



Sermon by Pastor Tim O'Brien

January 1, 2017

Old Testament Lesson

Isaiah 60:1-6

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 2:9-12

Faith and Fear

A woman was driving home on an extremely foggy and rainy night. It was very difficult for her to see the road ahead. Barely seeing the taillights of another car in front of her that seemed to be going in her direction, she decided to follow it. Following the taillights made travelling on that dark road so much easier.

All of sudden the car in front of her came to stop. She began wonder what had happened, perhaps the car in front had hit an animal or broken down. Much to her alarm the car in front of her turned off its lights. In total darkness she began to worry which soon turned to anger. Why was this person stopping in the middle of the road and then turning off their lights, allowing total darkness to engulf her?

A knock on her window startled her. She looked up and there stood a man beside her car. She cracked the window open and asked the man what the problem was. The man replied by stating that that was the exact question he was going to ask her. She retorted that she was not the one who had stopped in the middle on the road and then turned off the lights. He then took his flashlight to reveal that she was in fact sitting in the middle of his driveway.

You know in life, we are all following something on our journey. This Sunday is called Epiphany, which means to reveal, on the church calendar, and it is a celebration of the coming of the magi. Those gentile, non-Jewish, astrologers who caught sight of a larger vision, who in seeing a star left their homes for at least an eight month journey – it was journey I'm sure they undertook with some fear of the unknown – but they ventured forth in faith to follow this star and worship the signs in the heavens that proclaimed a new king that had been born.

You see, in the year 7 B.C.E., which is when many scholars believe that Jesus was most likely born, the planets Jupiter and Saturn appeared very close together in the night sky, casting a bright glow similar to that of a single large star. The following year, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn were also closely aligned. Some scholars believe one of these two events produced the bright light in the sky the wise men followed when they came to Bethlehem two thousand years ago. And

you know the story. “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi or wise men, from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.’ But, when King Herod heard this he was frightened.”

For you see, the journey of the wise men is a journey of contrasts between fear or faith. The first person they meet is King Herod, someone who we don’t talk much about on this day. Herod -- at this point is a bitter old man, in the final year of his 41-year reign. He was king in name only. Everyone knew that. It was the Romans who really called the shots. Herod's job was to do the imperial dirty work, subduing a rebellious colony on behalf of the emperor. That task he performed with relish.

For you see, Herod was terrified of losing what power and control he had. During the course of his reign, Herod had at least nine wives and 14 children. In his 41 years of ruling, he ended up killing all nine wives and 11 of his children. It was only when Emperor Augustus intervened and ordered Herod to stop murdering his family or he would be next - that Herod finally stopped killing his family.

And each time, each murder - was done for one reason – fear. Herod was terrified they were plotting against him –whispering and plotting to take this throne. This is why after the Magi left, Herod out of fear that this new king born would threaten him ordered the deaths of every male baby in Bethlehem resulting in Jesus and his parents narrowly escaping to Egypt where Jesus spent a portion of his childhood.

Herod is our example of what fear does as it drives out the light and makes the world seem like it is closing in on us. And Herod stands as our example that there is another side to the Christmas story. I have shared this before of my experience of working in a movie theatre at a time in my life when working on Christmas Eve and Day and season was not a big deal for me. For the most part people were mostly happy, but there were those people who were overlooked but I could just tell needed someplace dark where they could be alone. I realize looking back that they were about as soul sick and hurting as I was. For the side of this season we don’t want to face, but is reality is that there are many who are hurting and fearful this time of year. The number of suicides hits a peak around Christmas day, the number of calls for domestic violence peaks around the end of this month. While we are more aware of the homeless and poor this time of year, they are

always out there hurting, struggling with no family and little long term support. This season is filled with people who experience it from the sidelines, those who are grieving, who have experienced deep loss, who struggle with depression as the darkness gets longer. Just like those souls I saw shuffle into a darkened movie theatre on Christmas Eve, they feel like outsiders to the joy of Christmas.

But what we come to celebrate this day is that the Magi didn't stop or get caught up in the darkness of Herod's fear and insecurity. For they continued on to experience the faith and light of Mary and Joseph – the faith of this couple where Mary proclaimed - a "Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word" –the faith of Joseph to take Mary to be his wife, when she became pregnant before they were married, in the face of great fear of what others might do to them or their baby. And so standing in the light of this couples faith, the magi came to behold the source of that light - one who was faith made flesh. The one who releases us from fear to hope. The one who came into our broken world to save it and redeem it.

What we celebrate this day is that a light has come into our world – a light greater than our fear – a light greater than our griefs – a light greater than our hurts. This is what the magi discovered they were ultimately following as they came and worshiped Jesus leaving by another way with joy in their hearts.

This is the light that we celebrate and we are called to share with joy in our hearts. There is a story told of two women who lived in poor communities and wanted to make a contribution but didn't know what to do. The first lady had a vision of helping the kids in the neighborhood. She said the vision that came to her was God instructing her to back her car out of the garage. She did. Next she decided that the open room in the garage could be made into a place to teach and nurture the neighborhood children. She invited them in, taught them about God and self-esteem, and nurtured their reading and writing abilities. Many years later those young people come back from leading successful lives and proclaim that the difference was in this wonderful woman who backed her car out of the garage and gave her love to kids who needed it.

The other woman not far away wanted to feed the homeless in the neighborhood and could not get a permit from the city. Watching the people needing food daily, she decided to go the way of the Nike slogan and "Just Do It." The city said she could not feed people out of the front of the house, so she set up benches in the backyard and fed 150 people a day. When the city called, she said

that it was not breaking the law: "These people are not homeless people or clients; they are my family. I always feed my family in the backyard of my home."

Both these woman lived in areas where there was a lot to fear – violence, crime, drugs, despair. And yet they refused to give into fear and they choose faith – they choose to stand up to fear and not let it dominate them as they choose to follow and let the light of Christ shine through them.

The point is that when we choose faith over fear and follow the light of Christ, we are changed and opened up to serve and love, to give and share in new and greater ways. The journey of the wise men shows us that by kneeling in front of the divine, we get a new direction as we become beacons of light and love. For each person we meet is a chance to share the light and each day we are given is a chance to celebrate.

So, on this first Sunday of the New Year, let's proclaim for this day and this whole year that the journey is just beginning as we declare that we will not give into fear or let fear rule our hearts for we choose to be a people of faith – That in 2017, We're going to celebrate what an unbelievable life we have had so far: the accomplishments, the many blessings, and, yes, even the hardships because they have served to make us stronger.

This is the year we quit worrying about what we don't have and really have no control over and start being grateful for all the wonderful things God has already given us and take control of the things we can change - ourselves. For the change we want to see always begins within us.

We'll remember that to worry is just a waste of time because our faith in God will give us strength and hope and a peace that passes all understanding.

Let us come with renewed strength for the journey ahead, because we know tomorrow is going to be new day, a new beginning, a new opportunity to focus on the wonder, majesty, and brilliant love of God that surrounds us as we follow hope, and follow love and let our light shine for all to see and be transformed. Amen