Seeking the Light

Preached at Wollaston Congregational Church

On January 8th, 2017

**Scripture:** Matthew 2:1-12

Today’s New Testament reading is really the Gospel in a nutshell. It tells of the coming of a heavenly king, of compassionate care for the poor: a king who will give himself for love of all people. And it tells of the violent reaction of the earthly king whose position of power is threatened by this child.

It tells the story of how, when love comes, those live in fear and hatred, opposing love, will always resist. It tells the story of those who are wise, because they open themselves to compassion, they care for the poor. They continue to seek the revelation of God’s holy love in the light of Christ.

And it also tells the story of those who fail to notice the light of Christ, because of busy-ness or indifference. These are the ones who fail to recognize the forces of fear and hatred. They are the good men and women, who, to use the words of 18th century orator, Edmund Burke, allow evil to prosper by doing nothing.

This is the story is told in our passage for today. Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus focuses the coming of the Magi, astrologers, or the ones we call “wise men” who come from the East. Matthew tells the story of Joseph taking his family from Judea to Egypt, because of the threat from the tyrannical king, Herod. This turns out to be a truly terrible threat, in which Herod orders all the male children under two years old living in Bethlehem to be killed. Herod is indeed a brutal ruler.

The passage begins with the Magi journeying from the East. They are learned people from distant lands. They are not Jewish, and so, by default, are called Gentile. But, somehow, they have a recollection, buried deep in their own religious wisdom, that a star will guide them to a new kind of ruler.

These men are educated, but they are not cynical. They do not feel threatened by a new king. They have the resources for a lengthy journey, but they do not send someone else to do make their inquiry for them. They are both curious and open to new revelation. They are willing to let light into their hearts, even if the source of that light is in a strange faraway land. And so, they make the journey.

It is interesting that the star does not lead them directly to Bethlehem. It is almost as though that leading light is hoping to give Herod and the learned religious people of Jerusalem a chance to get in on the act. The Magi stop in Jerusalem, the center of political and religious power. And they ask questions. "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

Ever the schemer, Herod gathers his own “wise men”, the priests and scribes. There is nothing like talk of a new king of the Jews to threaten this insecure and paranoid King, who operates on the side of the Roman oppressor. The religious leaders, offhandedly mention the prophecy from Micah. “Oh, that must be the ruler who is to shepherd the people. Check out Bethlehem,” they say. And then get back to their budgeting meetings, and their visioning statement committees. Too busy, or perhaps too lazy to get off the couch and make the 5 mile trip to Bethlehem. Too busy or lazy to pay their own homage to the Holy One come to the world. They leave that to these foreign mystics, with their peculiar celestial observations. And so, these religious ones, with knowledge and learning at their disposal, fail to notice the coming of the light of Christ. Worse still, they turn a blind eye to Herod’s evil scheming.

Meanwhile, Herod is paying more attention. He has more at stake. He summons the Magi, secretly. In this “hush-hush” meeting he pretends that he also wishes to “pay homage” to the new king. And he enlists their help in finding the child.

Of course, the Magi search diligently, guided once more by the light of the star. When they encounter the infant Christ and his mother in their humble home, they are overwhelmed with joy. They know, in their hearts, that this is the light they have come to see. They bow down and worship, paying homage. And they rest in that moment, soaking it in. They spend long enough to pay attention to dreams that warn them not to return to Herod. Then they go home rejoicing, by a different route.

With this story to inspire me, I am beginning to like the thought of recognizing myself in the journeying Magi, full of wisdom, curiosity, courage. Of course, I’d be one of the first to respond to the light of Christ. One who would sit in that light and bask in it, soaking up the goodness of compassionate love, come into the world

But as I look more closely to see where I might find myself in the story, I am getting a bit of a “sinking feeling.” I’m reasonably sure I’m not a tyrannical ruler. But I have to admit, too often I’m more like one of the religious consultants that Herod gathers to inform him. I have access to the religious texts, the prophecies, the salvation history, the gospel stories and the wisdom literature. But does that really make a difference? If person from a strange and foreign land stopped by the office tomorrow and inquired of where they might find Jesus, what would I say?

Would I send them off down to the Father Bill’s or the Interfaith Social Services, and say, give my regards, let me know how that goes? Would I tell them of amazing events going on in Boston and the area: community assemblies or world class preachers coming into town. But then I tell them I’m a little busy right now to go there myself?

I admit that is very often my modus operandi. Particularly on Sunday evenings, after preaching and leading worship, and maybe paying a visit to one of our elders. By evening time, I’m ready to settle on the couch with a glass of Pinot Grigio and watch an episode of “The Crown”.

But, something got a hold of me a few weeks ago. I’m not sure what it was. Perhaps a recollection of some holy moments with the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, during my time working in a city church a couple of years ago. And so, although it was a very cold night, and I’d have to hunt around for parking, I got off the couch.

I went to a Greater Boston Interfaith Organization gathering. It was called “Out of Many, One”, and was hosted by the Islamic Society of Boston in Roxbury. I found myself there with some 2,600 other people of various faiths. We were warmly welcomed by Yusufi Vali, the Executive Director of the Center, as well as all the regular attendees. The speakers included the Rev.s Liz Walker, Burns Stanfield, and Raymond Hammond and the UCC’s own Rev. Nancy Taylor. There were also speakers from Jewish, Islamic and other faiths.

We shared our stories. We made the case, to the political leaders of Boston and Massachusetts, that we all desire a wise, curious and compassionate leadership. We desire that people of all faiths and all political persuasions, all sexual orientations and gender identities, all races and guests from foreign lands, are be valued in our communities. This was summarized as An Interfaith Call for Dignity & Diligence. The political leaders agreed to sign on.

2,600 people of various faiths, cultures, races, and political parties, left the Islamic Center gently and peacefully, holding doors for one another. The elderly and those with disabilities were given priorities.

On my drive home I was indeed tired. But I was also overjoyed, and I had seen a little revelation of God’s light in our community. I’m glad I got off the couch at least that one time.

Today’s story invites us to pause, in our daily lives, and seek out the revelation of Christ’s light come into the world. But our culture is skillful in providing distractions and discouragement. In today’s word, as in the time of Herod, the powers of fear and hatred are at work and would like to distract and divert us from the pursuit of that light.

Our culture constantly demands that we “do better”.

Are you disheartened by our cultures constant demands to do better …

* better in your work
* better in your diet and exercise
* better in your relationships?

Do these demands leave you feeling inadequate, leave you, discourage and depressed, unable to get off the couch?

Or are you overwhelmed by our culture’s demands that we fill every moment with productive activity …

* do more socially
* do more volunteer work
* plan and attend more events?

Does this leave you wishing you could get onto the couch, and never get off it again?

Even in the life of our church we become distracted. We focus on our budgeting and planning. We focus on the need to attend to our structural challenges, and the future of our church. But, let’s remember, we hold the holy texts, here in this church. We house the sacred story, for Wollaston, for Boston, for the world. So, let’s pay attention to seekers and visitors, rom where ever they come. Most especially if they have seen a light resting over our surroundings.

Let’s not become distracted and diverted by the negative messaging of the culture. Let’s not allow that messaging to cloud our vision of the light of Christ’s love that lifts up the poor, welcomes the stranger, and brings together wise, truth-seeking people who from many places.

May we always be on the look out for opportunities to travel toward that light. When we find it, may we remember to bathe and bask in it. May we become overjoyed by it, to fall down and worship our God for the gift of revelation for all people.

And then, may we return home, rejoicing. Amen