

Another Way

January 7, 2018

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Texts: Matthew 2:1-12; Mark 1:4-11

I can't remember which boy, but one of our sons came to us when he was in preschool to announce that he could count to 100 in THREE SECONDS. "Wow," I responded, suitably impressed – "really?" And then he did: "One, two, skip a few, ninety-nine, one hundred!"

We have the same sort of sequencing in these two stories from the life of Jesus: wise men visit, skip thirty years, and then Jesus is baptized. These are both familiar stories from the life of Jesus. They are not usually read together as they take place almost 30 years apart, but it that's how we're doing it today. And, by the way, the creed most commonly used in Protestant worship, the Apostles' Creed, does the same thing in describing Jesus – jumping from "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary," to "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified..." and so on. Often, people of faith are prone to making the same leap – focusing on future hopes and forgetting about living the life of faith – which was the focus for Jesus. So although we are leaping over thirty years here, we will be focusing on the journey.

The journey the wise men take is one that can be instructive for the church today, as well as for individuals. Remember, Matthew's Gospel is the most Jewish of the Gospels, written to a Jewish community of Christians. And yet, the story that Matthew tells of visitors to the manger is the story of these Gentiles, these foreigners, the wise men from the East. The wise men, also described as magi, were spiritual people of a different tradition—they were not Jewish. They were seekers, people who were looking for spiritual signs, and they found one in the star, and so they followed it—away from their home, away from their people, in order to learn what God would show them.

Now Matthew isn't trying to make some point here about Jewish people not being part of God's plans around Jesus—this story isn't about exclusion but about inclusion. Matthew's Gospel will focus on interactions between Jesus and many Jewish people. But in this story, Matthew is telling us that others are also included in the household of God—indeed as we have seen God reaching out to outsiders throughout the Hebrew Bible. Ruth is from Moab, many places in the Hebrew texts teach that the people of God should welcome the immigrant and the stranger. The little book of Jonah is not so much about a big fish as a big prejudice that Jonah has against the people of Ninevah...but God is determined to save them. God often challenges God's people to new ways of serving God.

At this time in the history of the church, when so many people believe the church is undergoing a journey of great change, the story of the Magi can be both comforting and inspiring. The Magi went way outside their own traditions in order to follow God, and see what God had in mind for them. Can we be ready to look outside the way we've always done things, and notice where God might be leading us toward a new future?

The Magi went outside their country and traditions seeking God; Jesus spent most of his ministry outside the synagogue—I've always thought that one of the real strengths of this congregation is that so many people are involved in ministry throughout the community. We don't stay in this building—members here serve at Operation Bootstrap, and the Mobile Pantry, and St. Vinnie's. Some of you have volunteered for Meals on Wheels, or in Habitat for Humanity, or at the Family Crisis Center, or in environmental work. Members of this church have always seemed to understand that serving God doesn't only happen inside the church building.

The Magi left their comfort, and came to visit the infant Jesus—they worshipped him and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and then they went home. But they left by another way. They no longer reported to King Herod, they had found another king.

In these days, it's important to discern what it means to follow Jesus Christ in the 21st Century, and for us, what does it mean here in Portage County? What does it mean to us that we are Christian? What do we believe about Jesus, and how do our beliefs shape who we are, and our actions in the world? Presbyterians have, historically been a people of creeds and confessions—we struggle to discern what we believe, and we work to put our belief, our understanding of God, into words and action. Today, a group of youth in our church will be beginning confirmation class—during the next 4 months, they will be seeking to understand what they believe, and how they want to live that out. We call it confirmation, because at the end of the class, on May 20, those who want to will confirm the promises their parents made on their behalf at baptism, or if they are not yet baptized, they can be baptized. What does it mean to be the community of the baptized?

And so let's look at what it mean to Jesus to be baptized. Jesus has grown up in an observant Jewish home, and now he is about to set out in ministry. When our boys would leave for school, some days I would tell them, "Be a blessing today." A friend's mother used to tell her, "Be brave." My mom told me, "Learn things." And what does God want to say to Jesus, in front of everyone, as he sets out in ministry? "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus hasn't done anything yet—so God isn't telling him that he's done well—God is telling him that he is loved, just as he is. What Jesus teaches, what Jesus does, all flows from this central identity—he is beloved by God. And so are we. God believes in him and God believes in us, too. In the book of Isaiah, during a time when the people of Israel had been in exile, and were at their lowest point as a nation—no success in sight, as defeated as a people could be—God reminded them, "You are precious and I love you." This is what God wants us to know, this is who God wants us to be: the Beloved.

It's not the way of the world—in the world, you are valued if you are the winner, if you succeed, if you are strong. Approval comes as a result of what you do. But God has another way: God starts with love, acceptance, and welcome. So we know that the people who sleep here at night are wrapped in the loving embrace of God; and the addicts whose lives go from fix to fix, or from drink to drink, or from feast to feast are children of God; and the woman who thinks she is all alone as the beatings come again, is loved. The way of the world is to value people according to their success. But God wants every child to be safe, and fed, and loved... because God loves each of us, and so Jesus reached out especially to the least, the last, the lonely and the lost. God's way is not the world's way; God has another way, the way of Jesus, and Jesus invites us to follow this way home. Amen.