

Not With Steps, But With Yearnings

Matthew 2:1-12

I admit to being both surprised and honored to be invited by the pastors to share on this Epiphany Sunday which has become such a meaningful tradition in our church for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that the gospel lesson about the Wise Men focuses our attention on the way a *desire* can be so powerful that it will cause a person or a group of people, or a family or a tribe, for that matter, to leave everything behind and at considerable cost and risk follow a star, a glimmer of an idea, a beacon of hope or freedom or opportunity into some place they cannot yet fully imagine and yet for which they yearn.

Which, it seems to me, is not only the story of the Wise Ones, whoever they are; it's also the story of so many of the members of our African Fellowship who for one or another compelling reason left everything behind to follow the star that beckoned and ultimately led them to this particular place in this particular community on this particular day where they, too, can bow down and worship the new-born King. So thank you for including me in something so significant. I am honored.

Now turn with me to the story of the *Wise Men* crossing the desert or whatever they crossed to get to Bethlehem, a story so familiar that it's hard to picture anything more involved than the traditional Christmas card image of three men in flowing robes, with sober faces, on bent knees, bearing strange gifts of oil, perfume and gold, not a diaper or pappie among them!

Yet if and when we pay attention to what Matthew, who is the only one who tells the story, actually says about these travelers, we may be surprised to discover how little we actually know about them. For certain they were not kings, and there's no clear evidence that there were three of them. We don't know where they came from, how long it took them to get to Bethlehem, if that's where they got to, or how old Jesus was by the time they arrived. We are not even sure about that famous star.

All we know from the record in Matthew's gospel is that these travelers, motivated by something like intellectual curiosity and spiritual hunger, stepped out on a journey for parts unknown and in so doing became a paradigm for what it means to be fully alive. For a person who is fully and vibrantly alive is someone who has never stopped longing, wishing, and searching. He or she knows beyond doubt that there are things in life that are worth hungering after.

Which is the something I hope you'll mark this morning: *there are things in life worth hungering after.*

Not little and fashionable things, like most of the stuff we're told by marketers and designers we cannot live without, but big things like *direction* in a world that seems to have lost its moral compass.

Or *fidelity* in a culture of lying, cheating and fraud.

Or *forgiveness* in a vindictive and vengeful world.

Or *courage and hope* in a perilously uncertain time marked by apocalyptic fires in Australia; the escalating threat of conflict with Iran; the spread of Ebola in the Congo; increased tensions in the Korean Peninsula; violence in houses of worship and schools and coffee shops; and so much more.

That's what I mean by *big things*! I mean things larger and more enduring and essential to our survival as shared travelers on this planet earth than a Samsung Galaxy S 10 plus or a Droid Eris by HTC or an Xbox One X by Microsoft. Those are neat things but they are not as essential as something like *reverence and wonder* in a world flattened by technology and increasingly seduced by the notion that there is nothing that human beings cannot make or manage by ourselves – *reverence* being the virtue that recognizes there is something greater than the self – something that is beyond human creation or control, something that transcends full human understanding.

So why do we settle for less?

The Wise Ones in our story didn't. No, their yearning for something greater than themselves moved them to set out for parts unknown guided by a remarkable star and a stunning promise. Yet it doesn't have to be anything that dramatic. It doesn't have to be a *moving star* or a *burning bush* or a *multitude of heavenly hosts* that gets your attention and changes the direction of your life forever.

In fact if God is going to speak to us at all it is more often in the *ordinary* than in the *extraordinary*. It is in the language of dreams, or in the rainbow hanging in the sky after the storm, or in the unexpected note scribbled at the bottom of a Christmas card that remind us who we are or what we mean to others, that God speaks.

Or it may be in the words of a song, or a movie, or maybe even in a sermon, if you can imagine, or in a prayer, or in a little scrap of bread and a thimble full of juice that God speaks, in order to urge us on, to show us what really matters, to help us face the stale secrets that distort our soul, or to reveal something of splendor, greatness, mystery, beauty and love in the daily-ness of our lives.

I believe *that* as much as I believe *anything* that God speaks in our lives. It's the essence of what I preached for nearly forty years: God speaks in our lives, so listen. Listen to your life – *listen to your life – listen!* - or you'll miss it.

