

Dream Work

^{NRS} Mat 2:1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men 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, 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 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 my people Israel.'" ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men 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, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, 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.

When the path you're on begins to fork- how do you decide which path to take?

And then, after you've made your decision- how do you know you're on the right road?

No one has addressed this better than Robert Frost, I think:

"The Road Not Taken"

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

When the path you're life is on begins to fork- how do you decide which way to go? And then after you've made your decision- how do you know you're on the right road?

I guarantee you, no one wonders about this more than the magi we find in the text this morning.

Often called the three kings, or the wise men as our text this morning does, 'magi' is probably the best word for them. *Magoi* is the word Matthew uses- and it has a very specific meaning in his world. Far from being mysterious figures or what not, *magoi* were actual historical figures in the ancient world that we know a fair bit about- mainly they were advisors to kings. Any ruler worth his salt had magi. While these magi probably came from the Persian empire, kingdoms all over the place had them.

Remember in Exodus when Pharaoh was dealing with that pesky Moses and his annoying friend Aaron? Moses and Aaron come in strutting their stuff, you know, with Aaron turning his staff into a snake and all. Well, Pharaoh's not going to put up with this- he calls out his advisors, his magi, to compete with them. And they do a pretty good job, too- they had the snake trick down cold for instance. And they even hung in there with turning the Nile to blood and making frogs rain from the skies. (I'm not sure why you would ever want to learn that, but apparently they knew how. I mean can you imagine it? You're in magi school. And there are all these choices in front of you. Let's see, we can

learn to turn lead into gold, excellent. Or we could learn how to predict the future by the stars- very helpful. Or...we could learn how to make frogs fly out of the sky. Oh yeah, teach us THAT one. That'll come in handy some day.) So they're making frogs come out of the sky and making faces at Moses and Aaron feeling pretty cocky. But, then, when it comes to producing gnats- Pharaoh's magi are out of luck. It turns out they learn how to make it rain frogs in magi school, but apparently skipped the day they were teaching about gnats. (And you know Pharaoh just had to be hacked at this. 'Come on!' he's yelling at them. 'You can make frogs come out of the sky, for goodness sakes! Frogs! You can't make a few gnats? Come on, they're making us look bad.') So, yeah, magi- advisors to kings. They were kind of like Karl Rove, an MBA, and the psychic hotline all rolled into one.

Now, you know the story, these magi, who apparently showed up when they taught astronomy, follow a star, somehow making their way across a wilderness of desert all the way to Judea- all to honor a newborn ruler. You can imagine everyone's surprise when they show up. They find their way to the palace- expecting to find little blue balloons tied up outside saying "It's a boy!". They were feeling pretty confident about the gold they brought- everybody like gold. But they were a little nervous about the incense and the myrrh- not really the best toys for a little boy, but then again, Tonka wasn't around just yet. And so they show up, and you know what happens next. They say, "Where's the king?" And it's that great scene where everybody stares at them and blinks- and you can hear a cricket start to chirp in the background. "We've come for the king who has just been born." And King Herod, his blood turning ice cold upon hearing this, says 'Wait here', and ushers his own magi into the backroom. And yes, sure

enough- his own advisors confirm that yeah, they meant to tell him about it, but it looks like the Messiah is supposed to be born in Bethlehem, and it looks like these guys might have a case.

And so Herod, no fool, calls those magi from the East to him in secret- and he tells them he is just as interested as anyone in finding this king- perhaps even more so. And he orders them to go, to find the child, and then to come back immediately, so that he might go as well, and...worship him. Of course if the magi had any idea how much sacrifice went on with Jewish worship in that day, they might have reconsidered. But, very used to taking orders from kings, they head off into the night, excited about what they had learned- excited to find this child and lay before him their gifts.

And of course they do. And what a sight. They keep following the star that's been guiding them all this time, and sure enough, it leads them straight to Bethlehem- just like Herod's people said. And there, in a small, modest home- they find the child surrounded by two, stunned looking parents. And sensing that there really wasn't anything to say, they laid their gifts, these exotic, fantastic gifts, of gold, incense, and myrrh, and the feet of that simple cradle, worn smooth by generations of use. And overwhelmed with joy, with joy the text says, they actually kneel down, *proskuneo* is the word Matthew uses, which means to worship, and they worship him- this little child, wriggling in that cradle, making those soft, cooing, baby noises.

