

"A Word to the Wise."

St. Matthew 2:1-12

Nativity scenes are often different. One that captured my fancy several years ago had Mary, as tradition dictates, wearing blue. Jesus, who appeared to be at least two years old, was wearing pajamas, not your typical Palestinian swaddling clothes. Joseph and the only shepherd might have been twins. Apparently, the shepherd sucked at his job for there was only one sheep.

An angel was harp playing while leaning against the flagpole. Santa Claus is sliding down a rope while his four reindeer awaited on the rooftop. On the other side, three wise men wearing turbans stand in line. One young child said the Magi were bringing, "A jewelry box, a golden football, and a silver sausage."

How St. Matthew tells the Christmas story is entirely different from the more popular St Luke version. Comparing the two stories can be confusing, and the shifts are dramatic: Shepherds exit, wise men enter; forget the stable, go instead to the palace; live in poverty or luxury; dreams come, or angels go; bye bye Mary's lullaby, hello Rachel's roaring.

One of the few items Sts. Matthew and Luke agree upon is 'traveling.' Their stories are about trip-making: Nazareth to Bethlehem; fields to the manger; Judea to Egypt. Mayhaps the most extended and most unlikely is from Persia to Palestine; a trip that could have used a platform like Mapquest!

This trip didn't have a rational reason for embarking. Do you ever wonder why the Wise men started on the journey? St. Matthew indicates that there might have been a sincere, internal desire; a Spiritual aching to follow that strange light not knowing where it would take them.

It is from the root word magi that we arrive at our word magician. In his book "Ordinary Magic," John Welwood writes: "Magic . . . is a sudden opening of the

mind to the wonder of existence. It is a sense that there is much more to life than we usually recognize. That life contains many dimensions, depths, textures, and meanings extending far beyond our familiar beliefs and concepts" [Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1992]

Our text's author wants us to realize everyone has a profound yearning for God. We don't always sense it, but we know it is there because sometimes we can feel it. Our spirits crave meaning, our souls hunger for hope, and our hearts ache for love.

Why do we worship? For what reason are we here this morning? We may have mixed motives, but at least there is a part of us that hopes we will experience God's presence. We worship in reaction to need even if we cannot name it. We have been summoned like the Magi, led by the light of a star. We feel the attraction of God's love.

This desiring is at the center of our being, and even those moments when we believe we experience something from God, we often don't take even one step forward. We don't because it is safer to stay planted where we are than to move toward the Light. For every set of three wise people, there are a hundred who choose not to see beyond their noses. You know, most of us are far too practical to follow a star.

As the lyrics go, "Paranoia runs deep." When the Magi ask about the "new" King, King Herod senses a lack of job assurance. He asks his research staff to check it out. The scribes say, "Bethlehem," and Herod relies on politics in an attempt to trick the three wise men. Herod was not a wise man, but he wasn't stupid either.

Each time Jesus appears he disturbs the status quo. Everything about us, even what we own and what we dream, is vulnerable, if a new king is enthroned. The baby grew and changed every rule. Jesus lived and taught a radical lifestyle of unconditional love, persistent forgiveness, and uncompromising hospitality to

those who were outsiders, to those who live in the margins. If you live as Jesus lived, they don't crown you Prom Queen or King.

All of us dance around change. We do not wish to let go of what we have grown accustomed to. Our genuine longing is clouded by our trivial pursuits. Many of us know precisely what God wants of us, but regarding God's invitation, we want no part of THAT!

God tenderly invites us to spend less time and money on ourselves, and more on those in need. God calls us to cease wasting time in amusing ourselves and give more time to our family, friends, and strangers. Gently, God tries to persuade us to turn our attention from the temporary to the enduring. I think we understand more about God's invitations than we admit. If it is difficult for us to listen to God, it may be because we have already heard God.

Are we daring enough to pursue God? In every area of our lives can we go forward in faith and not stand still? To follow the light instead of hiding in the darkness of fear?

The wise men went even when it felt foolish. They wanted the Messiah more than the status quo. They desired Jesus more than they wanted to play it safe.

The "Followers of the Way" are not only people who own a particular dogma, or way of believing. Instead, they are people who have the disposition to travel, to go after God's soothing light. Belief in Jesus Christ is not a place to stand, but a direction in which to move. God continues to invite us to follow the star.

Let us not go gently into this new year. Alleluia. Amen.