Sermon: Epiphany Sunday, January 5, 2020 – Matthew 2: 1-12  
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Have you ever been somewhere, but not exactly known why you were there?

No, I’m not talking about going into a room to get something then forgetting what it was before getting there, an increasingly familiar experience for me as time marches on. What I’m aiming at here, is feeling compelled to travel somewhere, or enroll in a seminar or workshop, or attend a public event, with only a vague and unresolved sense of purpose. It might be a place you’d never had any attraction to, or the kind of event that you wouldn’t normally be drawn to, but something has drawn you there and you really don’t know why.

According to Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth, a group of Magi travelled from an undisclosed eastern land bringing symbolic gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. I wonder if they also brought with them, this sense of unknowing: the sense that there was a purpose to their journey, but a purpose that had only been revealed to them in the haziest of terms.

There’s lots of evidence in the Biblical text and the traditions that have grown up around it, that this might not have been the case. These visitors from afar are Magi, a cross between astrologers and astronomers, guided by a star that they have been observing since its rising. That sounds pretty intentional. And depending on where they came from – Matthew only says they were from ‘the east’ but there is conjecture that they may have come from lands now identified as Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia the Yemen, southern Turkey or northern Syria, all pretty dangerous territory in our time and place, and you wouldn’t gather the servants and the camels for this journey, just on a whim.

But still, I wonder if they wondered, “why are we doing this?” My curiosity is piqued by three things:

1. the word Magi may refer specifically to a priestly order in Persia, within the ancient Zoroastrian faith, the Magupati. If so, their quest is a directly religious one, people of one monotheistic religion seeking experience within another, and such quests usually do have a sense of unknowing – you go to a place of religious significance, expecting that you will gain some form of spiritual enlightenment in that place, but not knowing in advance what it is that God will teach you once you get there.

2. The second reason I wonder about the clarity of their mission, is the question they ask at the start of our reading: “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.” Compelled to leave home and mount this big journey, the Magi are nonetheless uncertain about their precise destination: they know they have come here for a reason, but important details are yet to be revealed.

3. And the third reason I wonder if they wondered, stems from my experience last year of organizing a sabbatical.

Some of you have heard this story, and if so I won’t be offended if you leaf through the hymn books or memorize today’s bulletin announcements, but the process of finding someplace to go for Holy Week last year was a lot harder than I had anticipated. I was willing to go anywhere in the world, knowing that this was probably my one and only chance to be away from my home congregation in that week from Palm Sunday, through Good Friday to Easter. But as I Googled “Holy Week Retreat 2019” a full 80% of the results were for Yoga retreats, and the other 20% just weren’t hitting the spot.

Narrowing the search to a particular geographic region was helping a bit, but the wise words shared by Melissa Bane Sevier kept coming to mind: while on sabbatical, aim for experiences that “make your heart sing.” I hadn’t reached that point yet, so I kept searching. Knowing that I have some family roots in northeastern Pennsylvania that I’d like to explore sometime, I put that into the search engine, and on page four of the Google search results for “Holy Week
Retreat Pennsylvania 2019” was a link for Norwich Cathedral. “I didn’t know there was a Norwich in Pennsylvania” I thought, so I clicked on the link. Indeed, while there once was a lumber town named Norwich, Pennsylvania, it’s a ghost town now - and the link was for the ancient city of Norwich in the UK, a completely mis-placed link hidden right where I could find it.

At that point, I couldn’t have told you exactly where Norwich was – I now know that it’s two hours northeast of London– but I was very familiar with the guest preacher who would be speaking there every day in Holy Week, a wonderful British Christian poet named Malcolm Guite. I love Malcolm’s writings, and had shared them from this pulpit a time or two. So, spending Holy Week in a 900 year old cathedral and hearing Malcolm Guite every day started to make my heart sing, and when I saw that lodgings were available in an 800 year old hotel just outside the Cathedral grounds, I booked it.

That “misplaced” Google link was, to an extent, the star in the sky leading me where God wanted me to be, too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence. But I have to admit, that even as I rode the train to Norwich, there was still in my heart a strong element of “why here?” and “how does this fit in with everything else I’ve been doing in this sabbatical?” Like the Magi, I knew this was the place I was to go, and that there was a degree of divine guidance involved, but could not for the life of me say exactly why.

