

Sermon: Reading God's Signals
Feast of the Epiphany, Year A
Matthew 2:1-12

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January 12, 2020

You may be wondering... "Is it my imagination or have we heard this passage from Matthew about Herod, and the wise men and the leading of a star last Sunday?" No, it is not your imagination – déjà vu all over again! In fact, some of us read this passage at the prison on December 23, we read it here at Emmanuel December 24, read it again last Sunday in church, I sent it out in an email to you on the actual day of Epiphany last Monday, some of us read it again at the prison this past Thursday night and now here it is – one more time today! This is an important part of the Christmas story and it is the central reading for the Feast of the Epiphany, which we transferred to today since it is a major feast day.

You may wonder, "How can she preach on this text *again*?" Well, because scripture is the living word of God, we could actually preach a different sermon on a text not just two times or 22 times or 22,000 times. Time rolls on. You and I are not exactly the same people we were last year when we heard this text. We're not even the same people we were last Sunday. We've gotten older, surprisingly older, we've had new experiences, good and bad. And so if we are open to it, we can hear this passage with surprisingly new ears each time it is read. The text is pregnant with all kinds of possibilities of a sermon. And it will never be exhausted!

So let's take a look – again! At the wise men. But what if it had been wise women? Three **Wise Women** Would Have Asked Directions, Arrived On Time, Helped Deliver The Baby, Brought Practical Gifts, Cleaned The Stable, Made A Casserole, And There Would Be Peace On Earth.

The wise men, or magi, or possibly astrologers recognized something was different in the western sky. They saw a star that must have seemed out of place to these men. And they felt some kind of nudge or compulsion to follow it. Perhaps these learned wise men knew of the ancient scriptures of Isaiah that we read this a.m. "Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you...a multitude of camels shall cover you and they shall bring gold and frankincense and proclaim the praise of the Lord." It's difficult to say exactly what these Gentiles knew but we do know they had heard that there was a child who had been born King of the Jews. And they wanted to see him!

So they set out as pilgrims, journeying to a foreign land seeking the sacred. They had hearts that were open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. They didn't know how this was going to turn out, but they were reading God's signals. They took risks; maybe they were even fearful that this might not turn out well. They could have been attacked by bandits on the open road, they could have run out of water as they crossed the desert, they could have been jailed or killed by Herod as he digested the threat to his kingship they unknowingly invoked. It would have been much, much easier on them to have stayed put, wherever they were living, to have stifled their yearning, than to have ventured out into the unknown.

But they went anyway. They paid attention to the leading of God. And God spoke to them in ways they could at least partially understand - through the guidance of a star that must have been an unusual occurrence. They could have let their fear, anxiety and worry get the better of them. They could have stayed safe and stayed home. And yet they had the hearts of pilgrims, the open hearts that prompted a greater journey, a journey within as well as an outward journey. Upon encountering the child Jesus, their lives were forever changed. As they returned to their own country, they were no doubt, transformed.

By virtue of our baptism, like the wise men, we have been called to the journey of a pilgrim. Sometimes our pilgrimage will be an outward journey and sometimes an inward journey. As pilgrims who seek God's face we are called from ordinary lives into grace-filled extraordinary lives that reflect the love of God. We are all called to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, to encounter God in a new way.

I often hear people, myself included, say, "I am afraid to do this or that. It might be something big, like "I'm afraid to move across the country for this job" or it can be something on a much smaller scale, like, "I am afraid to speak up in that meeting." But if we are to live with the heart of a pilgrim, we must consider that God constantly calls us to grow, calls us to have courage. I remember when I was discerning being ordained as a priest, I was FEARful, and ANXious, and RESTless and strangely - exCITed. One day while sitting in a movie *for children with my children*, I remember the chief character saying, that courage is not the absence of fear but recognizing there is something more *important* than the fear. While I certainly have not mastered my fear, that statement helped me move forward and has helped me again and again with each new thing I feel called to and am fearful of.

When God calls us to do something, fear and anxiety are often part of the deal, but so is excitement. And to respond to God's call, we must have courage, a recognition that there is something way more important than the fear. As some have said, "God doesn't call the equipped, God equips the called." We don't just move when we think we have everything figured out! Certainly the wise men had no Day Planner, no GPS nor probably even an old fashioned paper map. We often have to take a risk, and just move forward; and then God gives us what we need to figure out the next step.

God called the magi, the wise men, to step out of their comfort zone, to venture out beyond their own countries to encounter God in a new way, through seeing and being seen by a little baby, the face of love. And they were changed, transformed.

English theologian Evelyn Underhill wrote, "Many people feel unaware of any guidance, unable to discern or understand the signals of God; not because the signals are not given, but because the mind is too troubled, clouded, and hurried to receive them." Our fear and distractions often cloud our ability to pick up God's signals. Can we be wise men and wise women, and take the risk of focusing on Jesus, that we might be better able to read God's signals and respond to God's call to the way of love?

Amen.

