayed came from. He asked Melchior where they had come and why they were traveling. Melchior gave him only a very broad answer with no details. He couldn't quite tell if the man could be trusted. Having answered the merchant's question, they moved as a group to a nearby food stall, where wonderful smells had been coming from and making them all hungry.

They went outside the market to sit on some grass and eat their lunch. Balthasar gave the others a run-down of what they had heard. Artan explained what had happened to Azara. The adults looked at each other with alarm. As soon as they had finished eating, they went back to the inn to obtain clean clothes and went off to the baths for the rest of the afternoon.

Reflection

Soaking in hot water in any century, anywhere, has been a luxury that anyone can appreciate. We all need to take some “me time” once in awhile. Just be with yourself in a relaxing place, whether a bath, hot tub

or in an easy chair. Find some time this holiday season to relax. It will make for a better you.

BIBLICAL READING: ISAIAH 12:3-6

Prayer

Holy and Gracious Creator, glorious be your name. You are our redeemer and sustainer. Our souls long for your warm embrace. You heal and bind up our wounds and set our spirits soaring. We are indeed grateful for all you have bestowed upon us. Amen

Monday, December 13 ~ Third Week of Advent

Not having to get up well before dawn was a luxury for Azara. Not having to get on that stubborn camel was also luxurious. Not that she minded riding a camel, but dealing with those animals was not her idea of a good time. She had grown up around camels and had frequently ridden them, but since she had joined the rest of the Magi caravan, she had been the only one that could deal with them in any manner. As the sun rose higher in the sky, she stretched and got out of bed. She realized that only Havva was still asleep. As she passed by Havva's bed, she gave her a poke, then went to pour water into the basin to wash up for the day. Havva grunted, got up and joined her at the wash basin. They joined the Magi who were nearly finished with their morning meal.

Havva looked around, "Where's Artan?"

Gaspar laughed and said, "Well, apparently the sun has not reached his eyes yet!"

"I heard that!, said Artan as he bounced into the room.

The rest of the Magi savored the last bits of their breakfast and talked among themselves as the apprentices gulped down what looked like either their first meal in a long time or the last one they would have for awhile.

They again split up to explore the city some more. Artan, Melchior, Gaspar and Asefeh Dinak went off to visit this city at the confluence of the Euphrates and Khabur rivers. It was built on a plateau that looked over the two rivers and a gorge that defined it's southern boundary. It was a stop on the trade route to and from the far east.

Every once in awhile, the Magi and apprentices had seen people that must have come from there in the streets and marketplace in Doura. Azara, Ramina and Havva went back to the market to find some items for trade along their journey.

Reflection

Resting doesn't always mean being still. Sometimes great rest can come from moving. Sleep is restorative, but true rest comes from within. Look within ourselves to find that peace that is beyond understanding.

BIBLICAL READING: LUKE 1:46-55

Prayer

Come, O Great One, come and dismiss the darkness and haze around us. Open our eyes so we can clearly see you. Open our hearts so we can show your great love to all. Open our ears to your softest whisperings. Open us to the possibilities. Amen

Tuesday, December 14 ~ Third Week of Advent

At dinner that evening, they told stories of their explorations of Doura. But the narrative that had them all laughing so hard was the one Asefeh Ramina told about Azara's encounter with the same man who had eyed her in the marketplace the day before.

This time she did not need anyone to rescue her. Once she was aware that he was looking at her, she wasted no time in letting him know that he had stepped over a boundary. She stomped over to him, told him in very unflattering language what he could do next, whirled back around and was gone in a dazzling swirl of color, dust and indignation.

By the look on his face, apparently he had never heard those words come out of a female's mouth. Ramina and Havva nearly doubled over in laughter until they realized that the man's face had turned first red, then very dark. They all quickly left the market.

As the tale ended, Melchior looked at his apprentice with new-found admiration and said, "Azara! I didn't know you could curse like a camel driver!"

Azara looked back at him and quipped, "Who do you think handles our camels?"

This activated another round of guffaws from those gathered around the table.

