

MATTHEW 2: 1-12
FOLLOWING A STAR

For the better part of the last decade or so,
I would rush home from choir practice on Monday evening,
to sit down and watch my favourite TV show.
Now I must admit I'm not a fan of much reality television,
and I think this show fits within that genre.
But it had enough education in it
to be worthy of my attention.
The show was Canada's Worst Drivers.

And year after year for 14 seasons
this television show stunned a nation - I believe -
with the quality of drivers they were able to find.
Many struggled with fears and phobias,
others with excess aggression,
and, well, it seems some just didn't care.
The show also came along at that time in our lives
when we were teaching our own children how to drive.
And as a result,
it became family viewing of a sort,
as we used it as a tutorial for all the basic rules of the road.

One of those rules of the road
– one that I have had to remind all of our children of from time to time –
is to focus your gaze to the horizon.
The further down the road you look,
the easier it is to quite your hands
and to centre your vehicle in the lane.

Looking toward the horizon, however,
isn't just good advice for us when we are driving,
it is good advice for all of live.

I was reminded of this reality this week
as I was reflecting upon our text from Matthew's gospel
and the journey of the magi.

Little is known about these travellers from scripture.
Indeed most of what we claim to know about them
comes from the creative minds of others
who sought to embellish the scriptural record.

To dispell one myth,
it is commonly thought that these first worshippers of the infant Jesus
were not kings
but likely priests or diviners from some other religion.
Many have speculated that these men were Persian astronomers,
most likely of the Zorastrian religion.

Others have thought that the wisemen came from the southern region
of the Arabian Peninsula,
as that is the only natural habitat
of the plant from which frankincense is collected.

Second, we do not know that there were three.
Matthew simply records:

*In the time of King Herod,
after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea,
wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.*

The thought that there were three magi
is a conflation of the story based on the fact that there were three gifts,
gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And yet the reality is that all of these details,
all of these things that we think we know about the magi,
are not as important as what we know.

The magi came following a star.

Have you ever laid on the grass underneath the night sky,
and stared up into the heavens.

If not,
or if it has been too long,
I highly recommend it.

It is an awe inspiring reality.

To gaze up into the darkness
to cast your eyes across a thousand points of light.
And the longer you lie there,
the more your eyes adapt to the low-light
and the more stars come into focus.

Imagine then, isolating one star
– one point of light out of the myriad of stars.
To spot it,
and chart it,
and then to follow.

The first lesson of the magi,
is to simply look up;
to look for the signs of God all around us
and to be willing to respond to their leading.

How often in our lives do we fail to recognize the signs of God's grace all around us
because we are not looking toward the horizon.
Life has the tendency to load us down;
to burden us with the practical and the mundane.
To load worry and doubt onto our shoulders
until we are stooped over by our burden of care.

It is as the hymn writer noted
in that great American Christmas Carol
It Came Upon a Midnight Clear:
*O ye, beneath life's crushing load, whose forms are bending low
Who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow
Look now for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing
O rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing.*

How much do we miss,
because we simply fail to look up?

The second lesson of the magi
is to follow without knowing the direction.

The magi embarked upon a great journey of faith,
when they set off following that star.
They set off without a firm destination in view.
They had studied their charts
and looked for references in religious writings
that would reveal to them the purpose of this star
So that they had an educated guess
– but there was no certainty.

How often do we limit ourselves and our lives
because we demand that before we will act
we must be certain.
How often we miss the fact that sometimes
– sometimes –
the journey is more important than the destination;
that it is only once we set out in one direction or another
that the path reveals itself to us.

And the third lesson of the magi
is that they arrived ready and willing to worship.

The purpose of their whole trip
was to discover the momentous event that was being heralded by the star.
And so as they set out,
they prepared to give their worship.
They trekked across desert sand
with gifts of the impractical
– gold, frankincense and myrrh.
They risked being set upon by marauders along the way
who would steal their precious cargo.
While they didn't know where of their destination
they did know the why
– to worship.

Integral to our lives is our need to worship;
to join with our fellow believers
to give praise and thanksgiving to our God.

While we live in a day and age
when formalized religion is on the decline,
this does not mean that people have walked away from worship.
The reality is without institutionalized religion,
people are now seek new worship practices,
that connect them to the creation and to others.

Worship is integral to our humanity.

As the Christmas decorations go back into their boxes for another year,
it is easy for to think that Christmas is over;
and yet it truly has just begun.

God has come to live with,
encouraging,
inspiring,
lifting us up.

That has been the message of God to God's faithful down through the ages.
Arise! Shine! Your light has come.
Lift your eyes and look around.

May we be inspired to emulate the magi,
who left everything
And followed a star.

Look to the horizon.
God is here.