

“When You Follow a Star and Find a Stable”

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Matthew 2: 1-12

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United Church

Tomorrow (Jan. 6) is Epiphany — the day that we remember the arrival of the Magi or the wise men to Bethlehem. I am very partial to Epiphany.

It is pretty clear that the Magi were not expecting a stable when they began following the star. It is clear because they stopped first at Herod's palace. After all, the stars told them a king would be born, and a palace is where you find a king! But they didn't find him there, so they moved on.

The Magi set out on a very long, dangerous and costly journey to find the newborn king. Can you imagine their disappointment when they found him in such a humble location?

Now I took some liberties with the title because the Magi likely didn't find Jesus at the stable — the scripture says the star stopped over a house, and that's not too surprising because I doubt Mary and Joseph stayed in that stable more than a night or two at most. But whether it was a stable as we typically see in nativity scenes or a very simple house, what they experienced was a far cry from what they expected.

Following stars and finding stables is a common occurrence in human experience. Who among us has not at some time in our life fixed our gaze on some high and lofty star only to find it leads to a stable?

Maybe you dreamed for years of putting your feet up in retirement and finally sleeping in, only to discover that instead of a life of ease you have health issues, financial struggles and other worries, or maybe the hours just feel long and lacking in purpose — but somehow retirement isn't quite what you dreamed it would be.

Life carries so very many disappointments ... from work, to relationships to health and energy. How many of you have ever said: “I'm not where I thought I'd be at this stage in my life”? Last Wednesday we crossed into a new year and new decade. I still can't quite believe it's 2020.

Most of us are happy to close the chapter and to start fresh. A friend on Facebook wrote a post that said: “Making a list of what I need to change. Things have to be different for 2020!”

All of us at some time in our life have followed a star only to discover a stable. The question is, how do we see God's presence and purpose in

that stable? What is it that allowed the wise men to see clearly that God was fully present in that space, even if it was so far from what they were expecting?

I'd like us to take a moment and close our eyes and think about the last year. Lift up the things that you are grateful for from the last year. ... Give thanks to Jesus for them. ... Now take a moment to hand over to Jesus the painful memories, the part you are not proud of, the disappointments, the regrets ... Now listen and see if there are one or two things you are called to change. I'm not asking you to list a 1000 things, I want you to listen for what Jesus is calling you to change.

Every year, every life carries disappointments. Not everything that happens to you or that you do is God's plan. Sometimes we are way off course. I don't know how often the Magi went off course — my experience of Pilgrimage and life is that going off course is part of life and we just have to accept that sometimes we need to backtrack to get back on the right course. I totally took a wrong turn when I walked the Camino in Spain several years ago. I was grateful that someone in a car who could tell instantly I was a pilgrim — a Peregrino — stopped and offered me a ride back to where I was supposed to be! But I still lost valuable time and energy.

I like to knit and I have come to learn that backtracking and going back several rows to fix a mistake is just part of the project. I'm pretty good at knitting backwards!

I'm guessing the Magi got off course a number of times — they made one whopping mistake when they went to Herod's palace. Because they stopped there and told Herod about the new King, many, many boys age 2 and under were killed. Their mistake cost the lives of many innocent children. You think you have regrets! How do you live with that kind of mistake?

Mistakes and missteps are part of life. When you do find that you are off course, take a deep breath and turn around. No matter how much it costs you to turn back and make amends, do it! You know that old saying that says the best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, and the 2nd best time is today?

The wonderful thing is that, like Joseph discovered, God can take our missteps and our mistakes and turn them into something redeeming. I'm not talking right now about Mary and Joseph but Old Testament Joseph who was sold into slavery by his brothers. After a very long and circuitous route Joseph ended up 2nd in charge in Egypt, and ended up saving the family and the nation of Israel from starvation. When his brothers stood

before him in humiliation and fear, he calmed their hearts with these words: “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” Joseph found God in the place he didn’t expect to be.

Sometimes we realize that we are not on the right path and we need to turn around and make a change ... but sometimes when we realize we are not where we’d thought we’d be, we need to accept it and see it through God’s eyes. Can you do that with your life? Can you look at your own disappointments and see God’s presence and purpose?

A guy was very proud of his lawn until one year a heavy crop of dandelions appeared. He tried everything imaginable in an effort to get rid of them, but without success. Finally in desperation, he wrote to an agricultural college, listing the remedies he had tried, and concluded with the appeal, “What should I do now?” Several weeks later, he received this reply: “We suggest that you learn to love them!” It might be hard to love our disappointments, but at least we can ask whether some good may come from them. Look for God in that stable.



Sometimes we need to accept where we are and live as best we can with where we are and what we have. The wise men knelt before the babe and offered him gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Our biggest problem is not that we have experienced more than our share of disappointments, but that we have not done the best that we could with what we have.

Renoir, the French artist, maintained an incredible level of productivity throughout his years as a painter, with an estimated 4,000 paintings completed during his long and fruitful career.

Did you know that he suffered with Rheumatoid Arthritis? For the last 20 years of his life he suffered greatly with this painful and crippling illness.



For many years he was forced to paint while sitting in a chair. A friend noticed one day that the artist was forcing himself to paint, through almost blinding pain. “You have painted enough,” said the friend. “You are established as one of the top artists of France and Europe. Why must you go on, torturing yourself like this?” Renoir hardly looked up at him from



his canvas. He said, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains." He never stopped painting until he died.

When we do stop and encounter God right where we are, something changes. For the wise men, because of what happened in the stable, their lives took a new direction. The wise men took a different direction home because they were warned that Herod was going to try to learn from them where the new king lay. When you offer yourself to God in spite of nothing being perfect, God charts out a new direction for your life.

Disappointments are not pleasant – nobody wants them to be part of their life. But if you hand your disappointment to God and if you can picture God right in the middle of that disappointment, God will transform it into something beautiful.

Thanks be to God. Amen.