

San Lorenzo Community Church

United Church of Christ

Sermon from Rev. Annette J. Cook

Sunday, January 8, 2017

Hear now a reading from the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-12.

² After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi^[a] from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel."

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

This ends the reading from the Gospel of Matthew. Thanks be to God.

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Good morning. Happy New Year.

There is a story set in a small fictional New England town, Castle Rock, Maine. In the town a new gift shop is opened by a seemingly kind older gentleman named Leland Gaunt. The allure of the shop is that for each of the townspeople the shop's inventory includes an item thought to be the thing most wanted in life. However, none of the people can afford to buy the item. The shop owner offers each of them a trade. A favor done for him will secure the most wanted item. Each is to play what appears to be a simple prank on another of the townspeople.

Then the residents of Castle Rock begin to turn on one another until at last the whole town is in chaos. Leland Gaunt turns out to be none other than the devil himself. Traveling throughout the countries of the world, he has been selling junk to people who thought they were purchasing the item they most wanted. What the shoppers failed to notice were the words printed above the shop's entrance...Caveat Emptor... "Let the buyer beware."

As many of you I am not a big fan of horror movies or books. However, this is the plot in the book *Needful Things*, a novel by Stephen King. I think this story has something for us today.

In these opening days of the New Year, as we anticipate the unfolding of 2017, let us consider how it is that we step into this new year to start a new path, a new journey, a new chapter and not be distracted or deterred by injustice disguised as reform; or racism, sexism and homophobia disguised as bringing back our country's values; or intolerance and discrimination disguised as what it takes to grow the economy. Let us consider what it is you and I "buy into" as the most important thing in life...the principal thing, the chief, the main thing in life, the big picture things that frame our lives.

Let us pray:

Eternal God, Emmanuel, God with us, we thank you for this time together to hear your Word. Help us to look beyond where we've been, and led by your Spirit, may we journey forth knowing that you are always with us. Amen.

Every year on January 6 in the church calendar, we observe the day of Epiphany, the Feast of Kings. It's the celebration of the arrival of the Three Wise Men, the Magi, on the day they found baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

In one sense, the Magi were on a quest to find the thing they thought most important in life. This was a calling, a compulsion, a thing that must be done or they would regret it for the rest of their lives.

According to the Gospel, this quest began with a star in the sky. The search for the most important thing in life begins for them by looking up, seeing the heavens. Less about astrology and more about attitude, their discovery started with what might be called a posture of prayer. A stance of openness and marvel at the world.

On my phone, I have this image as my screen wallpaper – I see it behind all of my other apps and icons, reminding me that prayer sometimes is standing in awe of the cosmos, of all of creation, and being open to all that the universe might offer.

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You know this story of the Magi. Matthew says the Wise Men started in the east and moved west. They left home, the most familiar of places, the status quo, and ventured out toward a yet unknown destination. It would be a journey not unlike that of Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament, who at the call of God departed their native land and traveled toward a land of promise.

Like any journey, this journey required that they endure some rough spots along the way, negotiating a curve or two, climbing some hills, and passing through and out of dark valleys.

Some of you are familiar with the "Outward Bound Wilderness" program which offers women, men, boys, and girls supervised opportunities for exploring wilderness areas of our country while developing personal survival skills, courage, and self-confidence.

Begun in the tumultuous waters of the North Sea during World War II, "Outward Bound" was a program designed to give experience and practical skills to sailors who would seek to endure battles yet to be fought. The name "Outward Bound" is actually a nautical term used when ships leave the certainty of the harbor. It is said that these journeys take people to places they've only dreamed of and leave them with things that last a lifetime. One might say they were outward bound to become inwardly free.

So there is a star and there is a journey. And then there is the discovery and experience of arriving at that stable. This is what they risked everything for, this is what they have been searching for, this is the One for whom they have brought their gifts.

This is usually where the sermon ends. The Magi have arrived. We preachers talk about the star, the journey and the encounter with Christ. We love these parts. They are full of warm and fuzzy moments. Sure there was some trial and tribulation in the journey, of course there was. But look where they ended up. Full of joy. Absolute, unrestrained joy.

So it is a little disappointing that this is not the end of the story. Woven throughout this story is the presence of King Herod – he appears no fewer than five times in these twelve verses. His reign as King provides the context because Herod is threatened by the news of the birth of Jesus, who is being called a "new King." There is no doubt of the deception and lies Herod undertakes in order to gain control of the situation before it gets out of hand. The Magi are in fact warned that Herod will do them harm if they return to their homes by the same path. The Magi are warned that they must return home a different way.

Ironic that the Light of the World, the experience of the Divine, the Light which Darkness cannot extinguish is a threat to the most powerful man in all of Judea. And I would say to you that any power structure that favors only some rather than serving all, all people, all life, is a false power. It has no ultimate future. It will collapse. And at some level false power knows this. It always feels threatened by the shining of true Power, the power of love. 'Love-Force,' as Mahatma Gandhi called it, 'Not Brute-Force.'

There it is. That is the risk. Having left their families and jobs and friends and communities to embark on this strange journey, they are now confronted with an even greater risk – they have a decision to make.

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As soon as they stopped and were immersed in all of the joy and happiness that confirmed their arrival at the right place, they remembered their secret meeting with Herod, and they knew they had to decide what they would do with what he had asked – whether they would tell King Herod where and how to find the baby Jesus. They were caught between their joy and their fear. After all, it's not every day that King Herod asks you to do something. And if you don't do what he asks, you could be in trouble – he is the King, after all. It's not a good thing to cross a fearful and threatened King.

We all know what it's like to be caught between our joy and our fear. Abraham Maslow, a psychologist of significance in the 20th century wrote -- "Every human being has both sets of forces within. One set clings to safety and defensiveness, hanging on to the past," moving in a backward direction, "afraid to grow, afraid to take chances, afraid to jeopardize what [one] already has, afraid of independence and freedom. The other set of forces impels [one] forward toward wholeness and uniqueness of Self, toward...confidence in the face of the...world" (Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*).

And so the Magi, like every one of us, have a decision to make. The Magi must choose between the joy of arriving at the manger and the fear of the king Herod. They had to choose between the joy of believing the sign from God and the anxiety and fear of the other. They had to choose between moving forward into an unknown path -- and moving backward out of fear. This is true for all of us -- afraid to grow and afraid not to grow.

Well, in this story, verse 12, the verse that closes this story, speaks of their decision. It reads: ¹² "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." They left for their own country by another way, an unknown path, a path not taken.

The Magi refused to go in the direction of their fears. Through the language of their dream, the language of God still-speaking, they chose to follow the new sign and move forward with their joy. They trusted their own inner experience of joy, even if that experience flew in the face of the power and authority and expectations of the world. They went in the direction of the Divine, even though Herod wanted them to go back.

They did that because, when you know this inner joy from God, it is worth trusting and worth following and worth building a life around. That inner joy you experience when you are who and where you're meant to be is the still speaking voice of God, beckoning you to live and move and have your being in all that God has given you and not in what the world expects.

This is the decision deep within each of us. You have the God-given gift of your own star to follow; your own Epiphany to behold; your own decision to make. God is giving you signs where you are, signs you will recognize. Look up. Follow your star. Your Epiphany awaits you.

And then, when you are overwhelmed and caught between going backward and moving forward, when you are struggling between this way or that, every time you are at the crossroads, I say to you -- choose joy. Follow the path of joy, where the signs of God will be sprinkled across the sky like the star of the east you will follow. Follow the path not taken.

Amen.