



From the Pulpit

Rev. Jane Lionberger
January 3, 2010
"Overwhelmed with Joy"
Matthew 2:1-7

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men came from the East 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." (Matthew 2: 1-3)

*Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes —
Some have got broken — and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school.*

There are enough

*Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week —
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted — quite unsuccessfully —
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers.*

Once again

*As in previous years we have seen the actual
Vision and failed*

*To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent*

Him away,

Begging though to remain

His disobedient servant,

The promising child who cannot keep

His word for long.

*The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off.*

*But, for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the
Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry
And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.*

W.H. Auden, in his poem *For the Time Being*, describes well the sense of the melancholy, the mundane, the tediousness, the sense of “What now?” we often feel at the end of hallowthanksmas – that season of the three holidays of Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas that merge into one huge morass of shopping and celebrating. It has been a time of busy preparations, and celebrations. We have worshiped with quiet gratitude, grand music, well crafted prayers, candlelight and greenery that put us in the mood of the season. Perhaps, as Auden suggests, we have even “seen the actual Vision” of Emmanuel, God with us, but the experience has been hard to hold onto and now we find ourselves back into the routine of life as usual. After a glorious time of being lifted up out of the ordinary we now find ourselves back in “the moderate Aristotelian city of darning and the Eight-Fifteen” and don’t find it terribly satisfying.

Unfortunately we live in a culture of perpetual dissatisfaction – always needing and wanting more – which keeps us searching for the next experience or relationship to buoy us up and keep us going. Searching can be fun, when you are searching for that elusive puzzle piece or the next book to read. It can also be frustrating when you know what you want but can’t find it, like searching for a house or browsing the internet for that piece of information you know is out there. But searching can also be frightening when you can’t find a job to support your family or when it leads you to compulsive practices or destructive habits. Searching can be triggered by our longing for some thing, whether concrete or abstract, outside ourselves or it can be the result of an inner drive to slake a thirst or desire that pushes us on.

Pascal spoke about our human tendency to always be searching when he wrote, “And thus, while the present never satisfies us, experience dupes us and, from misfortune to misfortune, leads us to death, their eternal crown. What is it, then, that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.”

The Wise Men in our story were on a search initiated by this ever-present desire God has placed in each and every one of us that can only be filled by God alone. Here is how Barbara Brown Taylor begins telling her story of the magi. “Once upon a time there were three – yes, three-very wise men who were all sitting in their own countries minding their own business when a bright star lodged in the

right eye of each one of them. It was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were so wise they knew it did not matter all that much. The point was, something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives. Each in his own country had tried books, tried magic, tried astrology and reflexology. One had spent his entire fortune learning how to read and write runes. Another lived on nothing but dried herbs boiled in water. The third could walk on hot coals but it did nothing for him beyond the great sense of relief he felt at the end. They were all glad for a reason to get out of town – because that was clearly where the star was calling them, out-away from everything they knew how to manage and survive, out from under the reputations they had built for themselves, the high expectations, the disappointing returns.”

These wise men were seekers on a mission and very serious about it. They dropped everything they were doing, left their country and the comforts of home to set out on a long, hard journey, guided by a bright star that led them on their way. William R. Herzog wrote that the star “was not necessarily an extraordinary celestial event, but an ordinary star seen through the extraordinary eyes of the magi.” The star led these three foreigners on their search, “as they traveled a long, hard way because they had an inkling,” an inkling that came from a star burning within their own imaginations, “of something very important unfolding in a distant land. Something inside them must have been restless, or hungry for understanding,” writes Kate Huey, “despite the reputation of the east as the place of wisdom and learning, there was something they still needed to find or learn on their westward trek. And what did they find but ‘an economically limited toddler, in modest surrounding, lying in a teen mother’s arms,’ writes Shell Copeland. ‘To the intellectually perceptive, this scene was not a scholar’s formula for future success. Yet by grace, the magi had the faith to experience unbridled joy.’”

