

ON SEARCHING DILIGENTLY

MATTHEW 2:1-12

It seems like our Christmas celebration began a long time ago. Of course, it did if we trace it back to God saying, "Let there be light, and there was light." Even if you prefer to mark the beginning of the church's celebration of Christmas to a manger in Bethlehem, that still is a long time ago.

What I am asking you to do, however, is to reflect on how this Christmas is being celebrated. Yes, this Christmas, the one that began on Christmas Eve and concludes with Epiphany, with wise men (and women?), with magicians, astrologers or magi.

By now, you may be thinking, "Enough with Christmas already. I still have decorations to take down and store. All of the cakes that I have baked are beginning to dry out, and now, every time that I look into the mirror, I am reminded of weight that has been gained and of exercise that is waiting to happen. Isn't it possible to celebrate Christmas without striving to look like Santa Claus? How do I continue to celebrate Christmas when it feels like nobody else in the world is?"

Start by recognizing that somebody else in the world is. Think back to the beginning of Advent and remember how we savored each and every step through the wisdom of prophets until we arrived on the dark side of Bethlehem when suddenly light appeared.

I have given this much thought and feel that perhaps the best way to continue celebrating Christmas after gifts are exchanged and ornaments are boxed neatly is to experience Christmas as a star-gazing Persian.

"Oh, but if I did this, I would miss all of the fun."

Maybe. Maybe not.

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2nd Sunday after Christmas, Year C, January 3, 2010

I will be the first to confess that I would prefer to be a shepherd, you know, one of those servants who spend time with the flock in the muck and the mire of the field, and then after the angels appear, I would be on the first bus to Bethlehem.

Now for a more reluctant confession: I would rather be an angel than a wise man, because there is less guesswork involved for the angels. God speaks directly to and through angels. All that the angels have to do is to listen. Listen and then repeat what they hear. They are safer than anybody else in the Christmas story.

Every Christmas celebration, has its cast of characters (and I am deeply grateful for the incredibly rich casts of characters of which I am part at both church and home). In each and every story, there are always those who think they know what is going on (or at least what should be). There are those who *actually* know what is going on and exercise leadership, and then there are those who would rather follow somebody else's lead.

Of course, there are other ways to think about the cast. There are those who do everything early. They are already shopping for next year. They arrive early at the Christmas gathering and are eager to follow the script. There are those who are always punctual. They arrive on time, not a half-second early or a half-second late under any circumstances. All gifts are bought on time, wrapped on time and delivered on time. Then there are those whom nobody expects until after the event has started. They are the ones who are asked to bring a dessert (not an appetizer). When they arrive, the gifts are half-wrapped and often are delivered in the same bags that were used to take the merchandise out of the store. When asked if everything is OK, because they sat in the drive for a half-hour before they came to the door, they explain that everything is fine. They were just wrapping their gifts.

Now let me be clear: I am not offering these observations as an invitation to judge but as a way of emphasizing that God created each and every person in the categories that I describe (and the ones

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that I do not and the ones that exist in the spaces “in between”). If these observations help you to laugh at yourself or to appreciate the idiosyncrasies in the persons with whom God has placed you at church or home, then “Hallelujah,” but the point that I am making is related even more intimately to the Christmas story.

Angels, shepherds and those who search diligently for wisdom behold the Christ at Christmas, and each one beholds him differently, and this is by God’s initiative. An angel of the Lord appears to Mary then shepherds in Luke’s Gospel and to Joseph in Matthew’s Gospel. The magi in Matthew’s Gospel are not looking for a celebration, but they find one anyway, because their search for wisdom is earnest, and it is marked by the ability to change one’s mind.

The plot of the Epiphany story, as told only in Matthew’s Gospel, is twisted. It begins with King Herod being intimidated by a question: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?” Answer: King Herod is frightened. I know that this is not an answer, but it is the one provided by Matthew: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened.” Rather than answer the question, Herod plots. He plots with the chief priests and scribes against the Messiah. He asks them to answer the wise ones’ question, and they do by quoting Hebrew Scriptures. They do by quoting Micah and 2 Samuel: “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.” Remember the sermon from the 4th Sunday of Advent? Relax, I don’t either: To you, O Bethlehem...

The plot twists, because the magi become caught up in the search, so caught up, in fact, that they ignore the second half of their commission to: “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.” Go and search diligently. Suddenly, the story feels like Advent all over again. Then, as they approach Bethlehem, crooked ways are straightened, and they are “overwhelmed by joy.” This joy is marked by a celebration possible only

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in places where there is sanctuary: “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, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left their own country by another road.”

Does it ever bother you that we spend four Sundays preparing for the Messiah’s birth and then only two celebrating his arrival (and I am not referring only to the number of Christmas versus Advent hymns that we sing in a given year)? Even when we observe Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Epiphany, this is only five celebrations of the Messiah’s birth.

Epiphany is much, much more than filling out the manger scene. It is about savoring a story that we prepare, repent and wait to celebrate. It is about acknowledging that we belong to a faith tradition that encompasses, and yet also is much bigger than, Judaism or Bethlehem. It is Christian, Zoroastrian and Muslim. It is not exclusively male. We do not know how many magi there are, only that there are three gifts---gold, frankincense and myrrh---“wise men” may also be translated “astrologers” or “magicians.” Epiphany is about looking up and looking out, about following one’s star wherever and to whomever it may lead. Epiphany is about the search, about one’s public and private quests and about being able to behold God’s glory and welcome the change that beholding God’s glory brings.

The English poet Samuel Johnson says that, “What we ever hope to do with ease, we must first learn to do with diligence.” One step in front of the other: This is how the church arrives in Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph. It is how the magi arrive after them. It is how you and I will persevere in the year ahead. It is how we will continue to learn about God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

How we live shapes our dreams. This is the note on which the Epiphany story ends: “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left their own country by another road.” Advent is the road that we travel to Bethlehem. Epiphany is the dream by which we are led on a different road, a

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road that is as safe and secure as Bethlehem's manger once wise men and women subvert Herod's plot and a road that is as fragrant as frankincense and as assuring as myrrh. Whatever road you travel, know that in Jesus Christ, God is with you. God is with us, and God provides sanctuary when you feel lost or alone. O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever. Amen.

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