

January 4, 2015

Second Sunday after Christmas

"Follow Your Star"

Isaiah 60:1-6 ~ Matthew 2:1-12

Our reading from Matthew's gospel is so very familiar. We almost know the story by heart. Everybody knows there were three wise men, right? Ah, but the scripture only mentions three *gifts*. It never tells us how many wise men took the Star tour to the holy land. One early story supposed there were twelve, probably for the twelve tribes of Israel, but the text doesn't actually say. We sing "We Three Kings" but the text actually labels them "Magi" which means they were priests of a different religion ... possibly advisors to the court of some foreign land ... probably astrologers who regularly sought signs from the heavens. They have even been named ... Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. According to the tradition, Caspar was dark-skinned. But none of this is in the Bible ... just in the imaginations of later believers. Interesting, isn't it ... how certain interpretations of scripture become *facts* in our minds even when they aren't really supported by the text?

Matthew simply tells us that after Jesus was born, magi from the East showed up in Jerusalem asking, *"Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."* Then they ask this of the current King, Herod ... because it is the diplomatic thing to do and of all people ... they would expect *him* to know. They may not know ... but Mathew knows that Herod and his advisors know ... that rabbinic tradition claims that a star appeared in the sky when Abraham was born ... and when Isaac was born ... and when Moses was born. And in the book of Numbers, the prophet Balaam says that a star will come out of Jacob. Among the Jews of that day the belief was widespread that God sends stars to announce the birth of great leaders. Terrified ... jealously ... zealously guarding his throne ... Herod asks his advisors where the Messiah is supposed to be born. They tell him, "Bethlehem" ... so Herod sends the magi to Bethlehem. Then, just to show how totally useless Herod really is, Matthew tells us that the star leads the magi to Bethlehem on its own ... where they find Jesus and Mary.

Now if the star appeared on the "Silent Night, Holy Night" when Jesus was born ... and that's when they began their arduous journey from the East ... the magi probably arrived when Jesus was a year or two old. It was quite a long trek. But this is still mysterious. Does everyone see the star? Does it shine continuously or only occasionally for their guidance? Is it a special light, like the fiery pillar that led Israel through the wilderness at night? The text doesn't elaborate.

When they finally see Jesus, the star-chasers kneel in homage. They give him gold, frankincense, and myrrh, which are obviously symbolic ... or at least intended for later the way you might give a baby a savings bond, because what is an infant going to do with gold, frankincense, and myrrh ... or a savings bond, for that matter? But you've heard it before ...

gold, for royalty ... frankincense, for divinity, the symbol of prayer ... and myrrh, used in embalming, a symbol of human mortality. After this, Matthew says, the wise men skedaddle without consulting Herod because by now they know that guy is a nightmare waiting to happen. They take a different way home.

That's the story pure and simple, stripped of its later legend. Some want to say the that whole story was a legend to begin with ... a metaphorical way of announcing that Jesus' birth was recognized by creation itself ... that other religions paid homage to him ... and that the rulers of the day were more concerned about holding on to their power than submitting to God or saving their own people. All of this is true of course, whether the story happened or not. But I like to think this story happened and still happens today because it is fundamentally a story about the wisdom of following your star and seeking God.

Why did these wise men set out on their journey? Even if they were astrologists and saw this star ... how did they know what it meant? What were they seeking that would lead them to take such a risk ... leaving the security of home and position ... making a long, difficult, dangerous journey to find what? According to Beatrice Hinkle, *"There is one great and universal wish of humankind expressed in all religions, in all art and philosophy, and in all human life; the wish to pass beyond ourselves as we are."* Some describe the goal as a search for meaning or the quest to know oneself. Others use words like "heaven," "Nirvana," "enlightenment," or in our time, "self-actualization." In our faith tradition the goal is named "God." *"You have made us for yourself,"* Augustine prayed, *"and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."* Or, as the Psalmists put it, *"As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God"* (Psalm 42:1-2) And again, *"O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water"* (Psalm 63:1). According to these psalms, our souls feel this restless longing for God as palpably as our bodies feel thirst.

The inner yearning may be universal, but the journeys that people take to answer it are all quite different. Some follow the star of a career ... seeking meaning in what they do or how much they can accomplish. Some follow the star of family ... seeking life in relationship and children and home. Some go off to seminary ... seeking transcendence in study and contemplation and then, through service. And many find what they seek by belonging ... giving of themselves and receiving from others in a spiritual hunger. Sadly, some seek to quench their thirst in ways that are harmful and hurtful. But something inside us is always pushing us for more ... for better ... for some way to pass beyond ourselves as we are ... to assert our being against the void of nothingness and chaos of death ... and this restlessness ... this pushing for more ... is the primary journey of every human spirit.

I want to commend you today to the journey of your spirit. Follow your star! When you see the light, go for it. Don't stay in the darkness trembling with fear. Don't grasp the puny power you have and oppose the light of God. Don't give up on yourself, and never give up on God. I don't know what the journey will mean for you. I don't know where the light of your star might lead you. It could lead you far away from where you are today. It could take you to confront the ruling powers in Madison or Washington DC ... or it could lead you to find a poor child in some forgotten village who needs your gifts. It may very well leave you where you are but call you to

go deeper ... deeper within yourself to find what you are seeking. But take the journey, keep to the journey, follow your star. Never quit seeking God.

