January 6, 2019

Matthew 2:1-12

When You Can’t See Where You Are Going.

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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.

 The other night I had a really scary dream. I dreamed that I was driving my car and the brakes wouldn’t work. I couldn’t figure out how to stop the car. It was terrifying. Has anyone had a dream like that? I immediately wanted to know what it meant, and for me I think it is fear because I can’t see what the future holds and I can’t see where I am going. Today we begin talking about when you can’t see where you are going. In our scripture we heard the story of when the wise men brought gifts to Jesus. The Bible does not say how many wise men there were, only that there were three gifts. We remember that event on the twelfth day of Christmas, January 6, which we call Epiphany.

 The earliest reference to Epiphany is by a Roman solider and historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, in 361 A.D. He lists Epiphany twice which may suggest it is a day to celebrate two things, possibly Jesus’ birth and baptism. Some scholars think that people believed that Jesus was baptized on his thirtieth birthday. In the Eastern Orthodox churches Epiphany is a day to celebrate Jesus’ baptism, and in the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches we celebrate the visit of the wise men. The word Epiphany comes from the Greek meaning reveal and it is a day when we celebrate the revelation of God the Son as a human being in Jesus the Christ.

 There are some customs associated with Epiphany, like eating Three Kings cake and also chalking your door. Have you ever chalked the front door of your house? You put 20†C†M†B†19. The crosses stand for Christ. The 20 and the 19 refer to the year. The CMB refers to the traditional names of the three kings, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. Chalking the door is a reminder of the hospitality of the holy family to the wise men. CMB also is an abbreviation for the Latin blessing, Christus mansionem benedicat, which means May Christ bless this house. Today is also the day that you can begin to think about taking down your Christmas decorations. You are invited to help us today after worship to take down the Christmas decorations at the church.

 I find our scripture for today to be fascinating because we see someone with immense power become afraid. Herod is terrified about this new king of the Jews that the wise men are searching for. Herod is planning to search for the newborn king so that he can kill him. Herod doesn’t want any threat to his power. The wise men go straight to the current leadership and resist. They challenge Herod’s power and defy his authority. The wise men believe in their own experience and in their own encounter with God. They don’t care that Herod is the king, they go to him and ask him where the new king might be. After the wise men worship Jesus and give him the gifts revealing who Jesus is, they are warned in a dream not to return to Herod so they leave for their own country by another road. They didn’t know what the future held, 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. This story shows us our personal experience of God has validity. When we feel the Holy Spirit speaking to us and urging us to try something new, we need to listen. When you hear that still small voice of God telling us something, listen. Our personal experience of God is important. The wise men show us what trust looks like. When they go to King Herod and ask him where the new king of the Jews is, they teach us about being a witness and resisting power.

 I served as a pastor in the British Methodist Church in 2001 and it made me scared. People didn’t come to church just because they were supposed to like they do in Texas. We didn’t have visitors come to church on Sunday mornings and a good Sunday had less than fifty people. I couldn’t imagine a future for the church. But, then again, I only knew the Bible belt. I would think of those wise men having to go by another road because that was where safety was, that is where life was. And, then, I began to see how God was present in the rainbow of colors that were in the British Methodist Church. The churches that I was a part of in England had people of all colors, they weren’t as homogenous as they are here. I knew that God was making something new in that place and it wasn’t going to look like what it had looked like before. It was going to be different and God would be there.

 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, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 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]](#footnote-1) In Ferris 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 your to-do list.

 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 because they knew that going back was dangerous. 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.

 With his birth, Christ became our light in the darkness of this world. Darkness seems to always carry a bad reputation because it represents the unknown, the scary, the avoid-at-all costs. But perhaps there are things we can only learn in the dark. After all, you have to be outside in the dark to see the beauty of the stars. The Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney from Brite Divinity School says, “Darkness is where light is conceived and from which light is born. Darkness and light are holy, both are life-giving.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The wise men were guided by a star. As you leave today, 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.

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 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://twitter.com/wilgafney/status/1070146226601943040 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)