

January 5, 2020
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Matthew 2:1–12 Beyond Survival: Control
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Matthew 2:1–12 New Revised Standard Version

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

We got back Friday night from a trip to New Mexico to go skiing. Since we were driving all the way there I thought it would be great to spend a few days in Santa Fe. I had so many plans to visit museums and walk the streets and see the sights. But, then it snowed and we sat on the couch and watched Netflix and played spades and laughed. I could have seen it as a failure, but it wasn't. It is so easy for me to not be present and miss what is most significant.

We can miss what is most significant about the story of the astrologers who traveled a long way from the East to pay homage to the newborn Messiah. Tradition makes this a story of three kings or three wise men or three magi who gave Jesus three gifts. But the Gospel of Matthew doesn't say anything about there being three people. They did offer three gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. These gifts had symbolic meaning. Gold was precious, worthy of a king; frankincense was incense, worthy of a God; and myrrh was a spice used in burials. These gifts all paid tribute to who Jesus Christ is: a king, a God, and a suffering redeemer.

I propose to you that the most significant thing in this story is a Greek word that is in the beginning, middle, and end of the story in verses 2, 8, and 11. The word is translated as “pay him homage.” Paying homage describes the custom of prostrating oneself at the feet of a ruler. Kneeling or lying down in front of someone is an act of humble devotion and reverence. The first thing the magi did upon seeing Jesus was to kneel down and worship him. In just a few moments when we celebrate Communion together I will say, “And so, in remembrance of these your mighty acts in Jesus Christ we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving as a holy and living sacrifice, in union with Christ's offering for us.” We pay homage to Christ by giving our entire self to Christ as a holy and living sacrifice.

The magi pay Christ homage by giving themselves completely to Christ, then they offer him their gifts. After we share in the offering today, we are going to sing the 4th verse that calls us to give God our heart. Imagine if your every action was to pray and seek God's direction so that your response flows from love. Someone cuts you off in traffic, how can you respond in love? You see someone who is hungry, how can you respond in love?

I have a friend who has a goal in 2020 to meditate for 10,000 minutes, that is about 30 minutes a day. Meditation gives you time to reflect and listen to God. Time to make choices. Meditation allows you to be fully present to the moment and notice its blessings. The most important gift we can give to Jesus the Christ and to one another is ourselves.

Today we are starting a new sermon series called Beyond Survival as we look at what we need to thrive in 2020. We are trying to survive after the holidays and also trying to find some kind of order as we start 2020. At our most basic level, we need food, drink, shelter, sleep and oxygen to live. If we are cold, sick or hungry, that is our only focus. We can't worry about learning or working or being in community. After our basic needs are met, the next level of our human need is physical safety. To feel safe in the world. When we are afraid, all of our effort goes to calming the fear within us.

Have you ever dreamed that you are driving a car and the brakes don't work? My grandfather was a teacher and he said he had a recurring nightmare that it was the end of the term and he was sitting at his desk and all of his students were looking at him. He looked down at his gradebook and he had not written down an entire grade for anyone for the entire term. He said he would wake up in a sweat. We have fear for what the future holds because we don't know what 2020 holds. We know that there will be great joy but that there will also be great pain and sadness.

In addition to these basic survival needs, psychologists tell us we have four needs as a human being. We have to feel like we have control, belonging, meaningful existence, and self-esteem. But the wise men let God take control.

I think of these magi traveling for possibly up to two years to visit the Christ child, giving up all kinds of control. They had left home and its safety to journey to pay homage to the Christ child. Tomorrow will be the twelfth day of Christmas, January 6, when we celebrate Epiphany, a word which comes from Greek meaning reveal. This is the day we celebrate the revelation of God the Son as a human being in Jesus the Christ. Jesus wasn't found by the wisemen in the bright, shiny lights of power, politics, and revolution. Jesus came as the light of the world, and nobody was looking for a manger; they were looking for a throne. God isn't often found in the bright shiny light of our expectations but in the humble, gritty places we didn't bargain for. God is found when we give up control and accept that God is with us and that God loves us.

When the wise men are warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they leave for their own country by another road. They didn't know what the future would hold, but they knew that returning back the way they came from was not going to work. Too often we keep doing what we have always done and when we follow where we believe God is leading us, it is hard. It might not look like it is working out, and we have a choice if we are going to go back the way we came or if we are going to go by another road. We have control over that choice. Maybe, like the wise men, we should give up our control and just listen to what God wants for us.

When we feel the Holy Spirit speaking to us and urging us to try something new, we need to listen. When we hear that still small voice of God telling us something, may we listen. Listening is hard, but it is important. Our personal experience of God is essential. The wise men show us what trust looks like. May we trust in God and listen to what God is telling us.

God keeps creating from the inside out, so we are always learning, growing, and changing for the good. I love how the scripture says the wise men set out; and there, ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising, When it stopped over the place where the child was, they believed and honored the child. How many places have we sped by and Jesus was there and we didn't stop? Under the bridges where the homeless live? At a hospice where someone is facing the very last hours of life? Among the hungry, the imprisoned? We need to remember that where people are longing for the light of Christ, Jesus is already there.¹ In Ferris

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship/advent-christmas-epiphany-2018-19-worship-planning-series/january-6-epiphany-sunday-year-c/epiphany-sunday-2019-year-c-preaching-notes>

Bueller's words from the great Ferris Bueller's Day Off movie, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in awhile, you could miss it." It is a reminder for us that the most beautiful things in life are never on our to-do list.

Thriving in 2020 means realizing God is with us. When I'm worried, it's usually because I'm trying to do everything myself. When I'm at peace, it's usually because I remember that God is in control. When we can't see where we are going, we have to trust that God's plan for our life is for good things. We know that we can't control other people. We can't control our kids. We can't control the dog or the washing machine breaking. We can't control all aspects of our life but we can take responsibility for our own life and for our own happiness. We can embrace the chaos of our lives and find peace. Embracing chaos begins with grace. We breathe in God's love and we choose to be happy. We choose to be grateful. We choose to be fulfilled. The wise men could have easily gone back to Herod because that is what they knew, but they went a different way. In a dream, they learned that going back dangerous. They listened and in so doing they put themselves first on their priority list. Do you put yourself first on your priority list? Putting ourselves first can be pretty basic with making sure that we get enough sleep, drink enough water, and eat healthy food. But we can expand this priority list to include trusting in God's wisdom for finding happiness in our lives.

The wise men were guided by a star. After you receive Communion, there will be baskets with stars in them. On each star is a different word. I invite you to take a star and consider how God might be speaking to you this year through the word printed on your star. You may find it is a word that fits you perfectly. Or you may find it is a word that offers you the encouragement or challenge you need. You may find yourself resisting the word or even wanting to reject the word. If that is the case, I invite you to sit with it for a while and be open to what this word may have to teach you. May your star word shine its light on you and on your path throughout this coming year. Thanks be to God, Amen.

Covenant Prayer - John Wesley, the first Methodist, celebrated a covenant renewal service in the Methodist movement in 1755. Wesley wrote in his journal about the service, "many mourned before God, and many were comforted." He said it was "a time of remarkable blessing." As we pray an adapted covenant prayer, may it be a time of self-examination, reflection and dedication as we renew our covenant with God.