After dinner they all went outside to view the night sky and look for the heavenly body that has predicted the Savior. There it was, shining as brightly as ever. Later on, as the women were readying for bed, Asefeh Dinak cautioned Azara not to react that way again. She could put not only herself, but the rest of them in danger.

Reflection

Patriarchy is alive and well in religion. But it is beginning to give way to balance. There is the acknowledgement that not only do women exist, but that they are spiritual. It has come at a high price. The women who have been there all along and fought for the right to even speak in church, hover over us. Our society is further advanced than our religious institutions. There is a very long way to go for women in religion.

BIBLICAL READING: PROVERBS 8:11-36

Prayer

O Great Wisdom, you have been there from the beginning, yet so few even know of your existence. We crave what you have to offer, but refuse to see that you stand there with God. You have so much to offer this world. We pray to you for the dawning of Wisdom in each one of us. Amen

Wednesday, December 15 ~ Third Week of Advent

As they left the next morning, before there was any light in the sky, they turned away from the Euphrates River and headed out into the desert. This would be their first time in the high heat and shadeless environment. It would take some getting used to. The next place they would stop for a few days of rest and resupply would be the caravan town of Palmyra. It was smaller than Doura, but would be a good place for them to gather news and supplies.

But they wouldn't stay there for long. Last night they had noticed that the heavenly body they were following had grown brighter, as if to say, "Hurry, hurry." As they pulled into Palmyra, they all felt relief that they could rest out of the burning desert sun. It would be a restful break and one they badly needed.

Though the Magi themselves had all experienced traveling in the desert, at least for short distances, the apprentices had not. They rested in Palmyra and took advantage every day of the public baths. After three days in the town, they set off as soon as the sun had gone down and now did most of their traveling at night.

It worked a little better. They found small oasis along the way in which to camp during the day. The palm and other trees gave much needed shade as they slept in their lean-tos. Their biggest concern was to not get dehydrated during the hours that they slept.

They pushed on to Damascus. They began to encounter hills that made traveling a little slower. Whenever they took a break from riding, they would dismount and walk about for awhile. They noticed that Gaspar began to limp and hold his lower back with his hands. He brushed it off as a consequence of the way he slept.

As they began to get nearer to Damascus, they noticed that they were seeing more and more Roman soldiers. Once they were forced off the road by a contingent of Romans marching toward Damascus.

Reflection

The desert can be a place that strips us of all of our defenses. We are left naked. This is not a place we really want to be in, but sometimes we must pass through. When we are down to nothing, then we can see what it is we need to keep and what can be discarded. As we get dressed again, we can put on the clothes that actually fit.

BIBLICAL READING: ISAIAH 40: 1-9

Prayer

I arise daily and pray to you, Saving God. My mouth is parched, like a desert, because I do not trod the path you have made for me. The rain has not fallen and the plants are nigh to wilting. I call out to you, O God of my ancestors to restore me. Give me the living water, so that I may no longer thirst. Don not strip me of all my defenses for I am dressed in rags. Send the rain and the gift of peace. Amen

Thursday, December 16 ~ Third Week of Advent

It was mid-morning when they arrived in Damascus. The city was teeming with activity. Since this was often the last stop on the route from the far east, people and goods from many far-off places mingled in the streets. Goods brought from many diverse places were shipped overland to even more distant cities and towns. Damascus was a crossroads where many different peoples and cultures mingled. Since it was on the edge of the desert, it was also very hot and dusty.

Melchior had gone ahead to secure a place for them at an inn, which was a welcome sight after many long days and nights traveling in the desert. Asefeh Dinak stepped down from her horse and shook the dust from her clothes.

“The first thing I’m going to do is find the baths.”

“Oh, my, that sounds so good,” said Ramina, using her scarf to wipe her dripping face. “I think washing our clothes and putting on some clean ones would feel wonderfully good, too.”

Gaspar got off his horse with difficulty. His face grimaced in pain.

Ramina turned to Gaspar as he stiffly walked toward the inn door. “You must be in a great deal of pain. We will need to work on you while we are here.”

