

Christmas 2 Year B 2008

Texts: Jeremiah 31:7-14

Psalm 84

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a

Matthew 2:1-12

“ And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.” Matthew 2:12

The story of the Magi is a story that we know so very well, but about which we know so very little. When I think about this story the picture I see in my head is a Renaissance painting with three bejeweled men in beautifully colored robes genuflecting to the baby Jesus who is being held by his mother. Although things almost certainly did not happen the way the great Masters painted them, their beautiful renditions of this story do point to a larger truth and it is that larger truth that Matthew focuses on throughout his infancy narrative.

What we do know about this story is that sometime after Jesus' birth, astrologers from the East, from Persia, noticed a new star rising in the heavens. They became very curious about this new phenomenon. New astral bodies were thought to signal the birth of someone very important, usually a new ruler.

The astrologers, who were Gentiles, set out of their respective countries to follow this star and to see where it will lead them. Like Abraham and Sarah before them, they leave their homes and enter new territory not knowing what they will find, but knowing that no matter what that might be they are called to seek it out. This is as much as we know about them.

We do not know that there were three of them; this is surmised by the number of gifts given to the infant King. One ancient writing has as many as fourteen showing up to meet Jesus. The gifts given: gold, frankincense and myrrh were appropriate gifts to give to the new king. The gold was given to represent Jesus' royalty, the frankincense to represent Jesus' divinity in that it was used in making sacrifices and offerings during worship, and the myrrh, a resin used in anointing the living and embalming the dead, given to represent Jesus' humanity and impending suffering.

The Wise Men arrive in Jerusalem and start asking a lot of questions, the most troubling being, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” The title “King of the Jews” was Herod’s title. No wonder Herod was frightened; if there was someone else claiming the title that someone was a rival and needed to be dealt with immediately. You can’t have two kings at one time confusing the people as to who really is the true ruler.

Herod the Great was as shrewd and ruthless a ruler as there ever was. When people got in the way of his plans he simply killed them. This included his sons, wives, and friends as well as his enemies. Herod had an ambivalent relationship with the Jews. He wanted to be loved and worshiped by them and so he took on the rebuilding of the Temple, that sacred site where God lived and reigned and in which God was worshiped.

Herod thought this would endear him to the Jews and that he could win their loyalty so when he found out that there was someone else vying for that love and loyalty, well that just would not do. He calls his own wise men, the chief priests and scribes of the day, all Jews, and asks them what the prophets say about the birth of the Messiah and finds out that the Messiah is to be born right under his nose, in his very territory.

Herod calls the astrologers back to the palace and asks about when they first saw the star to find out the age of this new king. He decides to manipulate the astrologers from the East and tells them he wants to know when they have found the baby because he, too, wants to pay him homage. To pay homage is to worship, but not only that, to pay homage is also to submit oneself to another. The Wise Men from the East were ready to submit to the true King of all heaven and earth; Herod most certainly, was not.

We do not know how long it took for the Wise Men to find Jesus. What we do know is that they did not stop searching for him until they found him and when they found him they gave him not only their gifts, they gave him their lives.

The Wise Men could not return the way they came. We are told that they went home by another road as they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod with the information he sought.

Meeting Jesus changed the Wise Men. They could not be the same people they were when they started out on their journey. Did their journey end upon meeting the God-child? No. In many, many ways, their journey was just beginning.

Matthew Henry, a seventeenth century English theologian, wrote that the Wise Men were led by a star before finding Christ, and led by the Spirit after finding him, and it was only after they found him that they became truly wise.

The wonderful thing about the Magi was that they followed the star from a far. They saw it, they questioned what it was about and then they went out of their country, out of their comfort zone, to find where it would lead them. At their core was an inquisitiveness, a questioning or imagining of what life could possibly be about. They didn't have all the answers and what they sought wasn't knowledge so much as it was truth. They didn't seek facts so much as they sought faith.

What is instructive for us today is that the Wise Men took action. They didn't just study the star, or admire the star, or just talk about the star from their homes or offices in Persia, they followed it! Following this star wasn't some head game, some intellectual exercise for them. Their questioning led them away from themselves and into new and unfamiliar territory. Following the star meant taking action. They reacted to God's first action-the birth of God's self in human form.

Part of their reaction was that after meeting Jesus they were able to resist Herod's request and not become part of Herod's plot. After meeting Jesus they walked in exactly the opposite direction from where they had come and from what was expected from them from the seat of power in this world.

This story begs us to consider whether we are inquisitive enough to start our own journeys of faith, individually and as a community. Are we willing to go into areas and territories we do not know, are we ready to question and take action even when we don't have the all the answers in order to seek a larger, deeper truth?

The Rev. Harry Pritchett, past dean of the Cathedral of St. Phillip in Atlanta writes, "we cannot do what we cannot imagine." Herod could

not imagine, and indeed didn't want to imagine, that his reign could end and new way of living begin. Herod couldn't imagine that it wasn't all about him and his power, but about serving others in the name of the living God.

Before we feel smug and think Herod was just some crazed megalomaniac, what about us? Can we imagine a different way of living? Can we imagine taking a different road, not knowing where it may lead us, but knowing it will lead us out of ourselves and towards others?

Can we imagine that living the Christian faith will not only re-form us as the body of Christ, but transform us as well? Can we imagine a world without war and poverty, hunger and oppression? Can we imagine a world where all people are seen as the image of God and treated as such?

If we cannot imagine this we cannot possibly work to address these issues. If we cannot imagine the reign of God altering the world's death dealing ways, we cannot work towards that end.

Are we, like the Wise Men, willing to submit to God and God's way of doing things? Can we see the world through God's eyes rather than through the eyes of our modern day Herod's?

My deepest hope and desire for us as we walk the road together in 2009 is that we will be inquisitive enough, questioning enough to search for deeper truths together.

I pray that we will enter into an expansive imagination of what is possible for St. Matthew's and in our life as a unique community of faith.

I pray that we will not only be re-formed but that we will be transformed in new and unexpected ways together through our seeking and serving Christ and that, like the Wise Men, we will not only give him our gifts, but we will give him our very lives.

Amen.