My favorite ornament on our Christmas tree is an ornament we got three years ago. It has a picture of Will on it as an infant, and a little button. When you touch the button it plays this sound Will used to make when he slept- kind of soft aaah, aaah, aaah.

I don't think there's a sweeter sound in the whole world. This is what I imagine those magi were hearing as they lay their gifts down.

So, many of us have heard this story so many times- where's the good news? We tend to get all excited about the star or the gifts. People make such a huge fuss out of the star- was it Halley's comet, or some other astronomical event? And scholar's make so much out of those gifts- gold symbolizing kingship, incense symbolizing the priesthood, and myrrh being the spice used to prepare bodies for death- we get so interested in this. Did these magi know somehow this little one was no ordinary king- that he wouldn't rule by force, but would give his own life? We get so intrigued by all these curiosities- but I tell you, I tell you what's REALLY interesting, to me at least, what's good news is what happens after all of that. After the star. After the gifts. What fascinates me is the decision the magi make, a crucial decision, to disobey Herod, and instead of going back to Jerusalem as they promised, to break their word and go back home by a different road.

Two roads stretched out before those magi that night. And because of a dream, because of a dream, they decide to take the road less traveled and go home by another way.

When the path you're life is on begins to fork- how do you decide which way to go? And then after you've made your decision- how do you know you're on the right road?

How did the magi know? You say, well they had a dream. Sure they had a dream. But they had lots of dreams. How did they know to pay attention to this one? How did they know this dream was true? Not all are to be sure. *Test the spirits*, we hear

in the First letter of John- test the spirits- not all of them are of God. In this Advent in this season of dreams- how do we tell which dreams are of God, and which are not? Obviously, there's no easy answer here- and beware of anyone who tells you otherwise. However, I do think we can learn a thing or two from these magi when it comes to discernment- when it comes to deciding which path to take when we have to make choices.

First off, they were prepared. When this dream came to them, it's not like it came out of the blue- they had been paying attention to such subtle signs for a long, long time. In the church we call these habits of paying attention spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines.

Many of these disciplines are pretty well known. Prayer for instance- even if you don't pray regularly, many of you have known prayer at some point in your life as something that has helped you become aware of God's presence in your life. When I was in CPE as a hospital chaplain, I was very cautious at first. I never want to be one of the church people who forces themselves on others. And being in New Jersey most of the patients there at Robert Wood were either Roman Catholic, Jewish, or unchurched. So I was especially wary. So, at first I'd go, and I'd visit with people- I'd go into their rooms, introduce myself and listen to whatever it is they had to say. And then I'd head to the next room. My supervisor, Tiina, asked me pretty soon into this if I ever prayed with people. And I said I did if they asked. She said, "And how many ask." Not many, I admitted. So my new assignment she said was to ask them. But I don't want to intrude, I protested. "People want prayer here, Ken" she said. "People need prayer here. Trust

them to say ‘No.’” And so, not terribly happy about this, I started asking patients if they wanted prayer. In almost every single case when I would ask this they would turn and look at me, eyes suddenly alive, and say “Yes, of course.” And not only did I never get the sense that I was forcing my spirituality onto others- I began to feel like I had something truly helpful to offer, I began to feel like I was leading thirsty people to cool springs. Not bad work, I’ll tell you.

So we often know prayer as a spiritual discipline. Worship is a discipline we often don’t think about, but it is. And fasting. And reading scripture- especially prayerful ways of reading such as *lectio divina*.

But you know what I love about the magi? What I love about them is that while they may have practiced some of these more well known and “normal” disciplines, nobody knows, we do know that they practiced the unusual spiritual discipline of astrology. I love this, because we see that God can sometimes use the most bizarre things to speak to us. And this frees us, I think, because sometimes our souls don’t always fit in the tidy religious boxes the church makes for us. Sometimes, God speaks to us in ways that are more unique and creative.

