

January 6, 2013

The Epiphany

Matthew 2:1-12

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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For those of you keeping a tally, what I am about to say will mark the fourth time I have mentioned a bumper sticker in a sermon. I'll leave the significance of that fact up to your own discernment.

Not all those who wander are lost. Google tells me that JRR Tolkien said it first but I've only seen it on bumper stickers, often accompanied by Appalachian Trail logos or Grateful Dead bears. It is a delightfully hippy concept.

General, everyday wandering has never really appealed to me unless I'm on vacation at the time on the schedule allotted for recreational wandering, and even then, I need to wander with a project: wandering while collecting seashells, wandering on a hike to the waterfall. I don't wander well, in the bumper sticker sense.

The magi, as it turns out, were good at wandering. Purposeful wandering. And they were not lost, or at least they didn't think they were. They were following something strange. As experts of the night sky, they noticed a star that was not behaving like stars are supposed to. And, like good scientists, they decided to investigate. They consulted charts, symbology and prophecy and decided that this needed attention. They packed up and left for an unprecedented adventure. This was no aimless hour of seashell collecting.

Not all those who wander are lost.

It has occurred to me before that there are a few opposites of the Tolkien quote. Not all those who wander are lost, sure, but it is equally true that not all those who are lost are wandering.

Have you ever found yourself spiritually stuck? There are lots of ways to get stuck, stuck in a job or in a relationship, stuck in a financial situation, but spiritually stuck is a particularly sticky wicket, I think, because it is possible to find oneself stuck, really mired, in one tight spot with no apparent God in sight, but with no particular event or action that has caused the spiritual malaise.

I wonder if in those times, we need to wander, like the magi.

The magi, it should be noted, were not Christians. Christianity had not been invented yet as its founder had only just been born. But even more notable, they were likely not even Jewish. They were students of the stars, and teachers of

them, too. They were looking for something, a sign perhaps, that something was afoot. They found it in that strange, misbehaving star.

So they went wandering.

And when they went wandering, they found... what? What they were looking for? Certainly not. They were looking for a king of a nation and they found a young child with average-looking parents. But they knew something was happening and they knelt down laid open their gifts: Gold, to crown the new king; frankincense, to call God close; myrrh, for anointing at the time of death. They must have been baffled, overjoyed and overwhelmed, but totally baffled.

I grew up in Atlanta and even back in the good old days, stars were hard to see through the bright lights in the night sky, the clouds and the smog.

I was lucky enough that, even as a young child, I had opportunities to get to the mountains, to the coast, to wide open spaces where the air was clear and the sky was brilliant with stars at night.

But I am no star expert. And while I find a full, wide-open sky lovely, mysterious and humbling, the stars don't really make much sense to me. I wouldn't recognize an errant star in the sky, calling me out of what I know into a great adventure. I will not wander for stars.

But I have been lost. I have been stuck. And I have gone wandering in search of something, anything, to find meaning and to find God. I have told you of some of my wanderings, on Sapelo Island, Honduras and Burma, and I have gone with you on some of them, too, to Brazil and to visit our Muslim and Jewish friends in our own city. I have needed to get out of my own space, out of my own head, in order to be reminded that God is near. Very, very near, no matter where I am, but in my stuck-ness, I just wasn't able to see clearly. But then when I see God in the faces of those I go to serve, the faces of my traveling companions, and the faces of those who serve me, my sight is restored, and like the magi, I am baffled, overwhelmed with joy as I fall to my knees to pay him homage.

In the story of the visit of the magi, we see God using unexpected messengers—wandering astronomers—to remind us that God can and will be found in unexpected places and in unexpected company and that sometimes, we need to look outside the box a little to find and be found by God.

“Wandering,” I want to be clear, is different from “straying.” Do not take this sermon as permission to stop coming to church. God is found here, in liturgy, sacrament, service, community. We need you to be a community whole and holy. Instead, hear me say that if you are feeling spiritually or emotionally stuck, maybe it is because you need to wander some. You might wander into a new book or answer a new passion, you might explore a new land or a new kind of prayer discipline. You might take a class or a pilgrimage. I do not believe you

need to stray from us in order to wander into the arms of the God that loves you and is waiting for you.

The wise men came back to their own country and there is no doubt in my mind that they were profoundly changed by their journey. I also have no doubt that the gifts they brought back to their community far exceeded the gifts that they took with them. They were not lost, but they certainly didn't know where they were going.

I also want to be clear that this is not a "Little Drummer Boy"-style wandering: "come they told me, ba-rum-ba-bum-bum." You might not know what or who is calling you out there. You might not hear a voice or see a star at all. This might be undirected wilderness time, when you look for God in places that make you uncomfortable.

But when you are stuck, you are stuck. The alternative is to stay stuck, cemented in place and, like Herod, frightened at the possibility that the world might just change without your permission. So frightened that you lash out in anger and fear, damaging yourself and others. The alternative is to ignore the likelihood that God is near, very very near, waiting to be found, if only you can garner the strength to look outside of what is familiar to not only see that babe in the light of the star but believe in him enough to fall on your knees with the magi and know that God is near.

God is near. God is here. But sometimes we must wander a bit to see him.