

## **Following the Light**

Matthew 2: 1-12

January 4, 2008 – Epiphany - UM

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*This sermon was delivered as a dialogue, with another person reading the bold print, which is the scripture passage from Matthew.*

Will you join me in a moment of prayer?

Eternal God, in our struggle to hear your Word, O God, bless even our doubts, our wonderings, our wanderings, our soul-struggles, life's deep questions, and deeper mysteries. Teach us to love our questions as well as our answers. Amen.

**In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men 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."**

What do you imagine King Herod's reaction to this news that the wise men came seeking to find the baby in order to honor him?

Only a king was worthy to be paid homage... how could a baby warrant this?

Indeed, who is this child who has been born king of the Jews? Who is he for us? A helpless baby? A prophet? A King? A radical reformer? A breaker of social barriers? A healer? A teacher? A friend? Those questions ring true for us just as they did for the wise men...

Like them, we want to know this Jesus and each week we gather and pay him homage through our worship... and we pay homage to the life of service he led through our lives...

Jesus life was not that of a king.... He had no palaces... indeed was dependent on others for hospitality... he had no priests and scribes ready to do his bidding... he had no armies... he had ordinary people, men and women, who gathered around him to learn and to learn how to serve... people like us... ordinary, wonderful people...

**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, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.**

I can't help wondering why Herod was so frightened.... After all, this was a baby, the Magi had not brought him tales of a warrior rising up...but in naming him "King of the Jews," the wise men threatened Herod...

**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.' "**

Nobody expected a ruler to come from Bethlehem... a small unimportant village... but don't our heroes and leaders often come from unexpected places and live in unexpected ways. We just have to think of people like Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King Jr.

**Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared.**

Did Herod not want the priests and the scribes to know that he took the threat of this child seriously? Did he not want to appear concerned?

**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."**

The wise men would have believed Herod, after all, why wouldn't they? The question that arises for me is how do we trust what we are told? By anyone? Our leaders? Most of us no longer give our leaders unqualified trust... in fact some of us are so jaded that we think all leaders are corrupt... it takes discernment... and in our world of too much information... it is easy to give up and not bother taking part...

**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.**

We don't know how long this journey took... much like our journeys to meet Jesus... some of us are fortunate that we were told stories about him... brought to Sunday school... nurtured in the faith...

For others... we come later... sometimes by very circuitous paths... but seeking that star... that place where Jesus is being born all the time... sometimes we stumble... and fall... but we are seeking that light... a purpose greater than this world offers... a chance to be part of something more...

**When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.**

Overwhelmed with joy... that is what the scripture says... have you ever been overwhelmed with joy? So much that you wanted to sing and dance and praise God... Or simply fall on your knees as the Magi did. Perhaps the birth of a child... or a grandchild... or perhaps an intimate moment between partners... perhaps a shining moment while outdoors. There are times when our hearts are so full that we are overwhelmed... overwhelmed with gratitude, with joy, with a feeling of everything being perfect at that moment.

**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.**

According to Matthew, The Magi offered gifts for a king... It is not the historical accuracy that counts so much as the meaning for us: that Jesus is honoured by these wise and rich Gentiles, not people of the Law...

The gifts suggest royalty, priesthood, and sacrifice: a summary of belief in Christ.

What gifts do we have to offer? Not many of us have gold, frankincense and myrrh... but each of us has a gift that is our alone... the gift of music... of teaching... of speaking... of compassion... of listening... of hospitality...

Even our troubles can be a gift... They are an opportunity to do something different... An opportunity to think in a new way... a chance to take stock of what we have.

We are rich in gifts and talents and opportunities to live the message of God's call.

So what makes many of us hesitant to respond to that call?

Is it fear... feelings of inadequacy... lack of guidance?

These words, written by Marianne Williamson, are ones that Nelson Mandela spoke at his inaugural address as president of South Africa:

*Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.*

*Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.*

*It is our light not our darkness, that most frightens us.*

*We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?*

*Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.*

*Your playing small doesn't serve the world.*

*There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.*

*We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within all of us.*

*It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.*

*And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.*

*As we are liberated from our fear, our presence automatically liberates others.*

Have we not been blessed and given unique gifts and talents that no one else has?

Not that we have been given the same gifts as everyone, we only need to look around us to see that that is not so.

But we are all equally loved by God and we are all equally as deserving of love and care and compassion.

**And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.**

The magi were open to having their plans altered? Has your life unfolded as you thought it would? How open are you, how open am I, to changing our direction?

One of the things I did in spirituality group once was to create a time line of our lives; separated into decades... we drew a line across the centre of a page... and then wrote down significant events or happenings in our lives, both positive and negative.... And what the outcomes of those things were... we had time and space to comment on how widely our lives had diverged from what we may have planned... and how open we were to those changes...

Interestingly enough to me... the negative events of my life led to learning and growth... there was light within them.... Even if only in retrospect... the positive events had negative aspects... what felt like one or the other when taking place... was really both... like life... the dark and the light are intertwined... day turns to night just as night turns to day... and in the midst of our darkest times, the light of Christ shines... on each and every one of us...

To God, be all honour and glory, world without end, amen.