Back in Austin I had a very good friend, a pastor named Jeannie Stanly. Like me, Jeanie was doing new church development work. But we didn’t meet in this context- we met at a conference. We were both taking a class on spiritual disciplines. We were supposed to say what spiritual disciplines we were practicing. And everyone was saying how many hours a day they were in prayer or lighting candles or whatever. And this was fine, but it wasn’t really me- and I didn’t feel like fitting in and being churchy, so I just told the truth. I shared that the best discipline I was practicing those days was playing

fetch with my black lab. I said there was just something in throwing that stick and watching her beautiful, black coat, as she streaked after it- again and again and again. Most people looked at my like I had horns coming out of my head- which wasn't the first time. Jeannie, however, came up to me afterwards and said she had a similar experience, but was afraid to say it. And after the reception I received- we both agreed she probably made the right decision.

No, the truth is nearly anything can be a spiritual discipline. The point is is that when it comes to discernment, to making choices, it's crucial to have something you do, whether it's running or praying or whatever it may be, that allows your soul to settle down, if only for a few moments, so that if God is saying something to us, we won't miss that still silent voice over the racket.

The second thing the magi that is instructive is they don't walk alone. The text is very clear- a dream came to *them* and *they* decided which path to take. You know we don't really know how many magi there were. We tell our kids there were three kings- but did you notice the text never says this? The text just says there's more than one, there are plural magi- it never tells us how many there are. The number three came from the early middle ages when folks just inferred how many there were based on the number of gifts. But in reality- it could be two or it could have been twenty. The important thing is there's more than one.

While time alone is important when making decisions- time together may be even more significant. Do you know, this is why we worship as a gathered body? Do you know this is why we say prayers together, sometimes. It goes against the grain of the

individualism of our culture, I know- but we come together once a week, and we say prayers together, not to brainwash ourselves or to mash all our identities into one. We come together and pray together because of the simple fact that there are brothers and sisters in our midst who are here, who are here right now, because they need the strength of others. We gather together because there are days I don't believe the good news of the Gospel, and I don't say that theoretically, I tell you the God's honest truth. Pastor or not, there are days when I am so overwhelmed with what is going on, it is hard, impossible to believe that there really is a loving God behind all of the pain, and I need others to sing and to pray and to believe with and for me.

A couple of weeks ago, one of our members who will remain nameless shared one of the most interesting things I've ever heard. She said if it were up to her, she probably wouldn't go to worship but once a month or so- she didn't need much more than that. She comes, she said, because she knows someone else might need her to be here. And many just to be a presence, maybe to be someone who smiles- something as simple as that. And she may never know if she's touched someone or not- but she comes, not out of her own need all the time, but because of the body. We need each other friends, we need each other. Especially when we're making decisions- we need each other just to bounce our ideas off someone else.

And finally, the last thing I love about these magi, that guides us, seems simple enough- but it bears saying: their dream called them to risk everything they had, in this case their lives, and in fear and trembling they followed that other road. While it may not always be true, often enough, God doesn't call us where life is simple, easy, and

comfortable. God calls us to the narrow path- the one that few dare tread. Christ calls us not to a happiness without suffering, but the costly joy that only comes through bearing the cross following after him.

You know sometimes it's true that when we face decisions- we honestly don't know which path to take. Sometimes that's true. More often, though, I find that when we're conflicted in life- it's always because we're confused about which direction to go. We're confused because the path we know is right is the one that's difficult, and it's the one we don't entirely want to take.

When the path you're life is on begins to fork- how do you decide which way to go? And then after you've made your decision- how do you know you're on the right road?

Well, the simple answer is we don't know- we never know. All we can do is make the best decisions we can, gather in the warmth of friends as often as possible, and to walk down the path a ways sure of one thing only- there is no path we can take, no road we can travel down, that can lead us so far astray that our Good Shepherd, the one who took flesh and traveled into the far country wrapped in swaddling cloths, is not able to find us and help us to make our way again on paths sure and true. **Amen**