Gaspar just nodded his head. He was in too much pain to even speak. Gaspar sat in the entranceway of the inn as everyone else unloaded the horses and camels. Stable boys watered the animals before they were led away to stalls at the very back of the inn. Once they settled in and ate, the baths beckoned.

Since the baths were close by the inn, Melchior helped Gaspar to the healing steam and heat as they all relaxed from their long journey. The men and women were in separate pool rooms and for an extra coin or two could take advantage of a massage administered by expert male or female masseuse. After an entire afternoon spent at the baths, they all napped back at the inn then went to find evening nourishment.

One of the many marketplace's in Damascus was not far from the inn and much could be found to eat there. They discovered that some of the food was nothing they had seen or eaten before and enjoyed the culinary exploration.

Gaspar was not in quite so much pain. Asefeh Dinak and Ramina told him they would see him before breakfast tomorrow to further work on him.

Reflection

The Light that we await is not one that comes from a palace or a big house. It comes from inside each one of us. We have to cultivate that Light ourselves. We cannot take the fast route to find this light, either. It is not magic, but patience and persistence that will bring this Light into not only our lives, but also of others.

BIBLICAL READING: PSALM 70

Prayer

God of Love, we pray for those who are struggling at this time of year. Especially those who are sick in body, mind, or soul. We ask your healing presence to be with them. Amen

Friday, December 17 ~ Third Week of Advent

The next day Gaspar was dragged out of bed by an early knock. Balthasar had opened the door and when he saw it was Asefeh Dinak and Ramina, he turned to Gaspar, “I believe your torturers are here!”

Gaspar groaned, got up and began dressing just as Balthasar closed the door. Later at breakfast, Gaspar was regaling Melchior and Balthasar with what Asefeh Dinak and Ramina had been doing to help his back pain, when three gentleman from the far east approached their table.

One bowed and began to speak to them in broken Persian. He explained that they were healers from Sinae (China) and could possibly help Gaspar with his troubles. Gaspar asked them how they would treat his condition.

The translator's answer shocked the Magi. Gaspar looked at Asefeh Dinak and Ramina. They seemed genuinely interested in the Chinese methods. The women asked if they could watch while Gaspar was treated. Gaspar, at this point, was open-mouthed. He had not made up his mind whether he wanted this treatment, but here they had already answered for him.

Melchior looked around the table at the faces of these learned Magi. “Well, I guess I would be interested in seeing how you work, too.”

“Do I get a say in whether I go through with this?” Gaspar threw up his hands.

“Apparently not, Gaspar!” Balthasar chuckled.

So it was arranged that these healers from so far away would show them their methods of healing, using Gaspar as their example.

Just as arrangements were made, the three apprentices came down to eat. They were surprised to learn of the opportunity for learning a different method of healing that afternoon.

There was much to do in the few days they were staying in Damascus. They all headed to one of the many marketplaces after breakfast. They were astounded by what they saw in these markets. They bought a few supplies, but mostly looked at the goods for sale and talked with the merchants.

They began hearing about a ruler to the south and west who was brutal. They talked about this as they went to meet the healers from China.

Reflection

Meeting those who are different from us can be a challenging experience. But realize that they are really not different from us, but just have a different way of living. We sometimes feel the need to separate those who are so dissimilar from us. Put yourself in their shoes—wouldn't you be “an other” where they live?

BIBLICAL READING: MATTHEW 1-12

Prayer

God of Goodness, hear my prayer. Help me to accept those who act differently than me. Help me to see You inside of them no matter their gender, skin color, religion or country of origin. Amen

Saturday, December 18 ~ Third Week of Advent

With astonishment, they watched as long needles were inserted into Gaspar's mostly unclothed body without seeming to hurt him. The Chinese translator and the Magi kept asking him if he was in any pain as each needle was inserted.

He kept saying, “No.”

Very few needles were even close to his back. Sometimes after the needles were inserted, the Chinese healers would twist it a small amount. This was a truly amazing scene, with Gaspar lying prone on his stomach, the Magi asking questions of the interpreter, the apprentices observing and the Chinese quietly talking among themselves.

