

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising,^[b] and have come to pay him homage." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah^[c] was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶"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^[d] my people Israel."

⁷Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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." ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Ingathering of the Dispersed

60 Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you.

²For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the LORD will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

³Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.

⁴Lift 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.

⁵Then 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.

⁶A 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.

January 6, 2019

“The Wise Foolishness of Following a Star”

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

Kerra Becker English

May God bless you with just enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this old world so that you will do those things that others say cannot be done.

If you've been worshipping here for any length of time, I can guarantee that you've heard me say those words, probably several times, as part of the closing blessing of our service. It's the final sentence of a blessing that has been attributed to a couple different monastic orders, so that tells you it's been in circulation for a very long time, and it's been in my pastoral repertoire for nearly 20 years from the time I picked it up from a conference speaker and fellow Presbyterian clergy-woman – Eugenia Gamble. Though the whole blessing moves me every time I offer it – it's this last line that is my favorite. What pastor blesses their congregation with foolishness – regularly? This one, I guess.

On this Sunday, Epiphany Sunday, a time to honor wise men, what I'd really like to do is thank them for their foolishness. What they do is anything but what the world would call smart. They travel from a great distance, with no GPS other than following a bright aberration in the night sky. They show up at the palace of an insecure King and threaten his authority by telling him about a new power on the rise. They bring terrible baby gifts. What infant needs gold, frankincense, and myrrh? Then they, as ornate and regal as we imagine them to be, kneel in homage in front of a scandalously poor and strangely religious couple in order to honor their newborn baby. And after all this, because of a dream, they choose to take a different route home.

For centuries, we have called them “wise” – but if anyone did the kind of things they were doing now, it would be more than just a little bit weird.

But remember, the wise men are called “wise,” not smart, not clever, not successful, not powerful or famous. To be wise in spiritual things sometimes takes being a bit strange in most peoples’ eyes. The wisdom they were after didn’t suit the powers that be. King Herod was not interested in any prophesy. He couldn’t have cared less about God’s word or God’s plan. What he did care about was his own power – and its possible diminishment. The thought of being rival to a baby sent him over the edge. When the wise men don’t come back – he sets out a horrific plan of death and destruction to thwart this newborn King. For Herod, the rewards that matter have nothing to do with things like wisdom, or compassion, or gratitude. They most certainly have nothing to do with God. His rewards were about staying on top, being the ONLY King, and fully maintaining the status of his subjects as under his personal control.

Unfortunately, we see this happening all the time, and not just with kings. Regular old people aren’t all that interested in wisdom, because focusing on wisdom, or searching for wisdom increases our vulnerability and can make us look pretty silly in others’ eyes. It may mean following an out of the way path and confronting important people in ways that threaten their perceived importance. It may mean taking extravagant gifts and giving them to those who aren’t normally deemed as deserving. It may mean listening to dreams and finding another way home. All strange and foolish things for us to consider doing.

However, as you likely know by now, I am a fan of the foolish when it comes to standing on the side of the wise and godly. I am always thrilled when I hear the stories of those who have dared to be different. Back in October, I got all excited reading about Kenneth Capron in Portland, Maine who was submitting a grant for a feasibility study to consider purchasing a

decommissioned cruise ship to convert to low income housing. Now that's a weird idea – hopefully one that's just weird enough to work. There are already busses in major cities that have been converted into shower and laundry facilities for the homeless. Why not a cruise ship structure of condos? Of course, the naysayers abound, even making valid points as they always do, and no solution to a major problem like homelessness is ever going to be perfect. But the “what if” always amazes me.

This biblical story seems full of the “what if” moments that make it worth telling year after year. What if the star is worth following? What if the baby really is the Messiah? What if the wisely foolish ones can distract or reroute the powerful and merciless rulers that think they have all the answers? We won't know unless we take some of those risks ourselves.

I whole-heartedly agree with Rick Ufford Chase, who was the moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA, elected when the General Assembly met in Richmond in 2004, who said, “I believe that we are to called to live as Jesus lived, to risk as Jesus risked, and to care as deeply as Jesus cared.” That means those of us who follow his star and tell his story will also be associated with Jesus' strangeness. Jesus was so odd, so foolish, and so full of risky choices that the powers that be wanted to kill him from the time he was an infant, and successfully did so at the height of his ministry. When Moderators of General Assembly and pastors of your church encourage you to take risks or act foolishly, know that we are fully aware of the dire consequences that can be involved.

Nevertheless, I really do believe that trusting in God's wisdom is a genuinely wonderful way to live out one's life. It may take you on a wild ride, and through near scrapes, but it will all be worth it. That's part of what I love about serving this congregation – it's hearing your “adventures in faith” stories. You have heard God's love resonate in your own hearts, and it has

called you to Christian service. You may not always think of it that way. You think of me as the one employed by God to do God-things, but it's really all of us. I may be called to be your support, your encouragement, and sometimes even to pose a challenge – but we're all in the thick of it trying to follow the weirdness of Jesus together.

So here's what I propose as our way to encourage the “epiphany” moment to last all throughout the year... I'm challenging you to tell some of your “leap of faith” stories publicly. Throughout the year, we will have moments for mission where you get to tell the story of how you were called to love, or where you have been sent to serve. If you don't like public speaking, I may ask you to write it for the newsletter, or to have coffee with someone who shares a similar passion, or ask you to let me narrate your story as part of worship. You don't have to write a book of your mission adventures as Flo did – but I know that in your work lives, and your family lives, and in caring about your community, there have been moments when you, and you, and you have risked looking the fool to follow God's wisdom. What star have you followed? Where did it take you? Did you find yourself so moved that you had to find your way home by a different path?