The “why” started to come clearer, when I visited the holy ground of St. Julian’s Church, home of the 14th century mystic, Julian of Norwich. Until then, Julian had only been a vaguely-familiar name from Christian history, but when I encountered her writings and stood where she had stood, I was hit by waves of integration. Her writings of a God beyond gender who exists in all things, the “ground and substance” of all being, connected directly with Richard Rohr’s Universal Christ Conference I had attended a month earlier. The words she received from a vision of Christ on the Cross, that even though we will endure difficulties in life we shall not be overcome, echoed personal journals I had been re-reading on my sabbatical, from when I crashed twenty years earlier. My experience of a loving God whose embrace is most real when most needed aligned perfectly with Julian’s words that “all shall be well – all manner of things shall be well”. My worship experiences at the Cathedral, which had such a rich interplay between the faith commitment of the clergy and the faith journey of the parishioners, spoke to a sense that has been unfolding throughout my ministry career, that if I’m not on a journey with the Divine I will be ill-equipped to help you on yours.

And then, there was Malcolm Guite. Malcolm is a writer of sonnets, written directly to a Biblical character or a Biblical scene, and his gifts as a wordsmith and his earthy, gentle demeanor drew me right in to the unfolding drama of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. He reminded us that “the Divine actions of Jesus are never only ‘back then and over there’ – they are still fully available to us in our here and now... in the body of a human being, [Jesus] teaches us about who God is, and the best and worst of our humanity.” And, bringing us back to what we are about here this morning, it turns out that Malcolm has written a Sonnet for Epiphany, which goes like so:

It might have been just someone else’s story,  
Some chosen people get a special king.  
We leave them to their own peculiar glory,  
We don’t belong, it doesn’t mean a thing.  
But when these three arrive they bring us with them,  
Gentiles like us, their wisdom might be ours;  
A steady step that finds an inner rhythm,  
A pilgrim’s eye that sees beyond the stars.  
They did not know his name but still they sought him,  
They came from otherwhere but still they found;  
In temples they found those who sold and bought him,
But in the filthy stable, hallowed ground.
Their courage gives our questing hearts a voice
To seek, to find, to worship, to rejoice.

(I’m going to leave that on-screen for a bit, to let those words seep in. )

In these words, Malcolm Guite embraces what it is to approach Christ without knowing exactly why. Viewed from the standpoint of the visitors to Bethlehem, the story of this newborn Messiah was “someone else’s story,” a story within the story of God’s relationship with the people of Judah. This was their King, their journey, our participation was not needed… and yet we are urged, with the Magi, people from “otherwhere,” to hear the invitation of the God of Sarah and Abraham and Miriam and Moses to enter this story, to be welcomed into this faith tradition. We are invited to attend to our spiritual urgings, our learnings, our yearnings, to follow our “pilgrim’s eye that sees beyond the stars.” We are called to explore beyond what we could possibly know, to surrender our need for certainty and come close to God, with a question that we ask God and God asks us: “where do we go from here, beloved one?”

As we step over the threshold from the 20teens to the 20twenties, this sonnet calls us “to seek, to find, to worship, to rejoice.” These are active words – seek, find, worship, rejoice – beckoning us to journey to the depths of our souls and to the unseen edges of our town and our society and our planet. They call us to seek new ways of thinking, to cultivate relationships with a wide variety of God’s children, to uncover the joy of living in an open community of support and love and welcome. And it is my sense, that as we journey, God journeys too: we seek and God seeks, we find and are found, we worship and are held in God’s delight, we rejoice and God rejoices. God’s engagement with the world moves and adapts, just as we are called to a dynamic life that grows and explores and wonders.

So to return to this sermon’s opening, considering what it is to be somewhere, without fully knowing why you’re there: My hope, is that our journey from here forward will frequently put us in that position… that we will be willing to move in unfamiliar and uncomfortable directions… that we will be willing to consider a future for this Church community and the physical building that supports our mission, that will be inclusive and adaptive to a future we cannot possibly see… that we will be willing to live with uncertainty, knowing that wherever we are and whatever it is we are trying to figure out, God is with us, nudging and urging and wondering, right beside us. In our journey from “otherwhere” to those places God would have us be next, may we know the companionship of God’s dynamic love. In Christ we pray, Amen.

References cited:
Guite, Malcolm. https://malcolmguite.wordpress.com/2013/01/05/a-sonnet-for-epiphany/
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