After about a half an hour, they appeared to be finished. The Magi had many questions, though the interpreter could not answer all of them, the basic information was gleaned. When they were finished, Gaspar felt better. Could he come back in two days, he was asked?

Yes, that would be the day before they left on the next segment of their journey. All day they talked about the treatment Gaspar had received, as they went to yet another market in the city and bought more things they would need for continuing their trip. Their purchases included dried fruit, salted and dried fish, medicinal herbs, and cloth, which they would use further along to have sewn into new clothes or for trade. It had been a long day.

After a hearty dinner at the inn, they all went to bed just as it got dark. The next day, the male Magi and Artan went to the market to gather more information, while the women headed to the baths once again. At dinner that night, Melchior, Balthasar, Gaspar and Artan discussed the new information they had learned at the marketplace. Since they were now traveling mostly in the Roman Empire, they needed to know what to expect.

Reflection

Those Romans had a head-lock on cruelty. The conquered people had few freedoms. But yet, aren't there regimes today that look similar? Have we progressed at all? Maybe not, but that doesn't mean that some us can't keep slogging on and working hard for a better world.

BIBLICAL READING: ACTS 16:16-24

Prayer

O God, the angels have told us, "Do not be afraid," but we continue to be afraid. We don't seem to listen to those who say, "It can be done." Our world, some say, is a complete mess. But we beg to differ. We are choosing to see the world as the half-full glass not the half-empty one. Amen

Sunday, December 19 ~ Fourth Week of Advent

Today Gaspar would go to the Chinese healers for his second treatment. This time, only Dinak, Ramina, Mechior and Azara accompanied him. Balthazar, Artan and Havva went to the marketplace to finish purchasing supplies. When the interpreter asked how he was feeling, he told them that his back was much better. The healers again placed needles in his body. The interpreter asked about other aspects of his health. After he had answered the questions, they put a few needles on the other side of his body, too.

When they had completed their ministrations, they gave him some herbs to use for a tea if back pain began to come back. As they left the Chinese healers, Gaspar flexed his shoulders and arms and proclaimed that he really felt wonderful!

At the midday meal, they all gathered to share the information they had learned in the last few days. They determined that the Roman presence would be something that they would have to get used to, and also, to be cautious where they went and who they talked to. They all felt that they were beginning to get close to the place where the Saoshyant was. They felt that this was going to an exciting part of their trip, but also one in which they would need to keep their eyes and ears open.

Reflection

Hearing and seeing are two of our most important senses. Yet when it comes to following Jesus, we seem to lose them. Keeping our ears open to the message God is telling us and our eyes open to see God in those around us-is that really so hard?

BIBLICAL READING: ISAIAH 11: 2-4

Prayer

Jesus told us to listen, "For those who have ears to hear." he said. But sometimes we didn't keep our ears open. We know we need to keep our eyes open, too. Help us, Dear God, to do both and then we may hear and see, although faintly, your message. Amen

Monday, December 20 ~ Fourth Week of Advent

Before the sun rose the next day, they were up and readying to continue their journey. Balthasar looked carefully at the waning night sky. The heavenly body they were following seemed to have become brighter. It had also shifted slightly in the sky. It was now pointing them in a southwest direction. Melchior joined him and they talked about the route that they would need to follow. Balthasar had obtained a map from one of the merchants the day before in the marketplace. It was crudely drawn but gave them some idea of what they might encounter as they traveled. Just before the sun rose, they left the inn.

They skirted the mountains on their right and most of the foothills, too. The Roman Army made its presence known often. They, more than once, had to abruptly move to the side of the route to make way for marching soldiers.

Each evening before they went to bed, the heavenly body was consulted for direction the next day. It grew brighter and brighter. It was guiding them over hilly countryside, but in the distance they saw a river that emptied into a large body of water. They stopped for a few days in the town called Bethsaida, which was near the Sea of Galilee, or as the Roman's referred to it, Sea of Tiberias.

Because the Magi felt that they were getting close to where the Saoshyant was, they inquired in the town, but got little credible information. Having refreshed themselves and resupplied, they continued on skirting the Sea and then crossed the Jordan River. Staying on the west bank of the river, they traveled due south, encountering small towns, but to their relief no Roman soldiers.

