

Their Journeys, Our Journey

Luke 2:21-38 Matthew 2:1-12

We're going to talk about journeys this morning: we're familiar with the journey of the magi, and we'll hear about that journey again. And I'd like bring back to our attention Simeon and Anna, whose story we just heard again. I'd like to look at their lives again, yet from the perspective of a journey—not a journey that requires travelling over distances like the magi, but a journey of *faith* that requires having a heart that's prepared and open to see Jesus when he appears on the scene. So let's look at these journeys side by side, and what we can learn about *our* personal journeys of faith, and in life.

Matthew 2:1-12

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, '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.'³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "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.'"

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.' ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

This is the word of the Lord

Let's look at these two journeys side by side: the journey of the magi; and the "journeys" of Simeon and Anna.

First, there are obvious differences, which highlight the wideness of God's grace and show how diverse and wonderful the spiritual journey is. For example:

- Simeon and Anna were Israelites, the magi were not; they were foreigners. So, Jesus is revealed to religious 'insiders' as well as to what we might call 'unchurched' folks who are spiritual seekers.
- Simeon and Anna stayed in one place to look for Jesus (the temple in Jerusalem); the magi travelled a great distance, over many days to find him. So, some journeys require staying put; some journeys require being on the move. Teresa of Avila: "I felt in need of a great pilgrimage, so I sat still for

three days and God came to me.” Being on a journey is a matter of heart, and not geography necessarily. That’s a big *similarity*, actually—they were all seekers, pilgrims in their heart (Psalm 84:5...)

- Another difference: Simeon and Anna were getting on in years, Luke wants us to know. The magi, it can be assumed, were not. They would at least have been *younger* to have made the journey to Bethlehem and back home (wherever that was for them).

These are some examples. Please keep these in mind as we look a little more in depth at one other element to their journeys and see what we can learn from all of this about our own journey of faith.

That is: Jesus is found in both an expected, and an unexpected place. He is found in both an expected, *and* an unexpected place. The expected place is the temple (in Jerusalem). Mary and Joseph are fulfilling their obligation to the law and dedicating him to the Lord there through the rite of circumcision. Simeon and Anna find him in the expected place.

By contrast, the magi find him in an unexpected place. Wherever that is. The text from Matthew says, “When they entered the *house* they saw the child...” By now the holy family has found a home to stay in, probably because most

everyone else from the census had gone home and now there was room somewhere, and they (well, Mary) needed more time to convalesce and recover. So, that means that all of our lovely nativity scenes are not 100% accurate, because we typically have the magi at the manger when they offer their gifts. Matthew says they arrived at a house (I'm sure we've put them at the manger for convenience so we don't have to have two crèche's). But the point is, manger or house, it's an unlikely place to find the Savior of the world. It's not at the temple or in a synagogue or some religious place. And it's in Bethlehem and not Jerusalem.

What's instructive to me is that the Jewish "seekers" found him where devout Jews would *expect* to find him: in the temple. Non-Jewish "seekers" found him in the unexpected, ordinary place: a house. And before that, a manger.

This basically holds true during his earthly ministry as an adult: every Sabbath Jesus is found teaching in the synagogue, and during holy week, when Jews gather in Jerusalem for the Passover, Jesus is in the temple every day, teaching. So the devout Jews found him in those expected places. The rest of the time Jesus is found in unexpected places, going out to meet the people in their homes or on the street or in a fishing boat or at the women's social gathering

place of the time (the water well), and so forth. He goes out to make himself known to people in the everyday-ness of their lives.

The encouraging message for us is: Jesus is everywhere (by the Holy Spirit) and can be found and experienced anywhere. We find him at church (the expected place), but we can also find him wherever people are searching; searching for meaning, or purpose, or truth, or help of some kind; in the unexpected places.

And the good news for *everyone* is: God wants to be found. God is not hiding somewhere, or telling people to go away and stop bothering him. In fact, the incarnation says, “Here I am, world!” God wants to be found. Or perhaps we can put it this way: God wants to be *sought after*.

This is an important message for our time. Because people are seeking; there is a spiritual hunger in our culture, and a hunger for connection with something bigger than themselves. And people are finding Jesus. Some are finding Jesus in a Sunday morning worship service, or church program. **And**, many people are finding God in unconventional places—in living rooms, coffee shops, workplaces and offices, meeting halls, and outdoors in some way. A lot is being written about this right now, and actually has been for years.

Religious researcher & pollster George Barna (from a book published in 2005): “As I have tracked people’s inclinations through our national research studies, I have concluded that by the year 2025, the spiritual profile of the nation will be dramatically changed. Specifically, I expect that only about one third of the population will rely upon a local congregation as the primary or exclusive means for experiencing and expressing their faith; one third will do so through alternative forms of a faith-based community; and one third will realize their faith through the media, the arts, and other cultural institutions.” He wrote that 17 years ago, and we are discovering that his conclusions were fairly accurate.