Let me illustrate. True story. Not long ago, I stopped at the home of a neighbor who was working in his garage. As we chatted, I noticed some lacquer or shellac by an old space heater and was concerned enough to ask, "Aren't you afraid to leave that stuff near the heater? What if it heats up and explodes or something?" My neighbor said, "Oh, it'll be fine." "Well you can't be too careful," I said. To which he replied, "Yes, you can. You can be too careful."

Now he said it so quickly and half-kidding that I might have missed the truth of it. Yet with some time to think as I walked home it occurred to me that I had just heard something extraordinarily profound.

For where in the world would we be without men and women, explorers and scientists, statesmen and composers, environmentalists in Kenya and organizers in Chicago, astronauts and mountain climbers, preachers, teachers and prophets from Martin Luther King all the way back to Jesus himself, who were willing to move beyond caution, carefulness and control in order to explore frontiers, establish nations, minister justice, set free the oppressed, give voice to the unrepresented, break traditions, confront evil and face death - even on a cross - in order to do their part not only in expanding human knowledge but building the Kingdom of God? Every human advance requires someone willing to throw caution, control and fear to the wind.

When I think about Jesus, I am always impressed by the fact that one of the great differences He made to human kind is casting *fear* out of people's lives. For it is *fear* that holds people back and makes us cautious, selfish and greedy; it is *fear* that makes us hate; it is *fear* that makes us blind to the extraordinary possibilities in life. *Fear* keeps people like us from finding our voice and discovering the pathway to our own unique destiny.

That's why Jesus said over and again, don't be afraid, because fear casts out love just as love casts out fear.

And so the questions: *Which have you chosen or will you choose as you step forward into this new year and the next phase of your life: fear or love? What are you going to be careful about?* *“What are you willing to risk?”* And more importantly *“Whom or what are you going to trust?”*

It's a choice. It's always a choice.

In his song “Cautious Man” Bruce Springsteen writes,

*On his right hand Billy tattooed the word love
And on his left hand was the word fear,
And in which hand he held his fate was never clear.*

Fear or love. It's always a choice!

Kim Rosen, author of *Saved by a Poem: The Transformative Power of Words*, tells of visiting a safe house for young Maasai women who had run from their homes to escape the atrocities inflicted upon them – forced marriages, rape, mutilation.

The fifty or so young women in that safe house loved to sing and as they worked in the kitchen preparing a meal they asked Rosen if she sang. She said I know some songs but I much prefer to share poems. “Then tell us one,” they insisted. And without thinking Rosen began with some lines from Mary Oliver who writes in her poem “The Journey,”

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and
began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice –
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles,
“Mend my life!”
Each voice cried.
“Mend my life....”

But you didn't stop.

You knew what you had to do.

[And though it was already late and the road was full of fallen branches and stones] little by little,
as you left [those] voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice,
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.

When Rosen finished, the young women having recognized themselves in the poem, asked with tears flowing freely, “Who is this Mary Oliver? Is she one of us? Is she Maasai?”

To which Rosen replied gently, “No, she’s just a woman who knows the medicine of a good poem and who understands that so much of what we could have been or done has been wasted because we held ourselves back out of fear, or out of the assumption that we had no choices about what to be or do, or out of the faith that a life is richer or easier lived among paths not taken. She’s a woman who knows that *you can be too careful!*”

Now please don’t misunderstand, there are some things about which you must be careful. You must be careful to wash your hands, careful about the food you eat, or how you drive your car; careful about the promises you make and how you keep them – promises to your spouse, or to your employer, or to the people who elect you to office; or the promises you make to your church and to your God. About some things you must be careful.

Yet not *too careful*, for the *too-careful life* is usually a life unexamined, undiscovered, and unexpressed. It’s a life obsessed with control and lived more out of fear than faith. It’s a life that might never have fled to a safe house, might never have left Free Town or Monrovia or might never have followed a star in search of a King.

Dear friend, how are you living your life and, as importantly, what do you yearn for - healing, hope, forgiveness, sobriety, generosity, patience, more time with your family, coming closer to Jesus and to God and their whispered words of love? What do you yearn for? Get clear about that, write it on the palm of your hand, and then go for it, remembering that

To find what you seek you have to travel not with steps alone - but with yearnings
as the wise men discovered.

And their world was never the same.

Amen.