Reflection

The time is getting close when the Child of Light will appear. Are we going to be ready? Have we been diligently preparing our hearts? Time is running out. We had better find the time to get ready.

BIBLICAL READING: LUKE 1: 26-38

Prayer

O Precious One, as we get closer to Your Feast of Light, we find that the time is getting short: to do the things we need to do and to prepare our hearts. How difficult it is! Help us to make time to do the readying necessary for the Coming of the Light. Amen

Tuesday, December 21 ~ Fourth Week of Advent

Stopping in the little town of Aenon, they camped on the outskirts of the town near the Jordan River. They found a market and bought some fresh food. That night they looked up into the deep blue night sky and saw that not only had the heavenly body gotten even brighter, it had changed position once again. As soon as they had finished their evening meal, they talked about this change. Did it now mean they would

be leaving the valley and crossing the hills on the right of them?

As they did every evening with their fire crackling and popping, they prayed to Ahura Mazda to give them guidance and direction. The next morning they had a quick breakfast and got up on their mounts. They were continuing south for the time being, but at some point they would need to start moving west. The left side of the Jordan River had hills that at times seemed to turn into mountains. At Aenon they had inquired as to when they could turn west and were told of a route that left the river and went over the hills which was farther along the Jordan.

Reflection

Bodies of water often have great meaning to stories and in peoples lives. They are markers in the land and can be imbued with emotion in both narratives. Rivers, lakes, ponds and streams all carry tales about who and what lived on or near them, what they were used for, and why people loved them.

BIBLICAL READING: GENESIS 1:1-19

Prayer

O Holy One, blessed is your name. Come to us in this festive season. Come, find us, console us, redeem us. We are yours and shall ever be. Amen

Wednesday, December 22 ~ Fourth Week of Advent

Just before the town of Jericho, they found the route over the mountains. They decided to camp close by the oasis which was near the way they would have to take over the hills. Some of the party went into Jericho to buy fresh food and see if they could pick up any new information.

Over dinner they talked about what they had learned. One of the bits of information they had picked up was about the ruler of Judea named Herod. He had a huge palace in Jericho that he usually used in the winter. The people of Judea were terrified of him. Melchior said he believed it behooved them to use a great deal of caution regarding Herod.

They all nodded agreement. Balthasar and Gaspar talked about what they had heard regarding traveling on that road. It wasn't very safe and they would have to be very careful. Before it got dark, Balthasar and Mechior went to visit a small caravan that had been traveling from Damascus as they were. After talking with the merchant who was leading the caravan, they arranged to travel west with them in the morning.

Back at their camp they saw the heavenly body in the night sky. It was extremely bright and pointed them to the west. They all felt that they were very close to finding the Saoshyant now. Sitting around their fire, now blessed to make it a sacred fire of Ahura Mazda, they prayed for guidance and safety as they traveled on the morrow.

Reflection

Travel for the Magi was dangerous. It can be today. But that does not and should not stop us. We do not let fear stop us in doing what we need to do. Fear can block many things, but that is not a happy way to live. Let the journey that you need to make be like the Magi's. They knew it would be dangerous, but it didn't stop them at all.

BIBLICAL READING: JOSHUA 4:17-19

Prayer

Heavenly Mother and Father, guard us as we go where danger lurks. Lead us to your heavenly light and protect our travel. Find our courage and hold it up to us, so that is what we concentrate on, not our fears. Give us strength to continue on. Amen

Thursday, December 23 ~ Fourth Week of Advent

On the horizon could be seen one thin streak of grayish purple, indicating that the dawn was approaching, though the sun wouldn't actually come up for another hour and a half. They were already up, eating, and getting the animals ready for travel. The heavenly body was shining brightly, hovering over a place to the west of where they were.

