

January 10, 2021 Epiphany B

Matthew 2:1-11

In the Direction of Jesus

Last Friday, Brenda, Will, Theo and I left Memphis early in the morning hoping to drive all the way home. We knew that there was bad weather forecast for Missouri and Iowa, but we decided if we can't get all the way home we can move in the direction of home. Sure enough we had horrible weather in Missouri and barely made it across the border into Iowa where we stopped for the night in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa (which is misnamed, by the way—there is no mountain and it isn't pleasant). But that was ok. We were moving in the direction of home. Sometimes we were moving at 20-25 mph rather than 65, but we were moving in the direction of home.

I think we have an analogy in the Christian faith. We can't always immediately get to the place Jesus wants us. Or we can't always be doing what we think Jesus wants us doing. But we can move in the direction of Jesus.

The Wise Men's example

So these men saw a star. In the ancient world, the occurrence of a star or a constellation of stars was often associated with the birth of a notable person. So having seen the star that Matthew says heralds the arrival of Messiah, having interpreted that star as astrologers do, the Magi go to worship, to pay homage to the child they refer to as the king of the Jews.

No big shocker that Herod is not pleased.

It has always been the case, and I am afraid that it will always remain the case, that the presence in the world of that which is most godly evokes the resistance of that which is most insidious. It is an inescapable spiritual truth that when tender grace bursts upon the scene, the harsh forces of selfishness array against it. And so Herod frantically plots to destroy the tender but mighty One who threatens his throne.

He begins by inviting the Magi to a secret meeting. One thing I have learned is never to trust secret meetings. "Go and search for the child," Herod tells the Magi. "I want to worship him, too." Herod is a liar. He intends no worship. He intends to pay no homage. He has no gifts to offer. He intends only to exploit the Magi, to use them as pawns in the hidden agenda he secretly and darkly wishes to advance. "When you find him," he says to them, "get back to me so that I can worship him too."

And so the Magi leave Herod, the threatened one; and they follow the star until it stops over the place where the child was. And Matthew tells us, in a verse that almost leaps off the page, that:

Matthew 2: 9-10 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

And this is where I want to spend some time digging around today.

I can imagine that when the Magi experienced that joy, they were struck by contrast. They were struck by how different that joy felt from the feelings they had experienced in that secret meeting with Herod. One felt so right. The other felt so wrong. The joy they felt when the star stopped was the inner confirmation that they had arrived at the place. Anytime we experience that kind of deep joy that is God's gift, then we know that we are where we are meant to be.

Have you ever had such a moment? Sure you have. Stop and call it to mind. A moment when things seemed to really line up for you. A moment when you felt so at home in your own skin, so at one with yourself and everything, that you knew the place at which you had arrived is the exact place where God wanted you. It was right where you belonged. A moment when you can say, "This is me. This is why I'm alive. This is who I am. This is where God means me to be." A moment when the star you've been following stops and you find yourself overwhelmed with the joy that comes from being you. That's the moment I wish for you. That's the moment God wishes for all of us. And what I also wish for you is that all of your moments could be characterized by that kind of joy. In the new year to come and in whatever years may follow for us, what if all of life could be the delightful experience of being flooded by and overwhelmed with joy? That joy happens, when like the Magi, we find ourselves at the place where, because of Jesus, we can freely and truly be who we really and truly are. Where is that joy place for you?

That's not as easy a question to answer as it may seem, because our lives are often not characterized by such joy. Our lives often reflect something other than the experience of being overwhelmed with joy? Why is that?

Joy—real joy, abundant joy, fearless joy-- comes when we see ourselves the way God sees us. We get to place that gives a joy that is of God and not from the outer expectations that come from the world. **Joy comes from following God's calling—not our own or anyone else's.**

Stop following stars that never stop.

Let me give you an example. Many people in this culture are following stars that they intuitively know will never come to stop at any place they could ever call home, but they try to follow them anyway. Many in this culture are in a frantic and feverish gallop to have all the things the culture says represent success and happiness. But after getting all that, I hear people say, "I'm not happy in this job. I feel like a rat on a wheel. But I have this house and the second mortgage and all the other stuff I'm up to my eyes in debt to pay for. I've always been told

that when I got all this, I'd be happy, but I'm not." I've heard that before. There's no joy in that, because that's living from the world's outer expectations and not from the inner calling that is of God.

