

Catching Notice

Matthew 2:1-12

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte NC

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January 5, 2014

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi 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 magi 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.

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It is a New Year and – five days in – many of us live in abundant hope that this is the time when we will turn it around and keep those resolutions we made when the calendar rolled.

According to the Journal of Clinical Psychology, 2/3 of Americans make New Year's resolutions. The top three most popular resolutions – to no surprise – are (drumroll

please...): 1. To lose weight, 2. To get organized, 3. To spend less and save more.¹ According to the same study, most of us have good success in our resolutions for about a week (a 75% success rate). After the second week we start to wobble in our resolve a little bit (dropping to a rate of 70%). After two weeks, the wheels tend to fall off. Only 8% of us are actually successful in keeping our resolutions throughout the year.

I wonder why that is.

The easy answer is that we're a bunch of undisciplined nincompoops.

While that might be true, I wonder if there is something else.

I wonder if the reason we don't keep our resolutions is because we believe that the things after which we seek: a skinnier pair of jeans, a clutter-free life, a robust bank account or stock portfolio – will finally make us happy. And when they don't (because they don't) – we give up on the dream and return to our old habits and our old ways of life.²

If you believe the statistics, we are a nation of seekers.

In a New Year, we seek after better habits.

In our professional lives we strive to be upwardly mobile – seeking after a better job and a better paycheck.

We seek after the best opportunities for our children.

But also, as a nation, we seek after an experience of the holy.

It's remarkable, really. Even amidst the chatter about how secular our world has become, the Pew Research Poll shows that 92% of Americans believe in the existence of God. What has changed is that people are expressing their belief in different ways. Or, frankly, they have gotten bored with the ways they used to express their faith. But people are still seeking.

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In Matthew's story of Jesus, the first people who seek him out were not the religious synagogue-going types. Rather, they were astrologers who came from far away and travelled a long road to meet the one who captured their attention. What is remarkable about this story is that these astrologers – the wise men, as we have come to know them – were not even waiting on a savior. They didn't have the language for a Messiah, or the Emmanuel. Yet they were the ones who showed up.

Of course the first place the wise men showed up was to Jerusalem. It was a natural guess as to where a king of the Jews might be born because Jerusalem was the place where the power of region resided. Jerusalem was the place with a temple, and the religious elite, and the money, and a king. And yet no one in Jerusalem had even

¹ <http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/>

² With thanks to the Rev. Mary Ann McKibben Dana and her paper on this text (The Well, Baltimore, 2013).

noticed the star that the wise men followed. They hadn't noticed the messiah that they had been waiting for generations because the people in Jerusalem were seeking after the wrong things.

King Herod was interested consolidating and holding on to his power by keeping the people in line. Those responsible for the temple – the righteous and pious religious leaders – were focused on maintaining the status quo by enforcing the rules. Doing so made them feel important.

When the wise men showed up with news that a new king of Israel had been born, those who lived in Jerusalem were not amused because a new king meant a new order...and those who had power in Jerusalem were very happy with the way the current order served the lifestyle to which they had grown accustomed.

When King Herod realized that he had missed the boat – and all Jerusalem with him – he consulted his best Bible scholars and asked them where this new king was to be born. They studied their scriptures and then came across a passage from Micah that Matthew quotes in today's story: "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."

It was there, in the backwater town of Bethlehem nine miles outside of the powerful Jerusalem city limits that the new king was to be born. That's how the Bible works, you see. It guides us past the places that distract and beyond the things we seek that do not bring life (which are often our first instinct) so that we can truly experience the fullness of God's grace.

When the wise men arrived at Bethlehem and found the place where Jesus was, there was no confusion. There were no clarifying questions. There was only joy, and worship, and adoration. They had found the Light. They had experienced God's epiphany. And it changed them – they went home a different way than they had come.

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I'm captivated by why the wise men decided to take off from their home and follow this star that led them to Christ. It wasn't in order that they would get something – a blessing, or eternal life. It wasn't because they were afraid of what would happen if they didn't follow the star – they weren't fearful for their salvation...they weren't even believers! And it wasn't that they wanted to join some special religious club – for after they met Jesus, they didn't stick around or go back to Jerusalem...they returned to their home and to their lives.

The wise men followed the star to Bethlehem because there was something about the light that guided them that they had to experience. The light awakened in them a hunger that they needed to satisfy. It compelled them to get up and go.

This morning during our 11:00 service we will welcome the 100th new member of our congregation to join in the last 12 months. I celebrate that fact. And I wonder...why is that people are drawn to our church?

Is it the programs – our ministry to youth and children? Is it the community? This is a church of incredible people – I often find myself marveling at the ways our members move and shake around town. Are new members drawn here because they want to be a part of a talented and committed group of people?

Is it because of our history? Our architecture? Both are pretty impressive. Is it because of our worship? Our music? Also impressive.

Do you think that people have come here because they think they should? Do they have come because of our commitment to be Christ's hands and feet in the center of the city?

Do they have come because they hope to get something out of membership – a good feeling, a sense of belonging, an assurance that they are saved?

I haven't asked all of our newest members this question yet. There are lots of reasons why people join a church...some of which I just mentioned. But ultimately, I think it there is more.

Why do celebrate people joining our community of faith?

Is it because it affirms our love of this place – it makes us feel good when other people see the good thing that God is doing through us?

Does it make us feel more important – does it make us less anxious about the future?

Is it because more people means we can expand our stewardship and our reach into the community?

If we are honest, we can probably admit that part of why we are excited to welcome new members is tied up in these more selfish motivations. But that's not the real reason we celebrate expanding our community.

This past week in our newest issue of *Tradewinds* – someone in our congregation who is a relatively new member wrote about his experience of coming to our church. He attended our young adult Sunday school class and there he experienced a group of people who were comfortable talking about faith in such a way that there was room for honest questions. It was compelling and refreshing. After one class, he came back. And then he came back to another. And then – a while later – he invited his friends to join him in class. And then he joined the church. And now he is on a committee!

You see, I think the real reason people are drawn into our community of faith is because they get here and it just makes sense. I'm sure our carefully made plans and programs and mission and worship services and efforts at hospitality influence the way people feel, but I don't believe people come here for us. I think people are drawn into the body of Christ by the light that shines in the darkness. I think that

when people see Christ light reflected in the ways that a church is being faithful – in giving ourselves away for the sake of the world, in caring for one another at every age and every stage, in risking the vulnerable questions about what it is we believe – I think when people see that light they recognize it...and they realize what it truly is that they have been searching for.

Maybe you know someone who is seeking. Maybe it is a friend who, you know, is seeking after those things that will not satisfy. Why not take them to lunch and ask them what makes them restless? Why not invite them to come with you to church? To a Bible study? To a Wednesday night supper?

Maybe you've been a member of this congregation for longer than you can remember. You've served on every committee that has ever been invented and you know way too much about how a large organization like a church runs. Do you remember what drew you here at the beginning?

We often seek and chase after those things that do not satisfy. Those things that promise false happiness and leave us feeling empty. Sometimes even when we find something good – like a church – we end up chasing after the wrong things. Yet, in spite of ourselves, and our misplaced motivations, God's truth in Jesus Christ penetrates through the fog and compels us to follow.

It was Isaiah who prophesied:
Arise, shine, for your light has come.
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Don't you see it?