

Jan. 9, 2022 Epiphany C
Matthew 2:1-12
What Moves You?

Let's talk about motives and motivation. A Michigan company was having trouble getting their fifty employees to work on time. Someone came up with a creative solution. Since they had 50 employees, they blocked off all but 49 parking spaces in the company parking lot. No one was late anymore.

Or how about this one: Despite the "Do Not Touch" signs, a museum was having no success in keeping patrons from touching--and soiling--priceless furniture and art. But the problem evaporated overnight when a clever museum employee replaced the signs with ones that read: "Caution: Wash Hands Immediately After Touching!"

One more: Harry ran a small appliance store in Phoenix, Arizona. Harry was used to price-shopping by young couples. They would ask detailed questions about features, prices, and model numbers, and one of them always took notes. Harry knew that as soon as they left the store they were going to head for one of the discount appliance dealers to make comparisons. Nevertheless, Harry would patiently answer all their questions, even though it took more than a half hour at times. But when the couple would announce that they were going to look around at some other places, Harry had a standard spiel to deliver. "I know that you're looking for the best deal you can find," he would say. "I understand that, because I do the same thing myself. I know you'll probably go down to Discount Dan's to compare prices. I know I would. But after you've done that, I want you to think of one thing. When you buy from Discount Dan's, you get an appliance--a good one, I know, because he sells the same appliances we do. But when you buy here, you get one thing you don't get at Dan's. You get me. I come with the deal. I stand behind what I sell. I want you to be happy with what you buy. I've been here 30 years. I learned the business from my Dad, and I hope to be able to give the business over to my daughter and son-in-law in a few years. So you know one thing for sure--when you buy an appliance from me, you get me with the deal. That means I'll do everything I can to be sure you never regret doing business with me. That's a guarantee." Harry would then wish the couple well and give them a quart of ice cream in appreciation of their

stopping at his store. Now, how far do you think that couple is going to get, with Harry's speech ringing in their ears and a quart of ice cream on their hands in Phoenix, when it's 110 degrees in the shade?

Motives and motivation. What moves you? Why do you do what you do? There are a world of motives out there. Success, money, fame, influence, power, reputation.

Motives can be hard to discern. Is someone being nice to you simply out of love or is there a hidden agenda? We easily become skeptical of people's motives.

But some motives are easy to discern. Look at our Gospel lesson today. Let's start with Herod. What makes Herod so bad? What motivates him to be this evil king? Fear. Herod is motivated by a fear which has gripped his heart and is strangling the air from his lungs. He fears that what has been prophesied about this baby will be true – and that his power will be compromised, even by a little child. This fear calls out the very worst in Herod – as it does in us. He becomes obsessed – wanting to entice the wise men to come back and tell him where this baby is.

It is curious that Herod doesn't go himself – he could have controlled his own results if he went on this journey himself – and yet he doesn't. Is that motivated by his fear, too? So terrified of this little baby and what he might mean, the threat he might bring to the monarchy and the power of the throne, Herod can't bring himself to go and visit an infant.

Then have these magi, or wise men, taking a long journey to see Jesus. We don't know a lot about them. We say that there were 3, but the Bible never says that. We assume that because of the three gifts. For that matter, we sometimes call them wise men, but we don't know if they are even men.

They come from somewhere east of Jerusalem—probably Persia or Arabia, but most likely not the Orient as the song says.

But they come to see Jesus, whom they call "King of the Jews," they make a long journey and they bring lavish gifts. Why? What were their motives?

Let's dig in a little bit. After coming to Jerusalem, they are called in secret by Herod and sent to Bethlehem. These three wise ones follow the star, which would mean they traveled largely in the dark. They walked and walked. They finally arrived at the "house" where Jesus was, and they

were “overwhelmed with joy” (or literally “they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy”—Matthew is really piling on the joy words).

When they enter the house and see Mary and Jesus, they kneel and offer Him their gifts. How long did they stay there, gazing with adoration at the newborn and his mother? Did they bed down in the hay alongside this little family – with ox and cattle to warm them, waking throughout the night by the cries of the infant Jesus?

At some point, the wise ones are given a dream. Is it a dream the three of them share? Or is it just one of them, with the others having to trust the insight? Either way, this dream is like the lightbulb going on. Suddenly, there is an understanding of who Herod really is – and they decide to leave by a different road and go straight back to their own homes.

What allows these three visitors the wisdom to listen to this dream? Herod is motivated by fear – and maybe these three visitors are motivated by love. They have been to visit the infant Jesus, who is love incarnate – and it has transformed their whole lives. They are no longer manipulated by an evil king; they are able to see his motivations clearly and make their own decisions about what they will do.

And there is one more set of motives we need to look at today. And those are God’s. In finding what moves God, we also find what moves us. What moved God to send Jesus? It’s simple really. It’s love. “*For God so loved the world...*”

Love, pure love, was God’s motive for sending Jesus into the world to live perfectly, die innocently, rise victoriously. It was love for you. It was a love that didn’t want an eternity without you. Love is at the center of all that God does.

We’ve talked a lot about being a people who want to be known by love. But that means we are also a people to need to be motivated by love.

From this well-known story, perhaps we learn a new thing this morning by looking at the motivations each character holds, by seeing this playing out before us. While it’s easy to see the forces acting on characters outside of us – forces from both their external and internal environment – our own motivations are often not so clear.

There are many parts to our own decision-making, many factors of motivation. Like Herod, we can be motivated by fear: fear of failure, fear of

the unknown, fear of change – these are just some of the major fears we all face daily.

We might also be curious, as the wise ones were. Willing to go on an adventure, even though we don't know exactly what it might entail.

We can seek to find what moves the heart of God and let that move us.

In this story, we are given a gift – we can come with the wise ones to worship Jesus, and those forces of fear and control which have been acting upon our lives are seen for what they are. In a moment of clear vision, we can see the truth and choose to follow Love incarnate. When we make the choice to follow that Love, we are changed. We are transformed. We are overwhelmed by joy and have our hearts moved by the things that move God's. Amen.