

This threshold moment

Psalm 23 (performed by Bobby McFerrin)

1 Corinthians 13: 8-13

Good morning – how good to be back together in this sacred space for these daily chapel services!

When Pastors Justin and Babette first mentioned the “Courageous Curiosity” theme for this fall’s chapel series, my mind went immediately to the confirmation lessons I learned from my dad, who introduced me to Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism*, in which we are taught to ask “What does this mean?” of the various parts of the Lord’s Prayer and Apostle’s Creed. What does this mean? – perhaps a form of courageous curiosity – perhaps a question we are called to ask always, and especially in this moment.

We find ourselves in liminal space – liminal from the Latin *limin*, meaning threshold – a space, a moment where and when we know what we have been through, but we don’t yet know what is to come – a space and moment that requires faith and hope and vigilance for what God is doing in our midst. What does this mean, we ask?

The social worker and Ted Talk rock star Brene’ Brown has called this liminal space “the messy middle” and perhaps that is how we are experiencing this space and moment – stuck in a middle that is very messy. What does this mean?

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” – “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. Liminal space. What does this mean?

The Apostle Paul reminds us that “Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.” Maybe here is the key for God’s faithful people: Paul reminds us that, though already known, we only know in part – for now – saved, yet sinful, the messy middle, this threshold moment, is where we must live.

So what to do? Perhaps our courageous curiosity – our questions about what does this mean – will show us a way forward into this messy middle.

There is a liturgical season in the Christian calendar that rather resembles this messy middle – it is the time after Christmas and before Lent, it is called Epiphany, its label perhaps a hint of what we are called to be and do in this threshold moment – to seek, to watch, to uncover, to follow.

One of the signature stories of the Epiphany season is that of the three wise men – these wise ones who come from the East, following a star, seeking a savior, only to find a child, living with

his parents. They leave their precious gifts as they give thanks to God and depart by another way to avoid Herod's edict. It is a love story, I believe, a story that offers us a map to our lives of faith in the messy middle.

I have learned much about the wise ones story through the lens of W.H. 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? How will we find the truth, the living, the loving, the humanity? 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! “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” Thanks be to God. Amen.