Where do we find ourselves in this story? Where do our lives connect with the search of the magi? Are we like Herod who was frightened at the idea of a new king supplanting his power? Are we afraid of something new; afraid of what we might lose if we opened ourselves to God and to the direction God might lead us? Or are we like the wise men who risk all to follow the star, not knowing what we might find but trusting God that it will be life changing, that if we follow the light we will discover the mystery and wonder that lies at the root of all our lives which can lead us to find our true home?

Marcus Borg, Professor of Religion and culture at Oregon State University writes of his search and struggle to find an authentic and mature faith in the book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*. Borg grew up in a Scandinavian Lutheran family whose lives centered on their church and God. He believed in Jesus without difficulty or effort. But as early as elementary school he began to question the image and understanding that had been handed onto him by his family and church. By the time he went off to college “the modern worldview with its image of what is real as the world of matter and energy and its vision of the universe as a closed system of cause and effect, made belief in God – a nonmaterial reality- increasingly problematic. And of course these doubts about

God affected how [he] thought of Jesus. What does it mean to speak of Jesus as the Son of God when one is not longer sure that God is?" As his childhood understanding of Christianity collapsed he had nothing to replace it and he became what he refers to as a "closet agnostic."

As his wife says about Borg, "He's been looking for Jesus all his life," and so he kept on searching as he became a Biblical scholar and began to do research on Jesus. Borg focused on Jesus as a sociopolitical figure "although he didn't know what to make of what Jesus said about God." Then in his mid-thirties Borg had a number of experiences of what he would now call "nature mysticism." Here is how he describes them. "The experiences were marked by what the Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel called 'radical amazement,' moments of transformed perception in which the earth is seen as 'filled with the glory of God' shining with a radiant presence. These moments, "involved a rediscovery of mystery-not as an intellectual paradox, but an experience of sacred mystery." Borg began to have a "new understanding of the meaning of the word God. "I realized that God does not refer to a supernatural being 'out there,'" up in heaven. "Rather, I began to see, the word God refers to the sacred at the center of existence, the holy mystery that is all around us and within us." The God in which, as Paul wrote, "we live and move and have our being," "God is not somewhere else but right here and everywhere." Borg's new understanding of God began to affect how he understood Jesus. He now was able to see the "centrality of God in Jesus' own life. Jesus' relationship to the spirit was the source of everything he was." Jesus didn't just believe in God, he had a relationship with God that was the very foundation of his life. So Borg says that the central issue of the Christian life is not about believing in God but about entering into a relationship with God. And like all relationships, if we are open to the other person we will be changed and we must change in order keep that relationship alive...to allow it to live and thrive and grow.

The Magi were unwilling to sit comfortably at home, see the star and only believe. They got up and journeyed far from home and family, to experience the divine, to see this new king. And what did they find but a simple baby, living among simple folk, surrounded by shepherds and farmers and their animals. They found a king of peace, humility and love, not one of power and domination. And they were changed. They went home by another way,

The question for you and me is, now that the high of the season is over, now that we have to get back to school and work, to meatloaf instead of roast beef and Christmas pudding, to the empty corner where the Christmas tree has glowed for the last few weeks, are we willing to keep searching for and exploring our relationship with Jesus? And after we encounter Jesus, after we may even have been overcome with joy at meeting him, are we willing to open ourselves to be changed...to live by the light that we have been given? Or are we content to keep God at bay and go back to living just the way we always have?

We really don't know what it was like for the wise men when they arrived back home. Was their experience of radical amazement, of being overwhelmed with

joy just a thing of the moment? We can only imagine. But their message at Epiphany is about going home another way. It is not about certainties given, but about journeying with joy and wonder; about giving ourselves to the experience of God in our lives and being willing to let go of our old ways and trusting God to lead us down whatever new path God chooses for us. It is about not looking backwards to the season that was. It is about opening ourselves to finding a new way home...a new way of being, and I wouldn't begin to tell you what that might look like. That is between you and God. But I do know that it is about dreaming of new futures; it is about following the star of Christ; it is about exciting new possibilities. "O, star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright; westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to they perfect light." Amen.