

January 5, 2020 **'Wonder and Word'** Rev. Jane Courtright *Matthew 2:1-12*

I remember years ago, seeing a church member outside a shopping mall. It was winter and she waved to me, gloves on her hands. She was wearing a really nice and warm red winter coat. She said, "Sorry I haven't been to church this winter. I bought a ski pass this year, and the lines are really short on Sunday mornings!"

I tried to smile at her. Sometimes it's kind of frustrating to be a pastor who doesn't have many free weekends. "You should see the view from the top of the hill," she went on. "It's beautiful. Peaceful."

Then she said something I've probably heard a hundred times! "To tell you the truth, Pastor Jane, I feel closer to God up there on that hill than I do in church. I've heard it so many times: while people are hunting, golfing, farming, camping, hiking or traveling. Anytime people are enjoying nature.

And sometimes I really don't know what to say when someone says something like that! I love the outdoors too. It feeds my soul to have a time in the wilderness, whether it is in the Northwoods or mountains, on a river, hiking a desert or by the beach.

And I know that church can be a busy place, sometimes a boring place, even at times a conflictual place where it can be hard to relax, much less feel God's spirit! Still, something doesn't feel right when a person says they feel closer to God out there than they do in here!

Decades ago, the church was the place where people went to worship, to learn, to be social. There was virtually no competition. Now, there are all sorts of sports on Sunday morning, vacations, snow birding all winter, busy schedules that only allow families to be together on Sundays, just veging and sleeping in to contend with! There are lots of reasons why people don't go to church!

And I realize that I am biased. I'm a minister after all...church is my life! But I am also a Christian. Christianity is a community faith...it can't happen without people getting together! As Jesus said, "Where 2 or 3 or more are gathered in my name."

When I miss church on Sunday, I just feel like something is missing! I may not be alone in this feeling, but these days, it is not a prevailing one in our culture! So, I want to take seriously, look closer when people say, "I feel closer to God in the forest than I do in church." What they're saying is that God's spirit shines through nature. It does make you want to say a prayer when you take a walk on the beach, climb a mountain, snowshoe in the winter, doesn't it? God has given us a beautiful world!!!

There is no scenery that does not have God's fingerprints on it. And even beyond this world, there are solar systems of infinite design, stars still not discovered by humans. Just the size of creation can overwhelm us, cause us to sigh in awe, and to feel the essence of the God who created all of it!

Which brings us back to the story of the Magi! They go searching for Jesus because they see a sign in nature. An unusual star appears in the sky, and it causes those Mage, those ancient astrologers, to recalculate their fixed ideas about the universe! They just know that God's up to something and that creations is bearing witness to it!

What WAS God up to? Ancient writers of history understood the skies through the births or deaths of famous people. For example, it was claimed that the birth of Augustus was predicted by an unusual happening in the sky. And Emperor Nero was so afraid when a comet appeared in the sky that he ordered the deaths of key people in his kingdom!

An unusual star and the birth of a new leader would have been a natural connection in the 1st century. But where would this leader be born? To which family? And what kind of leader could it be? The Magi didn't know the answers to any of these questions.

As Garrison Keillor once said, "If you get your guidance by following a star, the directions are bound to be a bit vague."

In our time, we have turned to science to answer a lot of questions. Scientists analyze the universe, discover the laws of physics, study the human body and put viruses and bacteria under the microscope. We've learned a lot! But we don't know the answers to all the questions!

You can learn a lot about God who make everything, but you can't be sure what kind of God. There are beautiful waterfalls, awesome autumn leaves and glowing sunsets! But there are also black holes, cancer cells and natural disasters that destroy things. A star can tell you that God is at work in the universe, but it can't tell you where or how or why. Especially why.

And so, we bring what we experience OUT THERE – in nature, in our lives, in the universe. We bring them to church, to the scriptures that are IN HERE. Then we listen to how the scriptures read our experiences.

Just like those Magi did! “We’ve seen a star out there, and we believe a new king has been born somewhere.” So, naturally, they go to the palace – that’s where kings usually come from! Too bad the old king is still on the throne, and not too excited about hearing news of a new king!

So (not called the wise ones for nothing!), they then listen to the religious ones – They should know what the Bible said about the birth of Israel’s new leader. The chief priests and the scribes open their scrolls to the 5th chapter of Micah and tell the Magi: “The new keeper of God’s flock will be born in the city of David, who was our great shepherd.”

That’s how we come to a deeper understanding of God. We bring what we see in the outside world into the sanctuary, the church. IN HERE, our experiences can be interpreted through the lens and light of scripture. And then, if we follow God’s way, we’ll go in a different direction than the one of that blood thirsty King Herod.

King Herod may have had access to the scriptures, but he did not share the awesome experience of the star that the Magi had seen. So, King Herod takes the scripture and uses it wrongly to justify his selfish murdering plan.

TRUE worship brings experience and scripture together!

The Magi HAVE SEEN the star of wonder. So they come, full of awe & scripture. When they see the child, they kneel down and offer gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

I would say this to someone who says that she would rather worship God on the ski mountain, in the forest, the field, the lake, or the ocean. OUT THERE in nature, you can sure see the glory of God the creator.

But even if you listen, you can't discern what kind of God this is. Just from nature, you can't know much about the God who made that hill and covered it with snow. If you fall down the slope and break your legs, you don't get a clue about God.

So, what do we do? We come INSIDE HERE – inside church to worship God. We bring our experiences, our lives. We know that God made all creation and set the stars in the sky. We come HERE to sing songs and tell the sacred story. We worship God who loves us so much that Jesus – a new kind of king, was born to show us God's kind of love and how to reach out to others with it.

It comes down to this: A star can't tell you that you are cherished by God.

But the church can!

Amen? Amen!