

Sermon 20.01.05

Matthew 2:1-12

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 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.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"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." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.' 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

SERMON:

“You’re really devoted to running” is a line that stopped me in my tracks once upon a time, long, long ago... A relative said it to me as I came into the house, drenched, bits of sleet stuck to my eyebrows, cheeks on fire with color, a huge smile on my face - ah, nothing like braving the elements and a good run. “You’re really devoted to running” - that comment was unsettling - it raised a whole host of questions for me: Was I *devoted* to my exercise regimen? Was I as devoted to my faith as I was my running? Where did my devotions lie?

While devotion is not quite the same word as worship, it’s close. In our passage today, the word homage is translated elsewhere in the New Testament as ‘to worship’. Homage - it’s used 3 times in these 12 verses from Matthew’s gospel. Homage; worship - Not worship like we’re used to, here to pay homage, or to worship, is to fall down; to kneel down and kiss the ground when in the presence of someone superior; to *worship*, is to get down on your knees and acknowledge the greatness of the other.

The wise ones are on a journey to find a king whom they will worship, to whom they’ve devoted their lives to seek. They are following a sign in the heavens that convinces them that there is a king they’ve never met yet who they recognize as being worthy of their falling on their knees and naming his greatness. And so they set out with gifts worthy of such a king.

Barbara Brown Taylor, author of the book Betty read this morning, paints the picture for us with words, describing that yearning in the Wise Ones, saying ‘something beyond them was calling them, and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives.’

Something beyond them was calling them...

Sounds like what Augustine of Hippo, early theologian, wrote: *Our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you.*

We are restless - it’s part of what makes us humans.

Our story describes the tug of restlessness and the willingness of the Wise Ones to journey into the unknown - ‘The star was calling them out and away from everything they knew how to manage and survive, out from under the reputations they had built for themselves, the high expectations, the disappointing returns.’

They went on quite a journey. Theirs was a physical journey, leaving behind the comforts and security of home. Maybe leaving behind the ways they felt cramped and stifled, trapped in the lives they’d built for themselves.

Sometimes we’re beckoned to set out on a physical journey, but I think more often it’s a spiritual journey that the restlessness we sometimes feel is beckoning us towards.

Do you know what I’m talking about? Have you ever felt an unease, an inner itch that has you feeling dissatisfied with some part of life - maybe your work life, perhaps certain relationships, maybe feeling like you don’t know why you’re here - this job, this church, this life.

“Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God”

We humans are a restless bunch.

I suggest that this restlessness, uncomfortable as it may be, may actually be a gift from God.

The wise ones, in their restlessness, went seeking. They looked way outside the box to find the place to worship the King, the One to whom they would get down on their knees and proclaim as Savior.

In preparing for this sermon, I learned two new words related to restlessness and this seeking; this restlessness that causes us to seek for something or someone to worship. One is *seculosity* - it's the name of a book by David Zahl. Zahl, in writing about how our culture is becoming more and more secular, with lower church affiliation, says that we, as Americans, are not done with God, but that **“our hearts are restless until they find rest in God”** is as true today as it was when Augustine wrote them roughly 1700 years ago. He suggests that the restless quest for what only God can give is found less and less in church pews, and more in activities where we seek meaning and belonging - political groups, foodie groups, our careers, parenting. We lean on these things, he says, to tell us we're okay, we have meaning and purpose.¹

Seculosity - the religious impulse cannot be quenched. It's just that we, as a society, tend to be looking for it outside the confines of church walls. Sounds to me like the Wise Ones who sought the King to worship beyond the familiar.

¹ Zahl, David. 2019. *Seculosity: How Career, Parenting, Technology, Food, Politics, and Romance become our New Religion and What to Do about it*. Fortress Press.

Related to this idea of secularity is the second word I learned this week - workism. In an article in *The Atlantic* magazine, Derek Thompson writes: The decline of traditional faith in America has coincided with an explosion of new atheisms. Some people worship beauty, some worship political identities, and others worship their children. But everybody worships something. *And workism is among the most potent of the new religions competing for congregants.*

Thompson refers to a 1930 essay where the author predicted a 15-hour workweek in the 21st century, creating the equivalent of a five-day weekend. Can you imagine? Sounds like Christmas break all year long!

Instead, many of us, especially rich, college-educated people—most often men—work more than they did many decades ago. They are reared from their teenage years to make their passion their career and their calling. Workism is the belief that work is not only necessary to economic production, but also the centerpiece of one's identity and life's purpose.²

“Our hearts are restless until they find rest in God”

Here we are, inside the walls of this church, this place of worship. I am so grateful that churches still exist. Grateful that we can gather and bring these restless hearts of ours, these seeking hearts of ours, looking for the Holy One deserving of our devotion and worship, to this place. Because this looking to human made groups - our work, our families, where ever we turn for connection and meaning - they cannot supply what the heart is wired by our Maker, our God, to seek.

²<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/02/religion-workism-making-americans-miserable/583441/>

Do you experience moments of restlessness in your life? I know I sure do - and while I find moments of joy and connection in work, in hobbies, in relationships, I've come to realize that it's God my heart is seeking. And I find God in all sorts of places, and have heard from many of you that you do as well - here in worship is one place we may experience the Holy One, but I find sometimes I'm brought to my knees with awe when I see a flower, like an amaryllis bulb that opens, overnight, into full bloom; or laughing at my own silly blundering when playing games with friends and family. I nearly fall on my knees in worship when I see kids running through the sanctuary after our service, delighting in one another, feeling so at home in this place.

I thank God for the restlessness that swoops down, sometimes knocking me to my knees, because it's from my knees - when I feel helpless and hopeless, that God gives the gifts we need to see the Divine at work, here among us. The Divine, living in us and through us and for us.

Restlessness can blind us, sometimes showing up as a depression, keeping us from seeing God at work around and through us, but this holy restlessness may also sharpen our vision, giving us glimpses in little, everyday things like glimpsing the bright red of a cardinal flitting through the bushes outside this building, reminding us that we are not alone, God is always present. This is a holy restlessness, beckoning us to follow the true source of peace.

I thank God for this holy restlessness. As we navigate our way into this new year, may we continue to whisper the prayer of Augustine - *Our hearts are restless, until they can find rest in you, Oh God.*