Shortly after, they mounted and joined the caravan that was heading to the city of Jerusalem. When the sun came up, the heavenly body could still be clearly seen. That was astonishing, even to the Magi. It was noticed by a few people in the caravan who didn't understand what it meant. They kept pointing to it as the day wore on. Just after midday, they saw Jerusalem. They saw the most beautiful building, shimmering, blazing, shining bright in the sun. It was the Hebrew people's magnificent temple, located on top of a leveled off mountain. In the full sun, it was breathtaking.

Roman soldiers were everywhere. They wouldn't allow the Magi party to enter Jerusalem at the same gate as the caravan for some inexplicable reason. At a gate they were finally permitted to enter, they asked the gate keeper where they could find the ruler Herod. After looking at them with a dark gaze, he pointed to a large palace above them. But they would have to leave their animals outside the gate. So Artan and Gaspar chose to stay with their horses and camels and the rest went into Jerusalem.

At the palace of Herod, they asked the doorkeeper, if they could see Herod. He wanted to know who they were, where they had come from and why they were there. When they told him the reason for their journey, his eyebrows raised up and he had a funny look on his face.

They waited the rest of the day and finally, just before sundown they were called in. Only the men were allowed to enter. That evening, as they were settling themselves at an inn in Jerusalem, they noticed how very bright the heavenly body shone and it had, yet again, moved. So the Saoshyant was not to be found in Jerusalem.

Reflection

Jerusalem is an eternal city. Three faiths count it as a holy place. It has seen its share of horror and joy. Yet even today it still stands and is prosperous. It can be an example for us that even though we or a place we love goes through a dreadful time, we can also come out the other side of the tunnel, whole.

BIBLICAL READING: REVELATION 21:1-3

Prayer

Holy God, your star is still leading us today. We thank you and praise you for this Feast of Light that is nearly upon us. We are becoming ready for your Heavenly Light. As night turns to day, our hearts and minds are getting ready. Amen

Friday, December 24 ~ Fourth Week of Advent

As they left Jerusalem, the heavenly body they had been following since leaving Mesopotamia was shining brightly, even though the sun had just come up. They followed this until they noticed that it had gotten even brighter and had stopped moving. It was nearly midday and the sun was shining brilliantly.

They were outside a town called Bethlehem. As they were disembarking from their mounts, a man with a donkey loaded down with goods was heading out of the town. They asked him if a Savior resided in the town. He looked at them as if they had just asked him if the sun was shining. Then Azara asked him if he knew of any babies had been born recently. He shook his head and continued on his way. Ramina asked Azara why she had asked that question, and she replied,

“It’s a new heavenly body. It wasn’t there last year or anytime before, so it makes sense to me that this Saoshyant has just been born or is still very young.”

Melchior agreed that made sense.

They walked into the town to find the marketplace. That would surely be a place that would know if any babies had been born in the last year or two. At a stall selling bread, two women were talking. Asefeh Dinak walked up to them and explained they were looking for a family that had recently had a baby—a very special baby.

The woman who was talking to the shopkeeper turned to them and said, “Well, I was in attendance at a birthing for a family a few months ago. I can take you to them.”

She led these odd looking people from the marketplace, through a few streets and then stopped at a house with a dusty yard. The look of utter surprise on the young woman’s face who was sitting outside the house as she saw this group of oddly dressed people leading horses and a few camels.

Asefeh Dinak approached her and said in a kindly voice, “We have been searching for you and your baby.”

The young woman stood up as she spoke and was astonished at what she said. She invited them to come in to the house and rest. She poured out some water for them to drink. Her baby woke up at that moment. Asefeh Dinak walked over to her and asked if they could see the baby. She showed them her young son and smiles broke out on all their faces.

“May I pick him up?” asked Asefeh Dinak quietly. When the young women nodded yes, she gently picked up this Saoshyant and smiled at him.

Reflection

Finally the journey is at an end. The hour is now and we are ready. The Light of the World, the Savior has come. Let the Feast begin.

BIBLICAL READING: MATTHEW 2:1-9

Prayer

O Most Gracious God, we sing to you and to the Child of Light made manifest on earth. The angels and the whole world sing about the Savior. We are so happy and joyous. Finally the heavenly body, the Star, showed us where Jesus is. Glory in the highest. Heaven and earth rejoice in this good news. Amen