

“NO LONGER KNEELING”

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

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Matthew’s depiction of the wise men’s visit to the home of Jesus is both one of the defining moments of our tradition and a critical post-Christmas jumping off point for contemporary Christians. The story tells us that the wise men have been sent out by King Herod in an attempt to know what is happening in his land. Of course, his sending the wise men to find Jesus was more about his fear and his desire to hold on to his power than about keeping up with the news. The birth of Jesus had left him frightened by the threat that this new king might pose. Thus, the wise men from the East enter his employ. They dutifully follow the star that leads them to the place where they find the infant Jesus. And there they meet him and something happens in that house, what we aren’t exactly sure, but something indeed happens. They brought the gold and frankincense that were foretold by Isaiah and brought myrrh also—and when they found Jesus and Mary they knelt beside the child and presented their gifts.

And that is really all we know of the moment that we celebrate as Epiphany—the culmination of the twelve days of Christmas. Epiphany comes from the Greek meaning “to manifest” or “to show”; and on Epiphany, which is celebrated on January 6, we celebrate what the wise men must have recognized when they found the infant Jesus—that this baby—this king that they had traveled so far to find—was indeed a human manifestation of God. When the wise men found Jesus they found that the one who they had been calling the king of the Jews—wasn’t merely a king in the worldly way that they expected to find. Instead, in some mysterious way, they understood that the infant that they found was the flesh of God. They must have understood that this baby was to be a king and teacher, a prophet and a savior, and not just for the Jews, not just for them, but for the world! I have no idea what they experienced there, but their discovery and the fateful decision that they made upon exiting that home makes our faith story possible. They ignored King Herod, they ignored the riches that surely awaited them, and they left by another road—back into obscurity so that their child and our story could live on.

I have always been intrigued by the story of the wise men and their decision to leave Herod behind. When I hear this passage I find myself reflecting on the change of heart that must have occurred for the wise men as they met Jesus. I wonder what that was like? I wonder what it was like to meet Jesus when he was but an infant, and be so changed as to believe in the warnings of a dream? I wonder what exactly the baby Jesus was like that made them understand who and what he was. I shutter to think about what might have happened if the wise men had not gotten it when they met Jesus. But instead, they made the courageous decision to ignore King Herod...and they and we together traveled on another road.

Perhaps it is because I always hear the Epiphany story with New Year’s resolutions fresh in my mind, but I find the notion of following “another road” to be ripe with possibility from a theological point of view. Although we do not know what became of the gift-

bearing wise men—we can embrace their choice to travel another road and see it as a jumping off point for ourselves on our faith journey. As we think about what would become of Jesus it is pretty clear I think that those who initially followed him were choosing a distinctly different road. Think about the teachings of Jesus in regard to family—he made it clear that allegiance to God easily held priority over allegiance to family. Think about the teachings of Jesus in regard to money—and imagine the wrestling match that would ensue to force the camel through the eye of the needle. Think about the forgiveness modeled offered in the parable of prodigal son—a different road in any time period. With these roads in mind I am intrigued then by some of the different roads that we as individuals might explore as we get up off our knees at the end of the Christmas season and join the wise men wandering down a different road.

There are many options for the roads that we might travel, but here are a few that I would like to suggest:

First, I wonder about wandering down a different road with the bodies that God has gifted to us. I would say that Corvallis is a bit above average in its fitness level, but I wonder how we, as individuals, might more seriously address the idea that our bodies are Holy instruments in the God's divine plan. Do we treat them with the reverence and care that they deserve? Are we as fit as we should be, or are we taking the most intimate gift that God has given to us and abusing it with poor diet, bad habits, and lack of physical activity? I find it interesting that the United Church of Christ health plan has been very active over the last few years in pursuing clergy to engage in exercise and better eating plans—and they have done a pretty good job of tying the effort to faithful living. Clergy aren't often the best models of physical fitness, but perhaps we all might do better at caring for our health if we saw it as a faithful decision. What if we engaged our health as a mode of being faithful and ask this question, "Are we being faithful with our bodies, or are we merely using and abusing them as if they were a) replaceable and b) a mere commodity?" This, I believe, is a road worth traveling.

Another road that we might consider traveling is one that might ask us to rethink how we spend our money. I'm not actually thinking about our tithes and offerings to the church—although I think that should be a part of the conversation, but I wonder what it might mean to be more intentional in our thinking about where and how we spend our money and what that says about our faith? How would we answer the question, "Is my faith recognizable in the midst of my purchasing?" Liz once quoted Kristor Stendahl, the Lutheran theologian and former Chaplain and Dean of Harvard Divinity School as saying, "The most important theological decisions we make are what we eat and what we buy." In many ways this statement serves as a bridge between the two roads that I have suggested we explore traveling. Taking seriously what we purchase and eat as food takes us on a profoundly theological journey because it helps us see our bodies as just one part of the web of life that God has created. I know that I am too often guilty of not considering the impact of my food choices, a reality that allows me to escape the theological and ethical ramifications of my consumption. Likewise if we consider every purchase we make to be a theological decision suddenly the story of our stuff becomes our theological story. Now, I am honestly not sure that I am ready to set foot on this

road, but in the midst of incredibly difficult questions about global warming, about food security and food safety, and about the ethical dilemmas that come up as we discover more about the social and economic costs of our products—we then have to ask whether we really have a choice but to determine whether our purchases speak of our faith—or fly in the face of what we profess. There are no easy answers here, but this is an important road to travel.

Finally, another road that I would offer is the road that challenges us to consider the depth and breadth of our spiritual journeys. Personally I wrestle with this one; I wrestle with being classified as religious professional and sometimes feeling like my faith has merely become a part of my job. Sometimes I recognize when I need to carve out more meditation or reading time; but it is often hard to be honest with myself about my own faith journey and my own spiritual life, and I don't think I am alone. I have talked with people in this congregation and in other faith circles who have expressed their frustration with jobs that force them to make decisions based on their family's financial needs rather than their faithful beliefs. Several friends who also have young families have expressed frustration because in the midst of all the things they feel they need to do, they don't feel they have time for a spiritual life. I wonder sometimes if being the church in all of its manifestations, in all of its denominations, in all of its structures and traditions hasn't become more important than knowing the heart of God in our lives. And, thus, I wonder if Christianity as we know it never quite gets around to manifesting God in the lives of those who are most in need. I wonder then if we aren't called to join the wise men on a different road, on an intentional road where our journey is more important than anything else. The ancient story of our faith has been written down and serves as the basis for what should be a vital and challenging faith; but, too often, life intercedes and we walk the same road that we have always walked. This year perhaps it should be different. This year, as we get up off our knees and leave the infant Jesus behind, let us join the wise men of ancient days and find another road to follow so that our story might be new, exciting, challenging—and, most importantly, more faithful to the child who grew into our savior and king. Which road do you want to take?

Thanks be to God, Amen.