

Jeremiah 31:7-14

John 1:10-18

Ephesians 1:3-14

“Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!
Praise your God, O Zion!” AMEN!

It's tempting to put stories together.

When it comes to the Bible,
we all do it.

For example, if you recall from Christmas Eve,
the question was posed by the kids
during Children's Time that

the Wise Ones were missing!

It was a good observation!

All nativity scenes have the Wise Ones there
around the baby Jesus in the manger.

The kids wanted to know,
“Where are the Wise Ones?”

And I pointed saying that
they're in the back of the sanctuary. (Pause)

See, the main attenders,
were the shepherds on that birth night.

So, when we put the Wise Ones out
on Christmas Eve we are
putting stories together.

Interesting side note, that there's only one shepherd
in the quaint statue scene when
the Bible account said there were
plural shepherds, grown men
and not a child.

I suppose it says something about us
when we are more comfortable with
three wealthy Wise Men presenting gifts

than we are with a crowd of low status
shepherds in attendance who arrived to
share what the angel had told them.

Possibly a little bit of projection going on there?

Anyway, the Bible doesn't have
the Wise Ones showing up to visit
Jesus, Mary and Joseph until Jesus was
around 2 years old.

Scholars draw that timeline from Matthew
where we are told that the Wise Ones
entered the house of the child with
Mary his mother and then offered gifts.

The other clue supporting the later timeline
connects to the Wise One's visit to Herod.

For when he found out he'd been tricked by the Magi,
he ordered the massacre of all the children
in Bethlehem from the ages of 2 years old
and younger.

Even Herod would have no reason
to murder children as old as two if the Wise Ones
were there when Jesus was
an infant in a manger. (Pause)

My point is that we put the birth stories of Jesus
from Matthew and Luke together
and things appear to happen
at lightning speed.

Tomorrow, January 6, marks the beginning of
the season of Epiphany.

And even though that is not our scripture
lesson specifically for today,
it follows the theme.

Which is paying attention to the journey.

The journey of the Magi, the Wise Ones,

the astrologers from a foreign land who traveled
to see the the new thing God had done
were paying attention to the signs.

The journey that Mary, Joseph and Jesus needed
to take in order to escape the child massacre
ordered by Herod was made because
they paid attention to the vision God
gave them.

And finally, the journey of a madman who was
so worried about losing his power, prestige
and influence that he'd make a decision
to murder innocent children
was a journey that paid attention
to selfishness. (Pause)

The powerful words from John's gospel, chapter 1,
speak of God's journey in the creation of
the world and that the Word, Jesus Christ
was there from the beginning.

In that poetic language which is so difficult to explain,
we find the journey set before humanity
by a creative God.

The process, for lack of better words,
of receiving Jesus, believing Him, and
the way that gives all people the power

to become children of God is
itself of journey.

How's it all done?

Some will tell you that you have to do stuff to earn it,
but John chapter 1 verse 16 says,

“From his fullness we have all received
grace upon grace.”

The journey of fathoming “grace upon grace” is
a lifelong one and it takes a lot of paying attention
to the good things God is doing. (Pause)

Most of us would agree that, as a culture,
we are not very good at paying attention.

At least attention on healthy things.

For instance, sometimes someone will tell me
that they're paying attention to self care.

“That's good!” I'll say.

But then they go on to tell me that it means
they'll be taking walks on Sunday mornings
instead of coming to church.

“I feel so close to God when walking on the trail,”
they tell me.

I confess, that my face takes on an
artificial smile because I don't really know how
to respond when someone says
something like that.

I mean, I love the outdoors as much as
most people do and there's much joy in taking
a Sunday getaway now and then.

No one knows more than I that church can
be busy and sometimes a hard place to relax,
much less experience the presence of
God.

Yet, something doesn't seem quite right
when someone says they feel closer to God
out there than when they are in here.

I know, maybe it's a cop-out, and
I realize that I'm the pastor so my perspective
is a little skewed,

but I also know how difficult it is to pay attention
to the most important things.

I know how important it is to have

a church community that holds me accountable
and misses me when I'm not there.

This congregation misses you when you're not here.

And I know that while being in nature is
a form of adoration and smacking a golf ball
on a Sunday morning is relaxing,
except for that slice and missed putt!

What I know (even more) is that when
I miss church I've jumped over an important
part of my journey.

I've skipped an important part of my routine and
then become easily distracted. (Pause)

Perhaps that's why we are so fascinated with the Magi.

They were astrologers looking
for something to happen.

They studied stars and watched the skies.

And, they knew enough about the Jewish culture
that they understood that a Savior
had been promised.

So when the light in the sky, the star,

shone its brightest, they followed it.

They took the long journey and
paid attention along the way,

watching for God to act,
but the Wise Ones didn't know everything.

They journeyed while pondering
the mysteries outside,
discerned that God was up to something,

but they didn't quite know what was happening.

Ironically, it was Herod's own call to
the chief priests and scribes of Jerusalem
that told him (and the Wise Ones)
to go to Bethlehem.

It's a classic example of the way people
misinterpret the Bible/scriptures and use
it for terroristic schemes. (Pause)

True worship brings people together
to experience scripture,
God's presence, and peace.

Anyone can have access to the Bible and
use it to justify deadly behavior, but mature

faith requires awe from the world out there
and knowledge from the God we learn about in here.

In nature, we don't learn how much God
loves you or me, and the person
we call our enemy.

A beautiful beach and majestic mountain vista,
won't teach us to see the Christ in other people.

No star communicates these teachings.

They aren't bad, they're just incomplete. (Pause)

So, we come to church and we worship
in a sanctuary that teaches about
God's universal love.

We go out into nature and connect that love
to God's wonderful creation and respond
by caring for what God has made.

We gather together and sing songs that
tell of the sacred story, and pray prayers
that call for miracles because the God
we worship

loves the world so much that a

Son's been given unto us.

The only tree I know that can reveal
the depth of that kind of love...
is the cross.

AMEN!