

Sermon for Epiphany, January 6, 2019 - "How God Guides Us"

Epiphany of our Lord
January 6, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Christmas carols and nativity sets make it appear so simple. The wise men just follow the westward leading star right to Bethlehem. Almost as good as a GPS, complete with a catchy soundtrack. I think you know it, join in:

Star of wonder, star of night
Star with royal beauty bright
Westward leading, still proceeding
Guide us to Thy perfect light

If only we had a star guiding us in the right way to go. If only we had such clear direction as we try to follow Jesus as we tackle big issues in our lives, our congregation and our world.

Except when you take a closer look at the story, you notice that the wise men don't have a star right in front of them all the way lighting the path to Bethlehem.

In fact, they don't actually make it to Bethlehem at first. They show up in Jerusalem saying they have seen the star at its rising. Only when they leave Jerusalem, heading towards Bethlehem, only then does the star go ahead of them to the spot where the child lies. They see the star at its rising but then they have to figure out where to go.

They do get really close geographically, Jerusalem is just 9 miles from Bethlehem, but it was worlds apart in every other regard. Bethlehem was a tiny peasant village. Jerusalem was the seat of power, the place to find Roman rulers and Rome's puppet king, King Herod.

Jerusalem is where you'd expect to find a king. So, it makes sense that the wise men show up there first.

They also likely use scripture to get there. Scholar Walter Brueggemann points out the wise men had probably heard the words of the prophet Isaiah, the words we just heard as our first reading. They'd likely heard them from Jews who'd been taken into exile in Babylon and then continued to live in the lands east of Israel. Isaiah speaks God's promise to Jerusalem that: "Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn ... A multitude of camels shall cover you, they shall bring gold and frankincense."

So, as the wise men try to find a new king of the Jews, it makes sense to go to Jerusalem and take rare spices and gold.

They don't just follow a star. Intuition, reason and scripture probably help them to get close to their destination.

Except when the wise men arrive in Jerusalem, they don't meet a new king. They meet an old king who is afraid, and all Jerusalem with him. Questions about a newborn king threaten the status quo. The old king gathers the chief priests and the scribes and from them, the wise men learn a new scripture. They learn verses from the prophet Micah that indicate they should look for the child in little Bethlehem. The newborn king has not been born in the seat of power, but in a peasant village.

The evil King Herod directs them to Bethlehem. He has malicious intent, he is already plotting to kill the child, but he does get them headed in the right direction again. *Then*, once they leave where they expected to find the king, *then* the star goes before to guide them and they find Jesus. Yet still, their journey is not complete. They must pay attention to their sense that something is off with King Herod - an intuition that is confirmed by a dream from God. They must find another way home to avoid colluding with the evil Herod.

All this means we have much more in common with the wise men than it might first appear. The wonderful Christmas carols and nativity sets don't tell the full story. A life following Jesus, a life guided by God, is more complicated.

The wise men set out seeking what is good, following in trust without a lot of direction, trying to respond to promises in scripture - and they end up in the wrong place.

They hear a new scripture and are told new things and must discern what to do. The scriptures seem to give conflicting messages. There is a lot of fear and anxiety; they must make hard decisions.

They have to let go of their assumptions about power and rulers, let go of their disappointment about ending up in the wrong place, let go of their first understandings of scripture. They have to change course to avoid evil. This all sounds a lot like a life of faith.

The wise men's journey does involve paying attention to how God works in nature and in dreams. But, it also involves wrestling with scripture, testing their experiences, analyzing reality, gleaning good from difficult situations, navigating difficult people. They must use the gifts God has given them in scripture, tradition, community, their lived experience and their own hearts and minds.

These are our challenges as well. In some ways, scripture gives us very clear guidance. The prophet Micah, the prophet who helped the wise men get to Bethlehem, provides other important guidance for Jews and Christians. He says, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" And Jesus says, quoting the Old Testament, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Scripture is clear about what God wants us to do.

But scripture doesn't give specific guidance for all the particular decisions we need to make as individuals and communities. Instead, we are called to do the work of discerning, in our context, how we will do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God, and how we will love God and neighbor. God has entrusted us with the freedom and responsibility to do this discernment.

We will not always handle this responsibility perfectly - things won't always go well; at times we'll find ourselves in Jerusalem when we should have gone to Bethlehem. We will encounter evil both within ourselves and in the world around us. We will have to wrestle with the guidance God gives.

When things don't work out well, it is not necessarily a sign from God that we are on the wrong track. The wise men's story shows us that even when we are faithfully following there will be struggle, mistakes and hardship. Yet, we can trust that God is present to lead us. God is at work through all those gifts given to the wise men and given to us - through prayer, nature, scripture, community, reason and experience.

We have what we need to follow where God leads, to seek the good and refuse to collude with evil, to take another road when needed, to rejoice and worship as the wise men did when they encountered Jesus.

We have what we need to love God and others, to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly through all that we face.

Thanks be to God.