

Matthew 2:1-12 ¹ In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, Magi from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to honor him.” ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.’” ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the Magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and honor him.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and ahead of them went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and honored him. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1-12

01/08/2023 – Saginaw First U.M.C.

“The Long Way Home”

Rev. Amy Terhune

I’m putting on the screen this morning a painting that is no doubt familiar to many of you. It’s Vincent Van Gogh’s “Starry, Starry Night”. Some say it’s his masterpiece. Certainly, it is one of the most recognizable pieces of art in the world today. I have loved it since I was a child. The bright colors. The broad strokes. The little village. It’s captivating, though I’ll confess: the reason I’ve always liked this painting is because when I look at it, I can hear it. And I can feel it. It always seemed to me that Van Gogh had found a way to draw the wind. I don’t know that for a fact – that’s merely my interpretation. Above a sleepy little village, there’s movement, like dancing, swirling, wind-swept colors and light refracting in glittering darkness. I can hear those breezes. I can feel that movement. So can you, I’ll bet.

However, they do say that Van Gogh painted this in June of 1889 after admitting himself to the Saint-Paul-de-Mausole Asile d’aliénés (lunatic asylum) in Saint-Rémy-de-Provence, France. Supposedly, it depicts the view from the east-facing window of his asylum room just before sunrise. The village is apparently imaginary. But there really was a cypress tree just outside his window, which would move with the breezes. It’s clearly painted there. There were also bars on his sanitorium window; bars which, notably, are not there.

I show it to you this morning because starry skies still captivate us, move us, touch something in our souls. Almost universally, human beings still look up to the sky when in search of hope, inspiration, direction, God.

Is it any wonder that as another year begins, the scriptures direct our eyes to the skies as well. Centuries ago, foreign men in distant lands studied the skies. Tradition calls them wisemen. Scholars today call them Magi. Just don’t call them kings, because they weren’t that. They were scholars. They knew far more than I ever will about the rising and falling of planets, the movements of constellations,

the rotation of stars. But I know more than they did about new stars. I know that when the light shows up here, it may well have been travelling for unimaginable years across the space/time continuum. In other words, by the time the light reaches earth, the birth of the new star we're just seeing may in fact be thousands or even millions of years old. Which I find mind-boggling, if I'm honest. I can't wrap my head around the vastness of space and time. But they were awed too, albeit for different reasons. They believed that a bright new star meant something momentous was happening. And so it was. If you really want to have your mind stretched, consider that science and faith are not incompatible here, and that, in fact, the divine architect of universe birthed a star thousands, if not millions, of years ahead of time in preparation for the gift of humanity's savior born to an average couple in a tiny town in a tiny nation. And God timed it perfectly; like, nearly to the day! From thousands, if not millions, of years out.

There's an old legend that says these Magi were from different places – China, Siberia, Africa, India, or wherever – and each one saw the star and wanted to see what was happening. They started off on their journeys alone, and only encountered one another as they converged in the desert. The lesson being that the light of Christ draws the world together, which is certainly supposed to be true, whether the legend is or not. The scriptures themselves tell us only that they came from the east, and that they seemed to arrive at the same time. Somehow, despite language barriers, they were able to communicate with Herod's court. We don't know how many there were, only that they presented three gifts. And we know that Matthew makes no mention of a stable, a manger, or any shepherds, but rather, a house, which suggests that perhaps Mary and Joseph had decided to settle in Bethlehem.

I sometimes wonder what those Magi thought, when they traveled for months cross the desert only to find a jealous conniving king, a royal court swamped with political in-fighting, and a star-touched infant in an average community with regular parents and neighbors. Did they question their assumptions? Or did they trust that there was more happening than met the eye? I'm inclined to believe the latter, given that Scripture tells us about them. I remain deeply touched that they foreign magistrates had a faith that believed it worth the trip, and understood within somehow that they would be welcome to worship at the cradle of another faith's king. Matthew, the most Jewish of all the gospel writers, is the one who most clearly demonstrates with this record of the Magi how Jesus comes to redeem the whole world, and not just his particular corner of it.

I also find deep meaning in the message that they return home by another road. Which countless preachers have commented on across the years to note that we can't encounter Christ and remain the same. Which I do not contest. But I'm more inclined to glean from this that God does not always take us as the crow flies, suggesting that it's the journey more than the destination that ultimately shapes our living once we've encountered Jesus Christ.

When I was a kid, my parents, from time to time, would pack us in the car and we'd go for drive. It wasn't a drive to anywhere, but just a trip for the purpose of seeing what we see. We might go look at Christmas lights on a winter evening. And there were plenty of summer Saturdays when we'd pack a picnic lunch and drive north just to see the lake or the woods or try out a distant restaurant. These days, were to suggest such a thing, my kids would tell me in no uncertain terms that this is environmentally irresponsible, and that if want there to be lakes and woods from my grandkids, I shouldn't be doing such things. Which is fair.

But I guess what I want to draw attention to is the mindset rather than the practice. It's not always a straight line from A to B. Sometimes as the crow flies is a lousy route that takes you above too much. Not everything in life that matters is about utility or practicality or efficiency. Those things have their place, of course. But those wisemen took the long way home. Because of a dream; a warning; a gut sense. They did it to save a family – strangers, people undoubtedly very different and

yet just the same. And God went with them. As God always does. And God goes with us. This new year, this epiphany Sunday when we talk about guiding stars, and growing light and journeys of discovery, let it touch you. Let it change you. Let it guide you to do for others. All of which brings to mind a song. Not a hymn, but one from the 70s. While I do what I need to do to be ready for the Sacrament, I'll let it play, and I have every confidence that you'll get the message...

*Does it feel that your life's become a catastrophe?
Maybe it has to be for you to grow, boy.
When you look through the years
And see what you could have been
Oh, what might have been,
if you'd had more time.
You never see what you want to see
Forever playing to the gallery
You take the long way home
Take the long way home...*

[by Roger Hodgson/Supertramp]

Amen.