

Called into the messy middle

Psalm 23, Matthew 2: 1-12

[Epiphany 4, Augsburg College Chapel, 29 January 2016]

As we conclude our week of chapels around the theme of Augsburg's vocational claim that "We believe we are called to serve our neighbor," I recall a story I have told before, but that bears repeating this morning – at this time, in this place, on this occasion. Cornel West, theologian and social critic, had been asked to address the "Aims of Religion" at a University of Chicago convocation – not a small topic! What I recall is the searing indictment of our the human and social condition he offered, pounding on the chapel pulpit as he proclaimed, "I am not optimistic, there is no evidence for optimism!" But then he paused and concluded, "But I have hope..." Hope, despite the evidence; hope, because I believe; hope, because God is in charge.

This sacred time we call Epiphany calls God's faithful to what the British poet, W.H. Auden, called "the time being," the time after the wonder of the Christ child, the witness of shepherds and wise ones, the proclamation of angels – the time when we must go on, living as God's faithful people in what social worker and Ted Talk rock star, Brene' Brown, has called "the messy middle," the time when we are too far in to turn back and yet we cannot see where we are headed except through the eyes of faith and hope.

I chose this haunting version of the 23rd Psalm from Bobby McFerrin because of how it provokes our thinking with its alternative language – "though I walk through a dark and dreary land" – sounds like the messy middle – "you will not forsake me." "you set a table before me and my foes," "surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life," – the stuff of faith and hope and God in charge.

I wonder if Epiphany is all about how we are called into the messy middle. There are many, like the Psalmist, who have gone before us and offer a way forward...

This morning, I want to draw on the story of the wise ones, the wise men (or kings, or magi) found in Matthew's gospel (and only there!) It is the quintessential Epiphany story – those outside the circle drawn to the light – and it is a love story, a story of longing and fidelity and surprise. It is a story that helps us understand both the nature of God – as Emmanuel, with us – and also what God hopes for and expects of us – a love story, God and God's people falling in love again.

The story is fairly straightforward – even cryptic some might say. The star appears in the East and these three men – rulers, magicians, priests – are drawn to leave their home countries and travel to see what the star proclaims. Along the journey, they meet up

with Herod, who attempts to trick them into being his spies. They finally come to the place (not the manger, but a house) where Jesus lives with Mary and Joseph, where they likely are amazed to find a child. And they leave their valuable gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh, worshipping God for what has been made manifest for God's people. They depart rejoicing by an alternative route so as to avoid Herod's edict.

I have learned much about the wise ones story through the lens of Auden's magisterial prose poem, "For the Time Being." In a section of the poem entitled "The Summons," Auden has each wise man remark on why he might follow the star. I find in these remarks an intriguing way to consider the logic of the story.

The first wise one comments, "To discover how to be truthful now - Is the reason I follow the star."

Imagine the situation. These mysterious kings from the East see a star – they feel its pull, its majesty, its danger, its promise - and they step outside their positions of power and privilege, they take the risk of leaving comfortable and predictable circumstances to follow a star. They want to know the truth in a world where what passes for truth is wrapped up in narrow and confining formulae, in dizzying reams of information, in insecurity and blind allegiance. They want to be free – and to be free they must be truthful. That is why they follow the star – to find the truth – and therein we learn one of the important lessons of the love story: God calls us out of our ordinary and comfortable circumstances to follow, to discover how to be truthful. Lovers step out of the expected to learn the truth of each other.

And the second wise one adds, "To discover how to be living now – Is the reason I follow the star."

The wise ones undertake the journey occasioned by the pull of the star – who knows the risks, the burden, the sacrifices – and therein they seek not simply to remember a distant past or to dream of a possible future, but to understand what God intends for us now. The star calls them to seek out the glimpses of truthfulness and fidelity and good that are here now to be embraced and engaged – not to dwell on precedent or speculation – and therein to find genuine faith. Here is the second lesson of this love story: God is with us, present now and here, and our journeys must be open to discovering what it means to live faithfully, to do God's work in the here and now. Lovers don't glorify the past or put all their hope in the future – they are there for each other in the present, in the messy middle.

The third wise one continues, "To discover how to be loving now – Is the reason I follow the star."

The wise ones follow where the star leads them – to a surprise, a baby lying in its mother's arms – so counter-intuitive, so outside the realm of the world's definition of

success. And here is perhaps the most startling aspect of the story. Think about it – you can step out of your comfort zone, even take the risk of a journey that challenges you to be open to life in the here and now, but when it comes down to it, as humans we expect that at the end of this sacrificial, risky journey, we'll be rewarded with a result that measures up to our sacrifices, that satisfies our human longings in ways we understand. But instead it is a child, living in pretty squalid conditions. This is it? This is what we gave it all up to find? Surprise, yes this is what it is all about. Lovers are open to the awesome and life-transforming surprises we will know in each other.

And finally, Auden has the wise men together proclaim, "To discover how to be human now – Is the reason we follow the star."

Here is the culmination of our love story. The wise ones have reached their destination and they do only what they can do – they give rare and precious gifts, they stand back in awe at God's grand and mysterious ways. They suspend disbelief and proclaim God's great wonders and love for God's people. They learn to love again, to love a child whose work in the world is to save God's people. Lovers fall in love with their beloved, and therein find themselves most fully, find what it means to be truly human now.

How do the wise ones offer us a map for our lives of faith in the messy middle? Are we willing to be drawn out of our usual places of power and privilege and comfort to undertake the journey of faith, to be open to surprises of love and to offer our gifts in response to the wonder of God breaking into our lives? How do we love as we have been loved? This is the love story of the wise men. This is our love story as God's faithful people in the world, called to the messy middle, called to be and serve our neighbor, called to fall in love again and again, here and now – and the wise ones teach us how!

My beloved friends, may the epiphany of our good and gracious God inhabit your hearts and minds as we journey together in this new year to discover the surprises God has in store for us. May we be drawn into the love story that is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord. And may we proclaim, along with the shepherds and wise ones and angels, this wonderful chorus that concludes Auden's poem:

*He is the Way.
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;
You will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.*

*He is the Truth.
Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.*

*He is the Life.
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;*

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

Surely goodness and kindness will follow me all the days of my life. Joy in the messy middle! Thanks be to God. Amen.