

Hearing Voices
Epiphany Sunday, January 3, 2010
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Biblical text-the story of the Magi. Matthew 2:1-15

The story of the magi is one of the most beloved of the Birth stories. What's not to love? It has mystery, intrigue, lurking danger and adventure. It incorporates astrology, astronomy, mystic Judaism and a touch of new age spirituality, as Matthew tries to steer his reader to the definitive explanation that this Jesus, this mysterious baby born in Bethlehem is, in fact, in the messianic lineage of King David, and has come to bring about a new world order, on par with none other the world has ever seen.

But to return to the manger scene one more time can feel like a thousand mile trek. After all, the child has been born, the shepherds have come and gone, and the scene is old hat, ready to be turned in and boxed up for the year. After all, a new world has been born, right? And it's 2010 already!

The magi's journey is late in coming. And with it's tardiness, it bring an element of danger onto the scene—where once proud angelic voices were singing joy and glad tidings, NOW they bring whispered warnings in a dream.

Unfortunately for those more discerning faith finders among us, it can be argued, rather successfully, that almost none of this story is true. For one, the story of the Magi only exists in one of the three synoptic gospels, leading many biblical scholars to the conclusion that the story is most likely created by Matthew in hopes of winning over his gentile and Jewish readers. Secondly, as Larry and Sandy pointed out previously, an astronomical phenomena like a moving star, or a rising star, or a new star in the sky is an occurrence that would probably make more of a world wide splash than just one author. And finally, the conclusion of the story, which really doesn't get much press in most churches around the world, largely due to its horrific drama, happens to be an almost exact replica of the story of Moses and the Israelites, and his miraculous salvation. In short, following the holy families flight to Egypt, King Herod orders all of the newborn babies in the town of Bethlehem to be slaughtered, in the same way that Pharaoh, when the Jewish slaves were becoming more numerous than their Egyptian counterparts, ordered all of the newborn sons destroyed. Moses escapes in a basket set in the Nile. Jesus escapes after an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, and warns him to escape to Egypt. And now Jesus can also live up to the stated expectations of the great Moses before him, that "Out of Egypt I shall call my son." (Hosea 11.1)

Even with the mounting pile of evidence against the likelihood of a story like the magi being true, I must admit, it still rings true to me. Perhaps it's my sentimental side, but for me there is still something wonderful in the arrival of these foreign dignitaries to a lowly stable in Bethlehem. It is the way they catch on to the

deceitful nature of King Herod, how they have traveled from a foreign land to pay homage to a newborn baby, and how they know to return home by another way. Matthew has sparked my imagination and my heart, and this story has become just one more beautiful example of all those things that I love about Christianity, and the Christian faith, namely, that God and faith stand in contrast to the Establishment, and all that it requires, that our faith is connected to and respectful of the ancient faith of the Israelites, and to the other faith paths of the world, and, ultimately, that if we can allow ourselves to be open to the world beyond our world, the world of love and faith and visions and dreams, that we will be led to a life of promise and blessing, beyond the ordinary, and into the extraordinary.

And that is the hard part.

Keeping our ears peeled for angelic voices can be a fruitless pursuit. In fact, I don't believe I've ever heard one. And to be honest, I don't know that I'd want to. I'm afraid it would scare the dickens out of me.

But I do believe in seeking guidance from God. And, I have experienced things I would call divine intervention in my world. Sometimes its a feeling, a gut instinct feeling that I need to do this thing, I must pursue this path otherwise I will feel like some moment, some opportunity has been missed.

That's how I felt when I decided I was moving to St. Augustine, Florida fresh out of college. I had just been offered the job of youth director at my former church, and I was slated to start seminary in the fall. In Chicago. Where I had been my whole life. But, around thanksgiving, I started feeling a little bit panicky. I can still remember it. I felt like I had to get out, at least for a little while, and LIVE a little bit before I settled down. So I made the choice to move to St. Augustine. But I had no place to live. No job. Nothing. Until...one week before I left I was offered a place to stay on Crescent Beach for free. And I found a job within a week of moving. And I met the woman who was to become my wife a week after that.

That was one of those moments for me. Where it felt like the stars aligned and everything went right, and my entire life was altered in inexplicable ways. Sometimes its as simple as a reminder to slow down in life, to take a brief respite from the lists and pursuits and schedule, and just sit and be for a moment. I had that experience this past week, watching my nephew playing in the sand and ocean for hours. Oh, what I would give to have a day of imaginary pursuits.

