



“Go There”

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Scripture (NRSV):

Matthew 2:1-12

The Visit of the Wise Men

2 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men^[a] 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,^[b] and have come to pay him homage.” **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^[c] 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^[d] my people Israel.’”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men^[e] 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 pay him homage.” **9** When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising,^[f] until it stopped over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw that the star had stopped,^[g] they were overwhelmed with joy. **11** On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. 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.

Sermon:

At both the beginning and end of the gospel of Matthew, the message is there to see, to hear: the gospel of Jesus our Christ is for the whole world.

Here in chapter 2, astrologers from nations far away come to experience the good news in Jesus, and at the end of this gospel in chapter 28, the disciples are sent “to all nations”. Clearly, the gospel is not private.

But more and more, our Christian faith is either hijacked by loud public perspectives that we can't agree with, or it is absent from the talk of “all the nations” altogether.

Out here in WA and along the west coast, religion is acknowledged and practiced in any manner, by fewer and fewer people.

All the societal pressure, and all the guilt or fear that may have motivated churchgoing in the past, no longer holds sway for countless numbers of people.

You say I'm going to hell. I don't believe you. You say God will stop loving me, I don't believe you. You say I won't get a good job, meet good people unless I go to church. I don't believe you.

Most days, I actually believe this is a good thing.

But it does demand that we, who are going to churches and synagogues and mosques and temples....that we answer the question why do we go?

So, I am asking you today...why do you get up on a Sunday morning and come here instead of Rockwood Bakery?

I am not asking you so that I can ambush you! I am asking because I believe one of the reasons we come here, and not the Rocket coffee house down the street, is because we want to be with one another, and learn from one another.

- Relationships matter. Friends, and support in sickness or trouble, in celebrations and in daily ins and outs, friends matter. Our world is lonely and isolating. Faith communities fight back at that.

And there is more:

- Justice, and fighting for it, matters. We get sick to our stomach at the suffering around us, and the inequity in which we participate because it is so entrenched and systemic. We come here because we want to do something to change the world around us and make it better. So we come here for ideas and strategies and the power to take action together.

- Hope matters. And many of us find hope here. From our friends. From our work. From the greater story of God and Jesus and Spirit.
- Finding meaning and purpose in the power of Love, in the possibility of a divine pattern that gives us a larger vision than simple materialism. This matters.
- And a relationship with the Divine, seeking and finding the passionate concern and fierce embrace of God, matters.

Looking for something more personal and meaty than a sort of vague deism...these searches matter.

Henry James declared that, "religion is either a dull ache, or an acute fever".

(I tend toward the acute fever myself.)

But under all circumstances, whether as ache of longing or fever of delight; I believe the search for and the longing for, and the experience of God is worth the journey.

An early church leader by the name of Irenaeus said, "May the experience of God be as near to you as a toothache."

Fever and longing and the acute awareness of God, or even the acute awareness of the absence of God...this drives us.

As a girl of 11 or 12, I can still recall one mystical moment that has always stayed with me: It was a winter at dusk with fresh snow outside and I was out there, alone in our snowy yard. I plopped down to make a snow angel, waving arms for wings, legs for the robe of an angel. But when I was done I simply lay there, with little flakes of snow gently landing on my face... and I lost the sense of disconnection. Instead, I felt one with the snow, the sky, the earth shrouded in white. I felt utterly content, one, at peace with it all. And then I went in to the house for supper.

But I have never forgotten that fleeting moment of peace and unity. And it has, on occasion, crept up on me again.

I claim it as the experience of union and communion with the Divine and all that is; and it drives me.

This, this experience of Mystery drives people to action. I think this is what drives the magi and what drives some of us to church, to seeking, to striving, hungering for God's presence.

Maybe like an astrologer of long ago, that fever, that ache...drives you here. Drives you wherever you are.

It is a worthy search for meaning. It is a noble hunger. It is a way of living imbued with purpose and power.

This is the joy of a human being fully alive, I believe.

It is manifest in a million different ways, as artist and as theologian, as pastor and as life partner, as employee and as employer, as doctor or as student, in child and in elder...let the ache and the fever drive your life, making you go there...wherever you experience the fever and the ache of longing for the Holy.

In a church. In a march. In a forest. In a slum. In the crib of your child, or in the arms of a lover.

Go, like those magi, hunting for the Holy. Walking far, traversing lands, go seeking and hungering for the divine communion.

Like the magi, you may find it in little things: a single child, in a humble home far from lights and glitter and the palaces of power. Maybe you will find it in the comfort of community. In the fight for justice. In the interactions between science and mystery, art and beauty, song and silence...

I do not believe in a God somewhere "up there" and we humble creatures "down here". I do not support this separation.

I have experienced otherwise as a girl on a snowy evening.

And in the story of Jesus I hear of this union, and this love that is in all and near to us all. As close and clear as a toothache!

It is my own ache, my own fever of hunting God.

Like the magi, I will travel as far as I must. I will look everywhere, seek in all things for the holy fire of the Divine.

And most beautiful of all, as I seek, I have come to realize that that fire shines in all things, in all people, all creation.

And then I am not alone, and I am filled to bursting with joy and peace, and love for you and love for others, and love for the Holy Maker.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; (And only he who sees takes off his shoes; The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.)