

I'm kind of envious of the three wise men in today's Gospel story. Not only because they got to meet the actual baby Jesus shortly after his birth and see this world-shifting, life-saving miracle. Or because frankincense, gold, and myrrh are pretty great gifts to have available to you as well. Seriously, frankincense and myrrh smell amazing! But because their route and plan from God was so very clear for them to follow. God showed up in their dreams, gave them clear directions, and also, here is this super bright star to guide your way for many days to get where you need to be to be closer to my beloved Son. That star was certainly a gift to these wise men and worthy of our celebration now too.

But generally, our callings from God don't show up in ways as direct or clear as a super bright star leading the way in a type of directional navigation that comes easily in our particular lives. God shows up for us in certain ways that we can trust and call upon, yes, but oftentimes it's not as expected or planned out or concrete. God's presence within and around and among us is much more mysterious and much more beautiful than we can imagine. God is beyond our understanding which is a true gift - if God were predictable, God would be finite. But instead we can trust that the God who created us, who created the cosmos with no point of reference and out of an abundance of goodness, is greater and more loving and gracious than we could ever imagine. There is wisdom in trusting in this goodness of God, for it gives us hope and direction even in the most fearful and challenging of times.

The main characters in this Gospel story are the wise men, whose journey dictates what we heard today. Wise men is how the Greek word "Magi" is translated. Magi were people who had a deeper knowing of things, in a spiritual and thought sort of realm. The wisdom that is assigned to them is from this deeper knowing - some translation help uses the words sorcerer or scientist - so there's a desire for deeper discovery of what was already present. This knowledge was respected and had power, which is perhaps why they are called kings in some translations, and is also the reason why Herod sought them out for their knowledge regarding this newborn baby, meant to be king of all the Jewish people, the king of kings. Their power,

though, was power that could be trusted because of its roots in deeper knowledge and trust.

We can think of these men as “wise” for a couple of reasons. We know they are wise for believing the words of the prophets, the words from God, to lead them to Jesus, the Messiah, the king of kings. These are the ancient words, speaking into the world as it was at that time, speaking truth into what was to come from that present time. Prophecy is much more than just telling the future. Prophecy speaks into the current moment, the reality of what is to then speak what is to come. The future has no foundation if it is not rooted in the present moment and the present needs.

When we hear the words of the prophets, yes, they speak into the times in which the prophets lived and ministered. But they speak into a more enduring reality, the time beyond just that current moment, the truth that is beyond time or place. The truth that is rooted in God is what the prophets speak.

We also know they are wise for following their own present directions from God. Are they prophets? No, because these words come to them in a dream. The dream is from God, but different from the prophets, because of that level of awareness in sleep versus waking. Dreams can provide us with powerful insight, but they are not always as certain as the words of the prophets. The men are wise in discerning that this dream was one that was important to listen to, to know Herod was trying to trick them and wanted to kill the baby Jesus. Because the wise men knew already that this baby was the promised Messiah, they knew they had to do what they could to protect him and themselves.

Herod was threatened by the power Jesus inherently had, from the very first moments of his existence, because he is the Son of God. Herod did not want to lose any of his power as the king, the earthly power in that region, so he decided the best way to avoid losing power was to eliminate the threat in the most horrible way possible, killing a child.

Later on in the Gospel of Matthew we learn that God spoke to Joseph in another dream, saying that he, Mary, and Jesus were no longer safe in Bethlehem, so they had to flee to a different country, Egypt, to save their

lives. And so they took refuge, as refugees, in a neighboring country to continue to live. Jesus would have been killed if they had stayed in Bethlehem, a terrifying reality. After a few years they return to the area, settling in Nazareth, a nearby town, but that kind of deep fear certainly impacted them for their lives to come, as it would for any person in such a horrible situation.

The situation the wise men found themselves in was unbelievably frightening and overwhelming. The King they had initially trusted and sought guidance from now became the agent of a process so horrible it's hard to speak of it. But God was with them even in the midst of that fear and that horror. In the midst of the fear God spoke to them and came to them and assured them of what was right and true and good. Those words of God, given to the men in dreams, lead to them continuing to live and spread their wisdom and testify to the newborn Messiah, Jesus Christ. Following God's call literally saved their lives and the life of Jesus and his family. God was with them, guiding and leading and giving hope for a different future the whole way along.

And so God is with us too, even in our fears, our overwhelm, our exhaustion, sadness, anger, grief, struggles, depression, brokenness, all the things that weigh heavy on our hearts, minds, bodies, and spirits. God is with us and gives us promises of hope and new life that are made new every single day. Those promises of hope and new life are from God's only Son, Jesus, this newborn baby who had unimaginable power, power to change the world as everyone knew it and turn it right side up. That power of Jesus still reigns true for us today, here and now. The hope that comes with his birth is God's commitment, his yes to humanity, his deep and great love for the people and world he blessed and called good from the very beginning. There is great hope that even in the midst of the impossible and fearful, a new child is born, the hope of what is to come from this great love of God now and in the future. And there is always new life to be found not only in the new life of a newborn baby, but also because of our beloved Jesus' death and resurrection. The rising of new life from even the most

feared place, death, and the power of sin that threatens us, is the greatest miracle we can hope for.

There is always new life to be found with God, dear friends. Jesus in his birth, his ministry, his death and resurrection and ascension into heaven gives us that hope, that nothing we do, no fearful or horrible situation, will ever separate us from the deep and enduring love of God. Because of God's love, that was and is and is to come, we can have hope for whatever comes our way. This hope is our guiding star, providing light and truth, wisdom and understanding, purpose and joy, in every time and place. I pray that you will embrace this light and truth of Christ, dear friends, in this season of Epiphany and always. Thanks be to God, Amen.