So I've been puzzling over these moments of life intervening in life. I'm curious how the magi came to the decision to load up their traveling gear and set out in pursuit of a dream. What were the cosmic clues or the subtle hints that brought these fabled kings together, and inspired them to set off in search of a newborn king. I wonder how long Joseph had to contemplate his dream before moving the family to a foreign land. Were the job prospects not so hot in Bethlehem?

Was Mary an encouraging adventurer? Or did his dream that night shake him to the core and wake him out of a contented sleep, with the sudden realization that as father and protector his life required new perspective. And I wonder what occurs in my life when the world suddenly takes on deeper meaning, and the decisions I make feel more important than any other I have had to make before. Those momentary epiphanies that seem to come only every once and a while.

In his book “Blink,” Malcolm Gladwell tries to tackle this mystery of the epiphany. (not the Magi epiphany, the “Ah-ha” epiphany.) In his book, the social commentator takes a deeper look at how we make decisions in our lives, and what factors into our decision making process.

In one interesting experiment, researchers used the five word jumble printed in your bulletins to test something. Guess what? It’s not testing how quickly you can make a four word sentence. When testers took this test, they had to first walk down a long hall to the experimenters office. After they took the test, they found that when they left the office and walked back down the hall, they did so more slowly than they walked into the office. Why? Because this test is designed to make our subconscious think of aging, and the elderly. Scattered throughout this test are certain words, such as “worried,” “Florida,” “old,” “lonely,” “gray,” “bingo,” and “wrinkle.” The big computers in our brain—our adaptive unconscious—associated these words with being old. It didn’t inform the rest of our brains of its sudden obsession, but it took all this talk of old age so seriously that by the time the testers completed the test and walked down the hallway they acted old. As a result, people’s natural tendency was to keep considering these things in life, and it caused them to slow down.

The same thing happens to me when I set eyes on the ocean; and I hear those waves crashing, and watch the pelicans fly. Something clicks, and I can sit for a few precious moments in a life outside of my regularly scheduled daily existence. It is in these momentary spontaneous pauses where some of my greatest life achievements were first dreamed; where some of the most life altering decisions were first made. At those brief pauses that dig past all the layers of expectation and accountability, when I am allowed a few precious moments to dream and to imagine, there is a peace for me that cannot be valued, and inspiration that encourages me to dream again of a life rich in blessing and peace.

But it’s not always peace that dreaming brings. Sometimes it’s finding the courage to face a longtime foe to a deeper life. Sometimes it’s angelic voices telling us that we must CHANGE, in ways that might make life more difficult, but that must be done in order to pursue the life we dream to live.

It’s easy to see why Joseph is the hero of our story today, and why the Magi are so captivating. Joseph’s ability to take decisive action in the face of mystery and fear is something we can all aspire to. His blind faith in a bad dream is enough to alter the lives of everyone in his family; and yet without making the hard choice to

leave everything behind, it's possible he could have ended up hurting his family even more. And the Magi's devotion and pilgrim initiative speak to the deeper wells of faith that we all seek. Their ability to gaze at the stars, to follow their visions to foreign lands, and then to see that there was no trust in Herod, no hope, no dreams, no visions, and to avoid him is a lesson we could

But there is a lesson in Herod's inability to hear the voice of God as well. It encourages us to examine why and how we make the quick decisions that we do; to ask, are we being manipulated by an empirical system, already in place? OR, is it possible for us to stand in opposition to the powers that be, and reframe our contexts of understanding in more holistic and healing ways.

On this Epiphany Sunday, let us take as our guiding light the examples of those mystical magi, the heroic Joseph and even the dastardly Herod as three ways to interpret the sudden revelations of the sacred that surface in our lives. In our ongoing quests for deeper wells of spirit, let us keep our ears tuned into the voice of God as it drifts to us across the universe, offering praise, promise, and grace. When moments of realization and revelation come to you, may they serve as a blessing and guide to bring you to a more extra-ordinary life.

In conclusion this morning, as we move into our time of prayer, I invite you to take a few deep breaths, and to open up your mind to a peaceful place.

Take just a moment, and drift back to some time in these past two weeks when you found a moment of peace, or, if you haven't, think of a place that you will go in the next few days, a place where you might find peace,

As you think of that place, think of the elements that combine to make it a place of vision, a place of dreams for you. What are the circumstances? Is a beautiful vista? Is it the crisp temperatures in the air? Is it the sound of a baby laughing? A cat purring? The warm embrace of someone you love?

Think for just a moment on that place, and live in that peace, and listen for the angel voices.