

“Come Toward the Light”

Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14, Matthew 2: 1-12

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Have you ever wondered what happened to the Wise Men when they went back home? Were their lives changed? Did they tell their neighbors what they were really doing in Bethlehem (I thought they were going to Jerusalem)? Was there a zip in their step, did the star's light radiate through their being, did their friends wonder what they had been up to? Do you ever wonder?

These three wise ones followed a star in search of a king. This king, they would come to understand, was no ordinary king. They were not searching for a grown up king, but a child that God and the angels had already decided would one day become a king. After all, who ever heard of an infant king? This was the ancient version of “babies having babies” only the outcome was very different! They were searching for the One in whom the light and love of all the world would come to dwell. They did not know exactly where to find this king, but somehow they trusted that God had chosen them for this assignment and God to lead them safely there. They were not religious men. They were scientist, astrologists, and yet, they were willing to gather their precious gifts and travel a great distance to pay homage to this child whom God has anointed the Prince of Peace.

God apparently got the Wise Men's attention with a star, but did not give them thorough directions. Therefore, they stopped to inquire with the present King about the location of this new king. This inquiry startles King Herod who had no idea there was a new king in town. What could this possibly mean? The chief priests and scribes told him they would find the child “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.’” Cleverly, King Herod directs the wise men to Bethlehem and encourages them to come back on their way home to share their story so he too could pay homage to this king. Do you ever wonder, why didn't Herod just go with them? If he is the king, why did he need the visitors report in order to visit the child himself?

The Wise Men continue on their way and finally notice the star shining over a rather unassuming place. It seems unlikely that a king could be found here, but nothing about this story is predictable. Their hearts were filled with joy and they went in to find the child with his parents. Overwhelmed they knelt down and shared the gifts they had brought, we know them well, gold, frankincense and myrrh. We do not know how long they stayed. We only know that God spoke to them in a dream and told them to steer clear of King Herod. Go now, go home by another way.

This is the story of the three kings we hear each year at Epiphany. It is a sweet story of babies and gifts and special visitors. It is the culmination of every Christmas pageant we can remember, the three kings making their way down the aisle, gingerly balancing makeshift crowns on their heads and placing their gifts before the mother and child as the

congregation sings another verse of “We Three Kings.” Kids can’t wait to be old enough to play the part of the kings. We follow their star, we rejoice and then we move on. The kings and we go home by another way nearly unaffected by the joy and mystery of this incarnational miracle.

When we gather for worship next week Jesus will be all grown up. There will be no more star. There will be no more kings. There will be no more gifts. It is a shame that all too often when we pack away Christmas, we also pack away our wonder, the mystery, the things we can never explain and therefore they trouble us. If we pack them neatly away without thinking too much about they need not affect us. What was so special about this star? What made three reasonably rational men leave their homes to follow it? What did they see when they found Jesus? Why were they overwhelmed with joy? How did this change their world? One of my favorite carols is “I Wonder as I wander out under the sky.” This story makes us wonder.

We marvel at these kings who without question set out on a mysterious journey, but we don’t want to be like them. We live in a world where almost all the wonder has been drained away. Harry Pritchett believes “we tend to see religion as only a system of ‘of rights and wrongs,’ or as a pattern of engaging in worship. We tend to have insulated and isolated ourselves from wonder...from imagination...from mystery...because it is unmanageable, impractical, and finally useless.” Yet, it is this longing to be in touch with the mysterious that so many people crave. In the midst of our technological, mechanical and scientific world our souls are unsatisfied and we yearn for something more.

Even when there is so much we can explain, there is still room for mystery. There are things we can never fully explain. There are those thin places, where the rational and mystical meet, and most of the time we stay clear of such things. We resist tapping into our imagination. Albert Einstein once said, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious.” We however, do not embrace the mysterious. We would not as easily leave our homes and follow a star in search of child who would one day save his people. We would have to clear our cluttered calendars, get someone to take care of the dog, reschedule a birthday party and put a stop on the mail before we could embark on such a journey. Too much work. No thank you. But God keeps inviting us to take another way home, to explore a road less travelled, to follow blindly. God keeps asking.

There are few of us brave enough to follow. There are few of us brave enough to imagine. When we let ourselves go, when we stop holding on so tightly to the rational world and let the Spirit lead us, we find ourselves in some pretty scary places. The Wise Men had no idea what they had gotten themselves into. God spoke to them, they responded and off they went gifts in tow, to find this child whose very birth brought forth a heavenly light.

I am in awe of poets, people who are brave enough to allow their imagination to come to life in the form of poetry. I know each one of us has the capacity to be a poet, with some loving encouragement, but I marvel at those who through the combination of words take

me on a journey and evoke an emotional response. Poetry paints a picture, it makes us wonder, invites us to imagine what it might have been like.

Remember I asked you if you had ever wondered what happened to the Magi when they went back home. I came across a wonderful poem this week in my sermon surfing that helps us imagine what might have happened to those Magi on this journey beyond what we have recorded in the gospel text. This is another way of imagining that journey to find the Christ child. What were they feeling, what was happening as they pulled up on their camels to the house where the star came to rest? It is entitled, "The Magi," and it was written several years ago by Kathleen Housley, yes our Kathleen Housley. She writes,

*We kick our camel's sides and curse, but they refuse to rise,
as if this house were the only oasis in a trackless desert,
and this child, playing in the doorway, the owner of the well.
They swing their ponderous heads slowly from side to side.
Their silver harness bells tinkle, their vermilion tassels flap,
and the child laughs.*

*He cannot be the one foretold to lead us to the abode of light
where wisdom glistens like dewdrops on which new worlds curve.
We must have misread the astrological sign or been dazzled
by a wind-driven spark. But how do we explain the strange behavior
of our beasts? They stretch out their necks on the sand and sigh.
It sounds like prayer.*

*There being none other, we may as well present our gifts to him
although they feel all wrong, as if we had carried precious salt
across steep mountain passes to offer to a prince living by the sea.
Worthless to us, we will leave our frankincense to purchase bread,
and our gold to pay for lessons. Of what use is myrrh? Before we go,
let us buy him a ball.*

*Far away, we perceive our granddaughters spinning prayer wheels.
Through our minds' sanctum echoes the sound of ripe plums tumbling
into beggars' bowls. In the ravine of the roan horse, lightning blasts
a single tree. Like closed pine cones, our hearts burst open in the heat!
We would not be more astonished if a star slipped from the night
to hover here beyond the dawn.*

*Too stunned to dismount, we gaze and gaze. How extraordinary!
The ordinary child!*

"And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road." Those Magi went back to where they had come from, but they were never the same, nor are we. That new road may take us into the terrifying land of mystery. The light may lead us to that place where everything can not be explain, where silence is treasured as much as the ability to speak, where we know we have been in the presence of the Holy even if we can not articulate what has happened. The road we follow may lead us to embrace the creative spirit within us, where color and images and words merge to birth something that is life giving. The wise men took companions on their journey. Find yourself an entourage and follow the star! Amen