For those of us who have been part of a mainline denominational church for many years, we find meaning and purpose and nurture in an environment like this, which is terrific. And there are many seekers and unchurched folks who will find meaning and purpose and nurture in an environment like this and we welcome them wholeheartedly. We celebrate that God is here and is found here.

And at the same time, in today’s world, we need to become accustomed to honoring where people are on their journey (to meet them where *they are* on their journey, as Jesus did); and become comfortable with the reality that God may be meeting them someplace other than church as we understand it, and

then learn how to walk with people and perhaps even help them encounter Jesus in unexpected places.

For example... Diana Butler Bass, in her book *Grounded*, tells a lot of stories of unconventional gatherings and God-encounters people are having, and one of these is a gathering called “Garden Church” in San Pedro, CA—in the heart of Los Angeles. A group of people got together who are spiritual seekers, and they gathered around a common call and purpose: caring for creation and the environment. They actually meet around raised beds in a community garden to pray and worship God, do Bible study, and support one another, and (obviously) do a lot of creation care and support for local farming and feeding the poor with locally grown food and helping with environmental causes. That’s their church—gathered around a common purpose and calling. And, Jesus is there! “Wherever two are three are gathered in my name,” Jesus promised, “there I am in your midst,” right?

And btw, as I have been snooping around for these kinds of stories, I see more and more Christian *environmental* groups and new church developments around environmental issues popping up. This is a good thing! I’m a fan!

God makes a wonderful promise in Jeremiah 29:13: “If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.” The magi sought him with their whole hearts, and found him in an *unexpected* place. Simeon and Anna sought him with their whole hearts and found him too, in the *expected* place.

I’ve often pondered the journeys of Simeon and Anna: how did they recognize Jesus? I’m sure there were many babies brought into the temple every day. How did they know that this one was the promised Messiah? I don’t think Jesus had a halo around his head, or had a “I am the savior of the world” logo on his baby onesie. So, it’s amazing to me that Simeon and Anna knew that he was the one.

Well, Matthew gives us some clues: they were people who had been praying and waiting and watching and hoping. They were, as Jeremiah says, wholehearted in their seeking. They weren’t just going through the motions in the temple, doing their religious duty. They were hoping for something; waiting for something, praying for something. Just like the magi were certainly not going through the motions. They were searching, and when the right time opened up, they were given a sign to follow, and they had an openness of mind and heart to

see it, and obviously a desire of heart to seek after something bigger than themselves.

The good news of these journeys—of Simeon and Anna, and of the magi—is that Jesus meets us in any and every *place* of our lives, and also at any and every *time* of our lives. The magi perhaps represent the young seekers, on the move, following signs and overcoming obstacles in their searching. Simeon and Anna teach us that there are surprises and there is hope and purpose in our later years. And even when there is loss, and change. Luke wants us to know that Anna was a widow; and in her loss and life change she experienced the grace of God and became part of the story and shared the blessing.

That's meant to be an encouragement to us. God uses all of us, no matter where we are in our journey, or what's going on in our lives.

Finally, there is a reminder here about joy. This is a good reminder as we conclude the Christmas season and celebrate a new year. And communion.

For the magi, and for Simeon and Anna, their patience, their waiting, their journeying and searching, results in joy and gratitude.

For the magi—all of the preparations for many days’ journey, cold nights, no showers, fast food (or whatever they ate), the uncertainty of not knowing exactly where they are going and when they would arrive, perhaps hungry and tired and stinking to high heaven, they find Jesus and rejoice greatly (literally, Luke says they were “overwhelmed with joy”) and offer their gifts for a king.

They didn’t arrive, find Jesus in an unexpected place and say, “*Is this it?!? God as a baby appearing in an impoverished family, born in a barnyard?*” No, they offered praise and went home satisfied, and safely guided by God away from danger.

And think of the patience employed by Simeon and Anna: here are two people, waiting and hoping, for years, for the promised savior, and when they see him, Simeon—first—praises God, expresses his contentment, then he blesses Mary and Joseph. I love that part.

Anna does the same, and she is filled with joy and praise. We don’t see these praying saints encountering Jesus and saying, “Well, it’s about time! Finally! Rather, they are filled with joy. And I suspect that part of the reason is that they understood that the journey itself is as important as the destination. So they could be patient and prayerful, because they knew the graciousness of God who

was with them, and that God is faithful, that God keeps promises, and that God was their friend and companion—all of which are just as important as having their hopes fulfilled.

In these, and all the others who are part of the Christmas story, there is no cynicism. Their waiting and praying resulted in gratitude, and in joy.

May we be found seeking God with our whole heart; and may we be found rejoicing and praising God not only in our discovery of Emmanuel, God who is with us, but all along the way, in our journey of faith, hope and love in 2023.

What Star is This, with Beams so Bright