

Epiphany Sunday, January 4, 2015
The Rev. Laura Ruth Jarrett
Hope Central Church
“Up off the Spiritual Couch”
Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, Herod inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him,

“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.’” Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.”

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, the magi offered the child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

*Come, come, whoever you are; wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving.
Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again Come. (words from Rumi, song
from the UU Hymnal)*

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. **Amen.**

Much great literature contain stories of heroism and journey - including our own sacred scripture - journeys during which the pilgrims are faced with circumstances that break them or make them wiser. Always there's a wounding, innocence shattered or lost as ethical dilemmas are posed, evil becomes real in a person or monster.

Matthew's account of this pilgrimage is concise - a mere 12 verses relative to the tale of the journey of Homer's Odysseus, written about 850 BCE, which is contained traditionally in 24 books for a total of about 12,100 lines of poetry.

Odysseus' tales have many details, but our Magi's story has few. Theologians have done their best to say who our Magi were, how many they were, their station in life.

We know that Odysseus was a king. But scholars disagree about our Magi. They may have been educated astrologers, dream interpreters or they may have been itinerant fortune tellers of the same ilk as palm readers. Our scholars say that like it's a bad thing. We know that Odysseus had a wife Penelope who spun all day, then unraveled her spinning at night. We don't know to whom our Magi were related. But we have given them names: Caspar, Melachior, and Balthazar, called them kings, and numbered them three - because we don't like a story without details.

Our scholars and our preachers have added details to the story of the Magi visiting Jesus. They have made midrash from that brief biblical account in Matthew so we can identify with the story, adding details from our experience so we may make meaning, ultimate meaning, as we long to do so that our souls may be willing to move toward the heart of God.

Our scholars say the story of the Magi is the presentation of Jesus to the Gentiles - Gentiles who were so attracted to the Jewish movement of Jesus, and they and we would expand this movement, eventually to sever ties with Judaism. It is this event that Matthew transmits a Jewish Jesus to a Gentile world.

I'm also interested in the Magi's ability to see a star and to decide to follow it.

I grew up on National Geographic – there were yellow stacks of National Geographic in our house. A new magazine showed up every month or quarter, sometimes with a map in - which I loved. Since my mom was born in Africa, and I'd never seen her in situ there in Mozambique, the National Geographic helped fill in details about what my mom's life might have been like - and I learned a few things about anatomy by looking at those pictures there.

But what also interested me is how those explorers in National Geographic got going - how it was they followed their curiosity to a place away from their home. How was it, I wondered then, and wonder now, they managed to get up off the couch, gather equipment on a boat, or a camel to fetch themselves across an ocean or desert to follow an idea.

This is how our spiritual work should be done, I want to suggest. We perhaps have thought our spiritual work is to arrive at the right belief - to be able to recite the books of the bible, if we grew up evangelical, attend mass if we grew up catholic, to know the book of order and discipline if we grew up Methodist, to do worship decently and in order if we grew up Presbyterian, to be baptized in the right way if we grew up Disciples or Baptist, and once we'd accomplished that,

then we were done with spiritual work unless we backslide or got divorced, or were gay or bi or trans, or thought it was OK for your friends to be gay or bi or trans, but we either had to choose to have arrived at a correct spiritual place or to pretend such, or to be back slidden person - terrible choices are those binaries - they are inhuman.

But this is what I love about our Magi, or my midrash of them - they may have been kings or tricksters, but they got up off their spiritual couches and followed a star - This friends, is the spiritual life.

I've been following the work of Bessel van der Kolk, a man who works with and writes about trauma. In his book, *The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* he says, and I paraphrase, that ideas and memories that do not change over time are ideas and memories trapped in trauma. That is to say, as we heal, as we mature, grow, deepen and widen, our minds change, our ideas develop, our memories morph, and this is a good healthy process. This is our work - not only of healing, but of spiritual practice - we are not reaching for the one true spiritual idea, but we are following the idea so we may see what God will reveal to us, the possibility of the light, of the eureka, of having an epiphany, of the revelation of the divine.

Our spiritual work is releasing the old thought, the immature belief, the memory of what was - for what will be - we are giving up control of our perfect misery or idealized one precious moment from the past in favor of what cannot be controlled, of what will be revealed to us by glorious divine presence.

We don't follow a star to God because it will make us safe - there will be King Herods on the way, or thirst or hunger, but we follow that star so that we may see God. Our work is to get up off our spiritual couches and go see God.

Maybe you don't have the facility, the spiritual gift to see moving stars - maybe that star was for those who have the gift of seeing stars. Maybe God's wink to you is a star in the eye of your child. Did you see Liam's note on Facebook on New Year's Day? He wrote, "If you get the opportunity, go on an amusement park ride with my daughter [Kay]. She giggles the entire time. And she has no fear.

Maybe your journey from fear to giggling will be accompanied by Kay. Maybe Kay will lead us.

Are you worried that if you get up off your family's couch of dysfunction you'll not belong anywhere? If that's you, that's most of us, here, friends. It is such an old and constant problem that Jesus talked about it - you can belong to your family or maybe not, but the work is making the journey toward wholeness. If you can't belong to your family and be well right now, there's a world of people who will

walk beside you as you get sober, get well, get right with yourself and with God. Folks have done that for us, accompanied us, yes?

Maybe you're worried you'll embarrass yourself if you get up off the couch. You're worried you look goofy or drunk - well again, you're in great company - David, that is King David, that is Jesus' ancestor, the great Psalmist, danced naked in praise of God. You might want to do that at home. And on the day of Pentecost, the coming of the spirit so filled the people that bystanders thought they, were drunk, but they weren't - at 9 AM.

Maybe you're worried that if you start on the journey of learning how #blacklivesmatter, you'll say something wrong - but I want to tell you that if you say something wrong but do it while you are learning to see who is with you, who is in front of you, who is accompanying you, if you're on the journey of learning that black lives matter, your mistake will be forgiven. And while learning how black lives matter, you, no matter what your race, may learn how you, yourself matter so deeply to God and to all of us here.

It may look like this building is stationary, but really it's an ark moving on the waters of the spirit, with sails full of the wind of spirit, and we are all crew here. It may be you think all the stars have been sighted and are set snugly in their orbits, but perhaps someone is watching the sky and will let us know where to go, so to meet God.

We, the Magi, royalty or not, will ride our camels together to see what the divine is doing. We will come like beggars with gifts in our hands of gold, frankincense, myrrh.

Come up beloved, off your spiritual couch, let us make our way to God. Ours is no caravan of despair. Come, yet again, come.