

Christmas 2A 2011
Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Matthew 2:1-12

“they left for their own country by another road.” Matthew 2:12

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen

When I was pregnant with the boys I remember the great sense of anticipation that every mother has in wanting to meet the little one they have sheltered and nourished for nine months.

I remember telling my own mother that I couldn't wait until they could talk. I couldn't wait to hear each one say those heartwarming four words, “I love you, Mommy.” Such simple words and yet they mean everything to a parent.

But in the anticipation of waiting to hear my children speak, I forgot about the dreaded question, the question that strikes fear in the heart of every parent, the question that we wonder how long we can put off before we have to go into more specifics, the question we know is coming because it is inevitable that our children would want to know.

All of you know the question that I am referring to: “Are we there yet?”

Are we there yet? That very much is the question of Epiphany and of the three wise men. These three Persian astrologer/priests leave their respective homelands and travel a great distance to follow a star that indicated the birth of a new king.

Their journey took at least several months and some historians even believe that they traveled two years to reach the newborn baby king. They didn't stop until they found what they were seeking. They knew that they had arrived and they also came to understand that finding Jesus was only the beginning of another long journey.

The three wise men arrive in Jerusalem and start asking about the new king's whereabouts. Herod gets wind of this and summons them to the

palace. Herod was brilliant and ruthless. He had no difficulty killing people that got in the way or that he viewed as a threat to his control. He killed his own wife and sons when he thought they would try and take his power away.

The message was clear: if he was heartless enough to kill his family, it wouldn't bother him in the least to kill anyone else.

Matthew tells us that when King Herod heard about the baby, he was frightened and as a result of his fear all Jerusalem was afraid too. To paraphrase a modern saying, if Herod ain't happy, ain't nobody happy. Jerusalem knew Herod's murderous rage and they were about to get another taste of it.

While the wise men were at the palace, Herod asks them when they first noticed the star. He then sends them to Bethlehem to find Jesus under the guise of wanting to worship the new king as well. He tells them to come back with that information.

Herod is using the wise men. They are honestly seeking Jesus out and Herod, afraid of the competition, wants to use that seeking towards his own purposes-which was definitely not paying homage.

The wise men were seeking the truth for truth's sake. Herod was seeking the truth so he could consolidate his grip on power. The wise men, as their name implies, were interested in wisdom; Herod was interested in knowledge, the knowledge of Jesus' whereabouts, to use against him.

Wisdom and knowledge are two very different things. Wisdom comes from searching deeply and asking the hard questions. Knowledge is a set of objective facts. The wise men sought out a deeper truth. Herod sought out a geographical location so that he could take care of a threat.

The wise men were making their own journey in order to find and worship the true king. Herod wanted to use their journey to find and destroy Jesus. The wise men's journey took them outside themselves and focused on another. Herod's journey took him back into himself and the blackness of his own fear.

The question of “are we there yet?” was answered for the three who came sincerely seeking Jesus. Yes, they were there in front of the one they sought. They came and did what they had come to do: they found him and they worshiped him. And then they did something else; they went home by another way. They returned to where they came from to spread the news that a new king, a new time, a new creation had been born in Bethlehem of Judea.

The question of “are we there yet?” is answered not simply with a “yes” or a “no,” but with both “yes” and “no.” Yes, we here in St. Matthew’s have found Jesus, but we aren’t there yet because God has more to come. God is not done with us or creation quite yet and because God is not finished with us we have not arrived. We are not what God would have us become.

Sometimes we concentrate so hard on the past or present that we ignore the future God has in store for us. I’m not talking about heaven or when we die, I am talking about when all is gathered up in Christ and we join God again in the new heaven and new earth-the heavenly Jerusalem that we have heard about in the Advent readings. It is the time when all creation is restored to what it was meant to be. There is a fancy name for this time, it is the “eschaton,” and it means “the last things.”

For Matthew and for us this future is important not because it is an escape from the Herod’s of this world, but because it informs how we are to live and what we are to do in the present.¹ We look to the future so that we can see and imagine another reality right now; the way things are are not the way they should or will be. Things can and will be different. That is what the birth of a new king signified and it is what had Herod so terrified. Things and can and will be different is the message of the manger.

The question “are we there yet” implies movement, a journey, not staying in the same place as we are at this particular point in time. The journey we decide to take, the path we decide to walk, the future we unfold, truly matters.

¹ The New Interpreter’s Bible vol. VIII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995) p. 144

One person who knew this was Lewis Carroll, the author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Alice asks the Cheshire Cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," Said the Cat.

"I don't care much where," said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," Said the Cat.

"-----so long as I get somewhere," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," Said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."²

The questions for us in 2011 are: Are we where we set out to be? Have we walked the road that matters? Have we found the one true King or are we worshipping something or someone else?

Are we there yet? Yes, and we have much farther to go before we arrive.

Amen.

² Homiletics January/February 2011 Vol. 23 #1 p. 13