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Light For the Journey

Matthew 2:9

On this first Sunday of a new year we are ordaining and installing a new class of elders and deacons. Today they begin a new journey of serving Jesus Christ in a special way through the ministry of Westminster. They will find it to be a journey with unexpected twists and turns. They will also learn that on this journey leaders are not always in control. The gospel reading for today tells of three men who are also on a special journey that is full of unexpected twists and turns. It is a journey through which they hope to serve God. The Magi had traveled from afar seeking a baby born king of the Jews. They are thought to be priestly sages from Persia who were experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams.

These men may well have been wise in their areas of specialization, but they are not savvy travelers. They are in fact quite naïve when they arrive in Jerusalem asking King Herod about the birth of a new king. They seem to have no clue that this approach to Herod will stir up a hornets' nest that will endanger the baby that they seek to honor. The troubled Herod is forced to consult with his chief priests and scribes. They find a decisive clue in the Book of Micah that describes a king born in Bethlehem. With this information the naïve travelers are able to continue their journey. They do not suspect Herod's real motives when he asks them to bring back to him a detailed report on their visit to the newborn king.

Matthew invites us to ponder the truth that the naiveté of these of these travelers actually contributes to their success. Because they are wise enough to know what they do not know they are always looking for help. In the end it is God who guides them to their goal. This guidance comes in the form of the star which they have carefully followed and in the text from Micah which names the town of Bethlehem. When they begin their journey home God leads them again by telling them in a dream to return by another way. These guileless travelers inadvertently defeat the clever plot of the cruel and scheming Herod. It is the hand of God which makes this journey succeed.

At the heart of this story from Matthew's gospel is the contrast between these naïve travelers and the politically savvy people who live in Herod's capital city of Jerusalem. The passage tells us that when Herod learns that these travelers are seeking a baby born king of the Jews he is frightened and all Jerusalem is frightened with him. The sophisticated citizens of Jerusalem are afraid of change. They know Herod is a tyrant but they prefer the tyrant they know to the uncertainties presented by a just king they do not know.

In Psalm 72 we find a description of what a just ruler is supposed to be and do. Here King David is shown praying for his son Solomon. The Psalm declares that a righteous king will, "defend the cause of the poor...give deliverance to the needy and crush the oppressor (Psalm 72:4)." The people who live near Herod in Jerusalem are those who benefit from a system which preys on the poor. If the oppressor is in fact crushed they will go down with him. Like Herod they are afraid of what a truly righteous king might mean. They are more than willing to support Herod in his clever and corrupt schemes.

Had these citizens of Jerusalem been traveling with the wise men on the last leg of their journey they might not have been so afraid. The baby they found in a stable was not surrounded by the accoutrements of wealth or power. Sophisticated people would have seen the travelers who adored this baby as nothing short of deluded. Hans Mol has reflected on John Calvin's understanding of this contrast in these words:

Calvin suggests that there is a lesson to be learned from the wise men "adoring Christ in the stable where he lay amidst the tokens, not of honor, but of contempt." Stripping the son "of all earthly splendor" informs "us that the kingdom is spiritual." In other words, the Kingdom of God is qualitatively different from an earthly kingdom. Herod trusted in his own power rather than God's. He was intoxicated with...man made security...The same was true of the people of Jerusalem who were also troubled (*Calvin for the Third Millennium*, page 121).

It is the naïve travelers from afar who recognized the authenticity of a king born in a stable. The spiritual kingdom the wise men found in that stable brings light to our journeys today. We celebrate that kingdom every time we respond to the call to serve.