

January 3, 2021- Epiphany Sunday
Farmville Baptist Church
Matthew 2:1-12
“A Worthy Journey is Rarely an Easy One”
Tracy Hartman

Have you ever felt called you to do something? Perhaps it was something as simple as feeling like you should pick up the phone and call a friend or neighbor – and learning that they were having a challenging day and desperately needed encouragement. Or perhaps God called you to do something drastic – liking changing jobs and moving to a new city where you didn’t know a soul and you had to start over. How does God speak to us in those times and what does it look like for us to follow that calling? God can speak to us in any number of ways, from an idea that pops into our mind that just won’t go away, to a suggestion from a friend, to something that we read in the pages of Scripture. Mary and Joseph were fortunate – angels appeared to them – in a dream for Joseph and pretty directly to Mary it seems – and their directions were crystal clear.

The shepherds in Luke 2 also got a heavenly visitor, then a multitude of heavenly host to boot. They also got a very clear message - ¹⁰ “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,^[a] the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” After the angels left them, Luke tells us that the shepherds made haste to go and find Mary and Joseph and Jesus.

For the shepherds, it was a worthy journey, even though it was not a long one. But I suspect it wasn’t an easy one. You may remember that shepherding was a despised profession. What would townspeople think when the shepherds came traipsing through the streets? Did they slip inside and close their doors and windows - just to be safe? What would Mary and Joseph

think when total strangers – outcasts at that – showed up in their make-shift birthing room? My first thoughts when these unusual men showed up would not have been charitable to say the least. But after the shepherds told Mary and Joseph what they had seen and heard, everyone was amazed, and Mary treasured their words and pondered them in her heart. A worthy journey, but noy necessarily an easy one.

And then there are the wise men, whose story we heard just a few moments ago. They don't get angelic visitors do they? What leads them to God? (PAUSE) Science. (PAUSE) That's a needed word in some sectors today isn't it, as so many question science these days. For these ancient visitors, it was astronomy, their study of the stars, that launched them on their quest to find the newborn King of the Jews.

I can only imagine how hard their journey must have been. Although we don't know the exact distance, or how long they actually traveled, it is likely that they did not arrive in Bethlehem until Jesus was almost two years old. And while Joseph and Mary and the shepherds got pretty specific instructions from their angelic visitors, the magi had to interpret Scripture and use logic, and figure things out as they went along.

Biblical Scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that, in fact, the wise men drew on the wrong Scripture in their quest to find Jesus. Isaiah chapter 60 records a poem that Israel recited when they were resettling Jerusalem after their exile in Babylon. Hear a part of that poem now:

Lift up your eyes and look around;
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away,
and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
 ⁵ Then you shall see and be radiant;
 your heart shall thrill and rejoice,^[a]
because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you,
the wealth of the nations shall come to you.
 ⁶ A multitude of camels shall cover you,
 the young camels of Midian and Ephah;

all those from Sheba shall come.
They shall bring gold and frankincense,
and shall proclaim the praise of the LORD.

This all seems logical to the wise men. They will go to Jerusalem, the Holy City, the seat of power. After all, where else would a new king be? But this worthy journey won't end so easily. For you see, this caravan of travelers from the east – however many there were – missed their intended destination by 8 miles. They arrive in Jerusalem and can't locate the new king. So what do they do? They ask for help. We all need that sometimes when we are trying to follow God's call, don't we?

I imagine that the wise men create quite a stir with their arrival and questions. So much so that Herod hears the news. Matthew tells us that Herod is frightened – and all Jerusalem with him. Herod is afraid because he senses a threat to his power. The citizens are afraid because they know how unstable Herod is, how dangerous he can be when he is threatened. Their worst fears are realized when Herod orders the slaughter of the innocents. But at this point in the story, Herod calls together the chief priests and the scribes – he needs information.

Walter Bruegemann imagines the conversation going like this: “Tell me about Isaiah 60. What is all this business about camels and gold and frankincense and myrrh?” The scholars tell him: You have the wrong text. And the wise men outside your window are using the wrong text. Isaiah 60 will mislead you because it suggests that Jerusalem will prosper and have great urban wealth and be restored as the center of the global economy. In that scenario, the urban elites can recover their former power and prestige and nothing will really change.

Herod does not like this verdict and asks, defiantly, “Well, do you have a better text?” The scholars are afraid of the angry king, but tell him, with much trepidation, that the right text is Micah 5:2-4:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah . . . from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old . . .

This is the voice of hope for the future, a voice that is not impressed with high towers and great arenas, banks and urban achievements. It anticipates a different future, as yet unaccomplished. Micah anticipates a leader who will bring well-being to his people, not by great political ambition, but by attentiveness to the folks on the ground. Herod tells the Eastern intellectuals the truth, and the rest is history. They head for Bethlehem, a rural place, dusty, unnoticed and unpretentious. It is, however, the proper milieu for the birth of the One who will offer an alternative to the existing power structures. It is here that God will begin his journey of downward mobility, of serving the least of these, and of calling us to do the same.

After some wrong turns along the way, the wise men finally arrive in Bethlehem, where they worship the young king. But there is one more twist to their long journey. Now they get their vision in a dream, and it tells them not to return to Herod. So they departed for their own country by another road.

Worthy journeys are often hard ones, and so it is for us. But, as a friend posted on Fb this week, we can choose our hard. It’s hard to get in shape, but it’s

harder to deal with the long-term consequences of neglecting our health. We can choose our hard. Relationships are hard, but often loneliness and isolation are harder. We can choose our hard. Re-visioning our future here at Farmville Baptist is hard, but doing nothing and continuing to decline until we die would, in many ways, be even harder. We have chosen our hard, because worthy journeys are rarely easy.

The good news of the gospel this morning is that the new born King, Immanuel is with us, and I believe with all my heart that God is doing a new thing. For us, the early months of 2021 will be a time of seeking, this reflection, entitled just that, speaks to our journey.