

January 1, 2017

Matthew 2:1-12

Fear Not: Stay Awake

Prayer —

Merry 8th day of Christmas! Just like the song, Christmas is 12 days long. So even though the Buckeyes lost yesterday, keep celebrating! You still have four more days.

January 6th is Epiphany - the day the three kings arrive to welcome the new baby - God named Jesus. In preparation for this, today our focus is on the kings - their journey, the obstacles they encounter, and how we might learn from the kings to fear not.

This month I am preaching a series of messages on the theme, Fear Not. It's one of the most repeated themes in the bible - from the Old Testament all the way through the New. Through prophets, priests, angels, and Jesus himself, God repeats, "Be not afraid. Fear Not. Do not fear." As we start 2017, there is much to be afraid of in the world around us. We live in a culture that perpetuates fear. But this is not God's message. Words to scare us are never, ever God's words. As people of faith, how do we learn to hear God's voice in the midst of all the other messages competing for our loyalty? How do we learn to trust God's voice when much of the air we breathe cautions us to be afraid of everything - institutions, leaders, other countries, our fellow citizens, even people of faith. Someone asked me if I would be preaching on this theme if the presidential election had turned out differently. I considered this, and my answer is yes. I started to plan this set of Fear Not messages in the fall after our bishop, Gregory Palmer, announced, "Fear Not" as the theme for all the United Methodist Churches in West Ohio. That planted the seed in my mind, and I started thinking about starting the New Year with focused attention on the Jewish Christian message to not be afraid. That as people of faith, our first and primary loyalty is to God and God's way is to choose love over fear. But that's easier said than done, and it's almost a cliché. Sure, most people can agree to love over fear. But what does this really look like? sound like? What actions do we take to practice love instead of fear? These are the thoughts I've been pondering. A Ted Talk this past fall by Rabbi Sharon Borus helped me organize my thoughts. This is the background to share how I came to a place to preach a series of four messages on Fear Not. While there are many things we can think and pray and do, I am focusing on four. Stay Awake. Community. Forgive. Hope. One every Sunday as we begin 2017 with God, each other, ourselves, and the world.

Today: Stay Awake.

Do you remember the super moon last November? It was the biggest, closest, brightest super moon of the year. Our family was at our farmhouse in Knox County during one of the super moon nights. I go to bed early, so I almost missed the moon - except that it was so big and so beautiful and so bright, my family got me up and took me outside to look at it. Out at the farm, far away from the city lights, the moon filled the entire sky. Even now, I can close my eyes and see that moon and remember exactly how it looked, where I was standing, the cool night air.

I wonder how the wise men saw the bright star shining in the East. Were they all awake into the night, star gazing? Or was one awake - it was his shift - and the star was so much that this time, this night, he had to wake the others up? Here is what I find remarkable. The star was so bright that the three wise men acted in a different way. For people of faith and people of conscience, to stay awake means to be aware of what is happening, and from this awareness be motivated to take action that is consistent with the values of faith. Anxiety is an expression of fear. Action is the antidote to anxiety.

In the gospel reading, we have two groups of people. Led by King Herod, one group acts from fear. Led by a star, one group acts from courage. We'll look at both, and see what we can learn that connects to our lives as we consider learning to live from courage instead of fear.

Ancient history recap: King Herod, Also called Herod the Great, ruled the area of what today is Israel and Palestine. While he was called a king, he really was an appointed ruler of a client state. A client state is a geographical area that is subordinate to a larger more powerful state. This was the time of the Roman

Empire. King Herod's job was to make sure his state paid taxes to Rome and was quiet enough to not cause Rome any trouble. Generally this wasn't too difficult. However, King Herod had to contend with the Jewish people who because of their faith were loyal to God before they were loyal to the government. Herod was always on the look out - for people who would undermine his authority, find favor with Rome and replace him. He was also on the look out for the Jewish people who occasionally tried to organize themselves against Herod. Like the Roman Empire, Herod led by fear. If people crossed him, they were severely punished, even killed. So it's no surprise that when King Herod hears rumors of a new born king of the Jews, he is frightened. Frightened for himself - he perceives this as a threat to his power, his reputation, his image. King Herod then frightens the leaders with him. When leaders and people are afraid, it is in some ways easier to rule them?

Herod led from fear. In secret, he asked the wise men to visit him to tell him about the star and the new king of the Jews. Then saying that he would visit the new baby and "Pay him homage." This was a lie - Herod's intention was to kill the new baby. Later, when King Herod learned that the wise men didn't tell him where the baby was born, he was infuriated - enraged. His response? To not have anyone threaten his job as the ruler of Judea, Herod ordered the slaughter of the innocents - the killing of all baby boys under the age of two. It's horrible!

This is leadership by fear. For Herod, his fear led him to frighten other leaders, operate in secrecy, lie, and in a fit of rage, order the murder of innocent people, causing untold suffering.

This is an extreme example of where fear can take us. However, being afraid can cause us to act in ways that hurt ourselves and others. Before Christmas, I was having lunch with a friend. As we were paying, we both saw a news on the overhead tv, reporting another attack Her mother is a devoted and lifelong Christian who lives in Tennessee. My friend made the comment, "My mother is so terrified she is afraid to go out of her house. I'm thankful she has a dog because she has to at least walk him two or three times a day." Thinking about these messages, I asked, "How does her faith help her to not be afraid?" My friend was quiet a moment and then said, "I don't know that anyone has asked her that question." This is a devoted life long Christian, active in church her whole life. I felt so sad- our faith needs to be alive and active enough to help us acknowledge the fear we feel and take steps to live differently if we so choose. Stay awake - a first step to action that starts to release fear.

The wise men can show us some ways to take this first step of wakefulness. What do we know about these wise men? They are magi - magicians - star gazers - and they are from the East - which means they are not Jewish. From the very beginning, the angel's words, "good news of great joy for all people" is true - God named Jesus is good news for all people - not some people - but all people - including magicians from another place who are not of the same religion as God named Jesus. The next thing we know about the wise men is that they take a long journey. They are curious - they gather information and stop to ask for directions. They don't know exactly where they are headed and still they start the journey. Think about that - starting a journey without an actual destination. Google maps wouldn't work! A journey that begins without an actual destination. To try to explain this, I offer a story from Peter Rawlins who wrote How (Not) to Speak of God. The story goes like this. "A young traveller is busy preparing his horse for a long and arduous journey. As he packs his few possessions an old friend approaches and asks, "Where are you going?" Without looking up, the traveller quietly replies, "Away from here." After a short pause his friend repeats the question and again the traveller responds by saying, "I am going away from here." Finally the friend exclaims, "I already know that you are leaving, but what is your destination?" In response the traveller stops what he is doing and looks directly into the eyes of his companion. "I have already told you my destination, dear friend. It is away from here." (p. 6)

When a journey has a known destination, maybe it isn't a journey. Maybe it's a trip or a vacation or a visit. For people of faith and conscience, seeking to live from love and not fear, maybe the journey is the destination. Away from fear and towards ... what?

The wise men have courage - they ignore King Herod's request to give him information. This has huge consequences - the death of many innocents. Courage - from the root word "COUR" - means heart. The wise men are heart people — and remember that in the Jewish Christian religions, heart is a metaphor for the place within us that connects our whole being - mind, spirit, body - all connect to the heart and act from the heart. The place of courage.

To stay awake means to have courage. To take a journey that is itself the destination.

This is not something that God asks any of us to do alone. God promises to be with us always - here and now - and God gives us each other - community - which is what we'll talk about next Sunday.