

Matthew 2: 1-12
January 7, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Epiphany Sunday

In preparing a message for Sunday I find myself wondering of a given story, “Why was this preserved to be handed down to future generations?” The obvious answer is, “because it happened.” Yet as John tells us toward the end of his Gospel, “Now Jesus performed many other signs which are not recorded in this book. But *these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus in the Christ and in believing have life in his name.*” So I suggest that the deeper reason this story as well as all the others comes down to us is simply that we may come to believe that Jesus is the messiah *so that* in believing we may *have life* in his name.

This morning I propose that one reason the story of the journey of the wise men was preserved was precisely because *there is life in it. There are within the story the seeds of spiritual awakening.*

The story begins with a deep inner yearning. Each of the wise men had deeply desired a great spiritual development which would profoundly mark their lives. This yearning led each of them to search the heavens for a sign that this event was about to happen. When they discerned the sign they made their preparations and set off.

I propose to you that without that deep spiritual conviction there would have been no journey. All inner growth, be it spiritual, emotional or intellectual, begins with a hunger to grow. It begins with a recognition that our present understanding of life is but a tiny fragment of what actually is. If we believe life as we perceive it is all there is to know or all that can be known, we will remain with whatever awareness we have and grow no further.

All quests begin with a desire to discover a pearl of great price. It is why Jesus spoke his great parables of the kingdom in which women and men were willing to risk everything to gain the peace that only God can give. It is our yearning for something that lives beyond the grasp of our senses, our reason and our ability to provide for ourselves that gives the urgent motivation to step out onto an unfamiliar path toward an undefined destination. Those who have stepped out of destructive relationships, addictions, spirit numbing routines and begun new lives; or who have found ways to affirm life in the midst of grief, life threatening illness and disability give us illustrations of what prompted the wise men to leave the familiar and begin a life changing journey.

Yet the biggest obstacle to beginning the journey is resistance. The sign of a true spiritual desire is that it inspires immediate and vigorous opposition. How often do we put off calling the doctor because we think, "Oh, I don't feel so bad." Or when the trouble is emotional or spiritual we put off reaching out to a psychologist or pastor. This is often in response to an inner voice which tells us, "You're making too much of a small thing. Other people have it worse than you. What good will it do, anyway?" If we dare to be honest in almost every case that inner voice is the voice of resistance born of fear of losing what is familiar. The problem is, of course, that it is the familiar that is the problem. It is the well-worn groove of habit that is suppressing the experience of genuine life. A boat cannot rest safely in port *and* venture out on the ocean.

The fact is that ordinary human will power is not enough to motivate us to move out on a life transforming journey. If will power was sufficient I would be the very example of healthy habits. If will power was enough I would learn to play a musical instrument. When I look back at

my life and notice what prompted any of the great movements in my life, it was always a great yearning which was met with a loving kick in the pants from God.

I have more to say about this; but I will conclude with this thought. When we are on the threshold of a great journey and are beset with resistance and discouraging voices, it is pointless and counter-productive to engage in a contest of will power with the inertia and apprehension. The only path forward which works in my experience is the patient cultivation of the yearning. We do this by focusing *not* on our frustration. We do it by recognizing that the reason that we are frustrated is because we yearn for something deeper. It is the *yearning* that causes us to chafe at our circumstances. We therefore are wise to become curious about the yearning and ask God to create a path for it to grow. Over time, if the inner desire *is* of God, we will become more excited about the opportunity ahead than oppressed by what holds us back. We will find ourselves on the way to an unknown destination with only a star to guide. We will be filled with a joy and anticipation we could never have imagined until we set forth. Amen.