**Where is the Child?**

Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

 “Where is the child? According to Matthew that is the question asked by the three wise men from the East? It is an old and ancient question, one that has taken many familiar forms. Where do I find meaning in life? Where do I go to encounter the sacred, that deep sense of connection with God and all that exists? Where do I find the assurance of being loved? Where do I find the hope that there will be justice in this world? Where can I find lasting peace? All of these familiar and ancient questions are summed up in the question posed by the wise men to leaders of Jerusalem, “Where is the child?”

According to Matthew the wise men have gotten a bit off course. You can hardly blame them. Whenever people call and ask directions for Cherokee Park United Church, I generally am able to provide very specific directions that bring them to the church without any problems. However, some folks never call and instead rely on MapQuest. Folks relying on MapQuest are as likely to end up near Humboldt High school at the home of Mary and Tom Murphy as they are at Cherokee Park United. Somehow MapQuest is unable to figure out the unique street grid that we have here on the West Side. Sooner or later they call. For the wise men, following the star is a bit like relying on MapQuest for a West Side destination.

 Matthew’s Gospel is, of course, written with the intent of letting people of his day, and fortunately ours as well, know what it means to engage these ancient religious questions of faith. “Where do I find peace? Where do I find hope and love? Where do I find God? ” In following the wise men on this off course, zig zag route, Matthew makes

it more than clear that there is no straight line answer to these questions. If you are looking for a faith that gives easy, simple answers to life’s problems, provides unambiguous directions to the challenges we face, offers absolute certainty about what direction to go, than according to the story Matthew tells, Christianity is not for you.

 Recently I heard Billy Graham’s son, Franklin, speak about how God was against homosexuality. According to Franklin Graham the Scripture, and therefore God, has drawn a straight line about this matter. Apparently Franklin Graham has never traveled with the three wise men on their circuitous route to Bethlehem.

 Although, the journey of the wise men is anything but direct, Matthew does make it clear we are offered guidance as we engage these deep questions of faith, centered on the singular question, “where is the child?” One source of guidance is Scripture. But, unlike Franklin Graham and many who share his straight line approach to faith, Matthew offers an approach to Scripture that is narrative rather than prescriptive. Rather than providing specific answers to all of life’s dilemmas and questions, Matthew draws upon the Hebrew Scripture to tell a story about how we go about engaging questions of faith in every age. This is a common practice of Matthew. More than any other Gospel writer Matthew turns to the Hebrew scripture in order to tell a story that connects this promised child with the prophetic hopes and dreams of Israel; found in their sacred text.

 In today’s lesson, Matthew draws upon Isaiah who anticipates the day when Kings will come bearing gifts of gold and frankincense. Apparently, Matthew throws in myrrh just for good measure. According to Garison Keilher, myrrh is a special type of hot dish found only in Minnesota. Like Keilher, Matthew is a good story teller. He draws upon Biblical images to create a narrative, which we too might enter, asking “how am I like those three wise men?” How am I like the people of Jerusalem who are afraid of having such questions of faith asked so openly and honestly? How am I like Herod who draws upon the tradition of faith, not as a source of guidance, but to protect his own self-interest and that of the Roman Empire?” For Matthew, the resource of Scripture is narrative rather than prescriptive. It offers guidance rather absolutes. Rather than a laser beam, it shines a broad light of God’s love, leaving the responsibility up to us to ask questions as we engage the journey of faith.

 A second source of guidance for Matthew comes from the awareness that the questions of faith raised by the child they seek are universal questions. The wise men from the East come from their own faith traditions and return to their own faith traditions. Matthew tells us nothing about their conversion. All we are told is that they pay homage, which is the deepest expression of respect, to this Child in whom they encounter the very essence of these profound questions of faith. Imagine if Christians worldwide were to offer the same respect to the people who follow the path of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Indigenous traditions, such as those followed by our Dakota brothers and sisters in Minnesota. Matthew tells us a story that invites us to see our mutual searching as a resource and a gift as we seek the presence and the guidance of the sacred.

 A third source of guidance is found in the capacity of Matthew’s story to challenge our faulty assumptions about where truth and meaning is found. When the three wise men go to Jerusalem they are operating on the common assumption that if you want answers to important questions than you need to go to the places of power and authority. You need to seek out important people, knowledgeable experts, those with influence and resources. Matthew redirects us from this common and all too familiar assumption by sending the wise men to a small out of the way town called Bethlehem. If you think the only way to engage meaningful questions is if your name is on the front page of the daily paper, Matthew tells an all together different story.

 A fourth source of guidance provided by Matthew in this circuitous journey of faith is found in the gifts brought by the three wise men for the child. If we are on a journey of faith, if we are truly engaging deep questions about the source of love, hope, peace, justice for ourselves and for the world, than something is expected of us. This has nothing to do with the prosperity gospel notion of giving money to God so that God will bless you with even more money. The gold, frankincense and myrrh are gifts of the heart from people who know that truth faith is never for spectators. It is about giving of ourselves, investing ourselves, opening our hearts and yes our wallets because we are committed to this journey of faith. Love, peace, justice, hope, forgiveness, never happen by people passively standing on the sidelines watching someone else. They are discovered in all their fullness when people care enough to invest themselves, like the wise men, offering the best of who we are.

 A fifth source of guidance is found in the readiness of the wise men to never be deterred by the challenges, the obstacles, the seemingly impossible odds that can come our way. When President Obama gave a speech before Christmas addressing the issue of income inequality in our country and in the world, he was essentially asking the question “Where is the Child?” Where is the source of justice? When folks gather outside of Ramsey County jail, giving witness to the need for immigration reform and holding in prayer those who are imprisoned, they are asking the question, “Where is the child?” When people in Detroit challenge corporate and government policies that have left their city in desperate straits, they are asking “Where is the child?”

 It comes as no surprise that there is often fear, resistance and sometimes violence provoked whenever the question is asked. Matthew tells us that King Herod pretends to be interested in the question so that he can kill the dream, put an end to the hope of justice in the very cradle of its existence. But according to Matthew neither Herod nor anyone else is able to kill off the presence of God, given birth whenever and wherever the question is asked. Where is the child? If the road to knowing God’s love is blocked, the road to peace is blocked, the road to justice is blocked, the road to wholeness is blocked, God will show us another way. “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road”. That is the narrative Matthew offers. We are invited to find our lives and our world in this story.

 It is an ancient question. Where is the child? Wherever and whenever this question is asked, the light of God’s love continues to shine.

**Isaiah 60:1-6**

*In our first lesson the prophet Isaiah offers encouragement to people who have returned from Exile in Babylon and face the overwhelming task of rebuilding the once beautiful city and temple of Jerusalem. They feel inconsequential, as if nothing they do will make any difference. Isaiah calls upon them to lift their heads and arise for God is at work with a promise of God’s love and justice that will be extended to the whole world.*

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you. Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from far away, and your daughters shall be carried on their nurses' arms.
Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you. A multitude of camels shall cover you,  the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord.

**Matthew 2:1-12**

*In our second lesson Matthew tells the story of three wise men from the East who come in search of the child that they understand will be the fulfillment of the hopes and dreams articulated by prophets like Isaiah. Their question seems innocent enough. “Where is the child?” But, it is a question that raises fear with the people and ultimately violence from those with power.*

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