The wise men offer us a few tips for the road. First of all, you will find opposition to your journey. There are obstacles in the road. Distractions, diversions ... rest stops that become campsites ... campsites that become dwelling places ... for those who have given up on the search. You remember how long it took the runaway slaves to make their exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land? Forty years! It doesn't take forty years to travel from Egypt to Israel, even if you're walking. You could crawl it in less than twenty. But it took them forty years because of their obstacles. There were people who were hostile to their making the journey ... people who didn't want them to start it ... people who didn't want them to end it ... people who preferred that they stay slaves rather than be free. At the same time, there were inner obstacles ... their own fears ... their own false securities ... their longing for the good old days that never were that good ... the realization that sometimes it's easier to be a slave and have somebody else make your decisions for you than it is to be free and responsible for yourself. They weren't ready for a relationship with a demanding God. Sometimes we think that we want God to be close and real, but in truth we are afraid of the changes that God might want us to make ... the idols we might have to release ... the directions we might have to take to follow our star. So we get stuck where we are ... longing for change but not budging an inch.

The sages leave their contemplations and follow their star, and what do they find? They find Jesus. But do they understand what they see? Is that the end of their journey or its true beginning? I want to tell to you ... I need you to understand ... that finding Jesus is not the end but the beginning of your spiritual journey. It is a journey and not a moment. It is seeing the light and moving towards it. It takes time and effort. But most of all it takes movement. I think no matter how long you study the scripture ... no matter how disciplined you may be in your prayer ... no matter how educated you think you are in theology ... if you think you understand God ... you've missed God. The more we search ... the more God remains just beyond us ... always more than we can comprehend ... more than we can ever claim to know. That does not mean the Bible is not true. It is true. That does not mean you cannot know God. God makes God's self-known. But relational knowing is different from intellectual knowing. You can know God, but the sum total of what you can understand about God is so small, you might as well be an amoebae saying that you understand particle physics. If knowing God does not make you humble ... if it makes you arrogant and judgmental ... you do not know God. So the wise person who finds God at the end of his or her journey has actually barely begun the journey of knowing God.

Have you ever taken a drive and come upon a little rise, and there you can see all around you. Maybe it's at night and city lights twinkle in the distance. Maybe those lights tell you that you're almost home. But sometimes the road dips and turns away and you lose sight of the skyline. It is still there, of course. In fact, you are even closer. But it disappears from view for a while. Now you don't stop the car and give up. You don't turn around and go back. You move on and trust the road. And this is our journey towards God. Sometimes you see so clearly. But the road dips. It twists and turns. God disappears from all view. But in those times, God may actually be closer. You don't stop and give up. You don't turn around and go back. You move on and trust the road.

In *I Thought My Father Was God*, a collection of human stories from National Public Radio, Grace Fichtelberg tells about the time her sister Dottie was taking care of her when she was six years old. They lived in the Bronx and Dottie had dragged her over to a friend's apartment. No one else was home and Grace, irritated with being ignored, threw a loud crying fit which so angered the woman in the apartment below, that she yelled she was coming up to get them and they would be sorry when she got there. Her sister and her friend grabbed Grace and ran up the stairway to the roof, and then across the roofs of several buildings until they found a door that would open where they could go downstairs to the street. Writes Grace,

We stepped out onto the sidewalk in this strange block. I don't know why to this day, but when our feet touched the sidewalk, I thought we'd gone to heaven. I was sure that we were in heaven. I looked around and was amazed to see children jumping rope, just like we did, and that everything looked the same - except how could that be when this was heaven? When we turned the corner, I could see stores and people going into them and out of them carrying bundles, and I was amazed. "So this is what heaven looks like," I said to my sister, but she wasn't listening. Every new block was more exciting to me than the last. I figured we'd reached heaven by climbing the stairs and going over the rooftops. I was so happy to be there, where children played like me. Then we turned one more corner, and we were on the block where we lived. "How did our street get up to heaven?" I asked my sister. But she didn't answer me. She just pulled me in through the door of our building and said, "Shut up."

Sometimes the spiritual journey isn't about finding what you need ... but seeing what is there ... what has been there all along. The magi discover God manifest in our world in an unexpected way ... in an out of the way place. I imagine them continuing their journey with a new view of reality. "So this is what heaven looks like!" I imagine them arriving home with a new awareness of God's presence everywhere. "How did our street get up to heaven?" It didn't. Heaven came down ... heaven comes down to the villages and streets where we live. The light of Christ's star shines on our lives, too, and our spirit journey finally brings us home.

Strip away the legend. Let go of the stories you tell yourself to keep yourself right where you are. Where is the light of Christ's star leading you? And how is your journey bringing you any closer to God? What would be the wise thing for you to do now? May we pray?

God, give us courage to move forward in our journey. Give us the comfort of guiding stars and sound directions and glimpses of the goal from time to time. In those places and times where we get stuck, bogged down by fears and frustrations, weariness and weakness, free us and push us to continue. And may we never stop seeking you until you bring us home. Amen.