Some of us never have such experiences of joy because we live under the burden of the expectations other people have of us, which keep us from being able to align with our real selves. "I feel like I'm living for everybody else. I've lost me along the way." I've heard that before. And so lots of people live lives of fragmentation because they try to find their center in everyone else they are trying to please rather than within themselves. No wonder people are so dizzy. Their center is out there, in a million different others, with a zillion different expectations; and they live dizzying lives of spinning from one false center to another.

The Magi were overwhelmed with joy, because they realized, they recognized, that they had arrived at the place where God had called them, the place they were meant to be, the place where they were most themselves, the place where they could say that they were at home. They had arrived at the place where the divine and the human meet. They had arrived at the place where heaven and earth come together in Jesus. "Yes, this is it." The joy they experienced confirmed that.

But at that moment, the Magi had a decision to make. You see, as soon as they stopped and bathed in the delicious joy that confirmed their arrival at the right place, they remembered their secret meeting with Herod, and they knew that they had to decide what they would do with what he had asked. And at that moment, they were caught in between their joy and their fear. After all, it's not every day that King Herod the Great asks something of you. And if you don't do what he asks, you could be in trouble. It's not a good thing to cross a fearful and threatened King.

Fear moves us backward. Joy moves us forward.

We all know what it's like to be caught between our joy and our fear.

Engagement ring example

And so the Magi, like every one of us, had a decision to make. They are in a free choice situation, between the joy of the King and the fear of the king, and they had to choose between the delight and joy of one and the anxiety and fear of the other. They had to choose between the forward movement of one and the backward movement of the other. In that way, they mirror what is true for all of us, afraid to grow and afraid not to grow.

Well, verse 12, the verse that closes this story, may be one of my favorite verses in the whole Bible, because it is a verse of hope and courage and life; and as I

sat with this passage, this is the verse that opened up the whole experience of the Magi to me. "Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road."

Mission moves us in the direction of our joy.

The Magi refused to go in the direction of their fears. Through the language of their dream, they chose life and growth and joy. They trusted their own inner experience of joy, even if that experience flew in the face of the power and authority and expectations of the world. They went in the direction of the Divine, even though Herod wanted them to go in another direction. They did that because that inner joy, the inner joy they experienced, is worth trusting and worth following and worth building a life around. That inner joy you experience when you're who and where you're meant to be is the still, small voice of God, beckoning you to live and move and have your being in the Self God has given you and not in what the world expects.

Jesus at the cross was moving in the direction of His joy: *Hebrews 12² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Herod has a thousand faces. He is alive today in anyone or anything that leads you away from being overwhelmed with the joy God wants you to have, the joy that comes from being who you really and truly are, where you really and truly want to be, and doing what you really and truly want to do. I know what it's like to capitulate to Herod. I also know what it's like to be flooded by joy. And I think I'm finally learning that any fear I have of Herod is not worth comparing to the delights of trusting my inner experience of joy that is the gift of God and moving courageously, confidently, in that direction.

That's what God wishes for you. I do know it's a tough move. Herod's pull is strong. But on this Sunday of Epiphany, when once again we watch a few stargazers offer some gifts to the child who is a king, perhaps we can recognize as well that the Magi bring a gift today to you and to me. What they bring is the gift of their example. It's the example of saying "No" to Herod and "Yes" to Christ. It's the example of saying "No" to fear and "Yes" to joy. It's the example of saying "No" to the painful past and "Yes" to the joyful future. It's the example of trusting your joy enough to build an entire life around it, whether the rest of the world understands and approves or not. And if we can receive that gift, then out of the experience of our lives joyfully lived, we will be more fully and richly able to offer our own gift to the Christ child. And I can think of no gift that would grace him more than for us to trust and to live each day in the joy that is the reason he came in the first place.