

sermon-010608 Newport Presbyterian Church
“When Outsiders Get It Right”
Matt. 2:1-12

Wendell Berry, in his novel, *Jayber Crow*, writes about Jayber visiting his old seminary professor, Dr. Ardmire. Jayber has a lot of questions that he fears won't be answered. He lists them for the professor. Dr. Ardmire responds, “You have been given questions to which you cannot be given answers. You will have to live them out-perhaps a little at a time.” Jayber responds, “And how long is that going to take?” “I don't know,” says the professor. “As long as you live perhaps.” “That could take a long time,” Jayber replies. “I will tell you a further mystery,” says Dr. Ardmire. “It may take longer.”

That pretty well sums up our journey of faith, does it not? We are on a journey, a deep and mysterious journey searching for answers to our most pressing questions about life. Ultimately, we are on a journey toward that great mystery we call God. Houston Smith, one of this country's greatest scholars on world religions, once had a PBS series on religion. He called it, “The Long Search.” That could very well be the description of each of our journeys of faith.

Our scripture passage for today about the magi seeking the newborn king is a text for searchers. The magi in this story have much they can teach us in our own search for God. One commentator describes their journey toward Bethlehem as being full of candor, openness and even naiveté. After all, it took great naiveté to waltz right into Jerusalem and ask a sitting king where the newborn king is to be found. Surely they must have known that would not sit well with Herod.

The commentator goes on to point out how these magi, these foreigners, these Gentiles, were guided by God. The story makes this clear when it mentions the star, the role scripture plays in this story, and how they were influenced by dreams.

The star in this story hardly acts like any star we know. It is more a symbol of being guided by God's light. The scriptures are the Jewish scriptures interpreted by the Jewish scribes. Interestingly, Herod goes to the scriptures as well. Herod, however, does not let the scriptures define or guide his life. He uses the scriptures to further his own devious purposes. We all know people who do that even in our day!

Dreams, for Matthew, and for the Old Testament as well, are a great medium for God to communicate to people. The Old Testament Joseph was helped by dreams in Egypt. The New Testament Joseph was guided by dreams in these first two chapters of Matthew. And now these magi from Persia are spoken to in dreams.

The whole point of this is to affirm that when we go on a journey seeking truth, a journey seeking answers to our most pressing questions, we will need to pay close attention to what we hear from that part of our inner life where the Spirit of God speaks.

Some of us are bigger questioners than others. Some are able to navigate their way through their days with ease. They just seem to focus on the task at hand, the many details of life, the routine, and don't seem to feel any angst from unanswered questions. But, none-the-less, they, too, are on a journey.

In fact, the definition of a Christian could very well be one who journeys. In Acts we read how the early Christians were called the people of the Way. We are all on the way somewhere. As Christians, we are on the way to a closer relationship with God. Like the magi in our text, we all travel toward God.

Part of the journey is joining a particular church. Many think that once they become members of a faith community the journey is over. Commentators tell us that is a big mistake. Joining a church is just the beginning of the journey. It is what happens after we have given our hearts to God in Christ, after we have become part of the people of God, that is really interesting. Who knows how our lives will be disrupted from business as usual as we continue on the journey after joining a church?

The image of the incarnation in the Christmas stories surely emphasizes this. These stories are all about God coming to us in the person of the baby Jesus. Babies are a wonderful metaphor for how the incarnation is experienced. As any parent knows, one's life is never the same after a baby enters the picture. Babies can be demanding. The dynamics of the marriage can't help but change once a child is born. Our journey toward God can, and ought, to carry the possibility of that kind of disruption in our lives.

Joan Chittister, that unorthodox Catholic nun, asks a very good question concerning this text. Contrary to popular thinking, we have no idea how many magi came to Bethlehem. We say there were three only because there were three different kinds of gifts. But, the Bible is silent as to the number. Chittister said the better question is not how many were there, but how many magi set out on the journey but did not make it?

This search for God is not an easy one. It can be disruptive. It involves great resolve and tenacity. Some will give up or become complacent with the status quo in their lives. But, when we arrive at those moments along the way when we get a glimpse of the God we seek, however partial those glimpses are, we can only fall on our knees and worship.

One person put it this way. The journey is about seeking, finding, and then giving. That pretty well sums up the story of the magi on that first Christmas. May it be a guide for us in our own journey. And may the meal we are about to eat together nourish us so we can keep at this wonderful, disruptive, but ultimately fulfilling journey to God. Amen