

## CHRISTMAS II

*In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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 pay him homage." Matthew 2:1-2*

The strange and wonderful journey of the wise men, mysterious strangers from the East. Exotic, foreign, and by drawn by something – they know not quite what. A child, a king of the Jews. What can that possibly mean to them, pagans residents of some distant land? Why undertake an arduous journey to pay homage to the possible messiah of an alien religion? What compels them out of their ordinary routines, comfortable and familiar, to travel far away, in a cold season? Where does their journey begin?

*Where does their journey begin? And where do our journeys begin?*

As most of you know, I am blessed to serve as chaplain to those in the ordination process in this diocese. As part of the application process they must all write spiritual autobiographies. Here are some of the kinds of things they write.

*Some of my earliest memories are of sitting in church or in religion classes and feeling a deep stirring within me. I didn't know what the stirring meant, nor did I have the language to articulate what I felt. All I knew was it had something to do with God. Even with 12 years of top-notch Catholic school education, my understanding of God was pretty simple. "He" was an old man in the sky who looked after us. I did not understand the Eucharist, but I felt connected to it and even remember gathering my friends to "celebrate Mass" with Ritz crackers. I went into high school feeling stirred but confused about God. I volunteered at homeless shelters and a children's hospital out of a desire to help people, but saw no connection between those actions and God.*

Another,

*Then, when I was in my early twenties and living in Seoul, Korea, I came to know a group of Lutheran missionaries who invited me to attend an English-language Lutheran Church. Two of the women offered me instruction over a period of weeks, and before long I was baptized. Not long after that I was church secretary. I immediately fell in love with church life. I remember walking down a street in Seoul on my first Palm Sunday, huge palm frond in hand, feeling an overwhelming sense of jubilation at this crazy new world I had entered.*

Another,

*I have always been a deeply religious individual. My desire for a more formal commitment to the ministry is long standing. Originally, I desired to become a priest as early as the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I was attracted to religious life and the ideals of the Franciscan tradition.*

And, another,

*The Eucharist, too, has been central to my spiritual life since I was young. I still remember my first communion – the real first one when I was very young, not the official one with my Sunday School class – as a moment of light. I remember playing priest, celebrating communion in a neighbor's living room with pickle slices and grape juice, using the Roman Catholic missalette the other children had taken home from their church. In our own way, we were quite serious about it.*

And, another,

*I can not state with any certainty when I first began to perceive a call to the priesthood. I have not experienced it as a bolt of lightning, or as an instant of certainty, but rather as a growing realization that this is where God is calling me to be. It took me some time to put a name to the sense of invitation I felt, and even then, I didn't immediately embrace it. I found the notion somewhat ludicrous at first; I couldn't have defined exactly what a priest was, but I was sure it involved more holiness than I possess.*

All the stories are different. And yet all have some common themes: a sense, at some point, of a larger intention, something larger than one's self beckoning toward a certain path. An intimation of one's life's direction or purpose. A necessity to go somewhere. Call it a *call*.

And the stories of response are different, too. Sometimes the response to the call is shock and fear, avoidance, denial. Sometimes it's relief, comfort, and joy. Always, at some point, there's a knowledge of inevitability, of necessity. *This is what God needs me to do.*

On Thursday this week I will help to lead a retreat for those who will be ordained to the priesthood next Saturday. We will talk together about the journeys the ordinands have been on – where they began, how they have unfolded, what they expect to happen next, and, I am sure, we will talk about the unexpected, the mysterious, the strange voyage through the often dark and shadowed paths of ordained ministry toward the light that draws us all toward the heart of God, God's intentions, hopes and promises.

I have quoted here bits of stories that have led to ordination, stories of responses to the Church's call to ordained ministry. I tell everyone who comes to me inquiring about ordination that the call to ordination is a call from the Church, a call to fill certain needs *of the Church*. We are all called, I tell them, by God, but we are not all called to ordained ministry.

But all of us here this morning are called by the Church as well as by God. In fact, some of us may be more aware of the call from the Church than we are of any summons by God. We may be – some of you are, I know – called to the Church because of your children, wanting something from the Church for them. Some of you feel called by a need for community, without, at least in the beginning, much of a sense of God or the holy or what in the world all these folks dressed in white are doing up in front.

In some ways those of us here this morning are very much alike. We share, most of us, very similar political outlooks, a love of city living and a commitment to urban values and to social justice. But the paths we have taken to arrive at this place, at this time, may be very different. I love to hear those stories, and I think we all enjoy and benefit from opportunities to share among ourselves how we got here, and why.

And like the Wise Men, we bring different gifts with us to share in this community. All important, and all valuable. We all have a great deal to offer, a great deal to contribute.

And we also have a great deal to gain, all of us. But one thing is for certain. We will reap the benefits of the journey most fully if we stay with it to the end, as the Wise Men did. They doubtless encountered many obstacles and challenges along the way. I often quote the marvelous poem by T. S. Eliot, *The Journey of the Magi*.

A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The way deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter."\_  
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory

And so on, the trials enumerated, the reluctance and increasing grumpiness of the travelers highlighted. But they make it to the end, and their lives are transformed forever.

As ours will be, if we stay the journey. Perhaps not in the dramatic, palpable way we may imagine the Wise Men's lives were changes. But we will be transformed.

When I talk about baptism I sometimes tell the story of my dear friend and neighbor Carolyn who was after me, periodically over the years, to baptize her children. I am known as their family chaplain, I have buried Carolyn's in-laws and her husband, our beloved Joe, and married Joe's niece, and, just last summer, Joe and Carolyn's daughter Emily. But I always told Carolyn what I tell everyone about baptism: not unless you're prepared to take them to church regularly.

"But I want them to know Bible stories," Carolyn would protest. "I want them to know Christian art." And I would explain, over and over, what seems to me a no-brainer, that none of that would happen with a few splashes of water and some prayers. It would only happen through Christian education, which usually takes place in church.

A few months ago Carolyn brought the subject up again, this time with a different slant. She said she might have made a mistake by not taking having her children baptized and taking them to church. *Why*, I asked.

"Because they don't have that sense of community," she said. "They don't have that sense of discipline and commitment to community that you exemplify, and that you teach."

And I thought, *At last. It's taken 25 years of conversation, and she finally gets it.*

But really, I know it's not the conversation, the argument, even the common sense, that's been persuasive. What has changed her view, I believe, is how she has witnessed my journey over those years, how she has watched my life transformed by, and in, a community of faith. She has seen what I have given, and what I have been given back, given back a thousandfold.

As the Wise Men were. As we all are, my dear friends, when we stay the course, when we prove faithful on our journey. What we are promised, and what I believe we can all anticipate, in faithfulness, is what we hear in today's Epistle to the Ephesians,

*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know God, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which God has called you, what are the riches of God's glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe. Alleluia! Amen*