

JOURNEY BY NIGHT

Matthew 2:1-12

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
First Congregational Church (UCC) of Colorado Springs

December 24, 2010 ~ Christmas Eve

I.

I've always loved the night. One of my favorite memories is of a summer rain at night. I remember lying on my pad next to an open window. The first thing I noticed was a smell, the smell of the gathering moisture mixed with the dusty earth. Then a sound: pat, pat, pat, pat. At first I could count them, and then there were too many. The droplets splutter splattered off the window sill next to me, dabbing my face with the warm rain of summer. I breathed as I smiled and I smiled as I breathed in and out, in an out, in and out. My body glowed and time stood still. In timeless ecstasy, I tried to fight off sleep. I never wanted that feeling to go away.

I awoke at dawn. The rain had stopped and the earth now steamed. The sky was completely clear and the hustle and bustle in the neighborhood was growing. It was time to get up. There was much to do now that dawn had broken.

That was a long time ago and much has happened since. But I have never lost my love for the night. For it was the night that gave me a glimpse of the most beautiful sight, a sight that haunts my nights with wonder even now.

II.

Who am I? I am called a "Magus," one of several "Magi", or "wise ones." Initially, these names were meant to make fun. They called us "dreamers" and "know it alls" because we studied the stars and asked unanswerable questions, which we thought were the most important questions to ask. Perhaps we *were* dreamers and perhaps we *did* think we knew better than most. But truth be told, the more we learned, the less we understood. One thing we *did* know: there is much more to this life than work and war and wealth and wisdom.

So we spent most of our time preparing for a journey. We did not know exactly where it would lead us, nor whether we would ever return. But we did know that if we were going to draw closer to what we were looking for, we would soon need to get up and go. The truth was not going to come to us. We needed to go out and follow it in order to find it.

When we first saw the star rising in the west, it was on a midsummer's eve as the sun left the sky. As the greater and the lesser light switched positions, we watched and waited. The light of that star pulsed red then blue then silver. I don't know how else to say this, but the star beckoned, and we had to respond. In the iridescent light of that star, we loaded our camels and horses. We roused our assistants and left notes for our families. We have been summoned, we wrote, and had to leave this very night. I remember looking in on my newborn child, wondering if I would see her again.

I kissed her forehead, wet with the heat of that summer night. I smelled the spice of her obsidian hair and whispered, “I don’t know why, but I do this for you.”

III.

By the time we were ready, the eastern horizon was aglow with the prospect of dawn. Anxious for the journey, and seeking to avoid the complexities of a prolonged goodbye, we set out toward the West, toward the great sea, in search of the star now lodged in our eyes.

It was noon when we decided to halt our caravan in the shaded cleft of a large rock. It was too hot to continue and, without the star as our guide, we did not know where we were going. After all, we worried, if our journey is astray by 1 degree now, we will find ourselves 100 miles amiss in a week. Overheated and underwatered, we decided then to travel only by night and to go to sleep at dawn. For it was only at night, when all was not bright, that we might glimpse the star.

After the sun set on that first day, we started out again, but we weren’t so sure. Was that the star in the sky ahead of us or just our memory of it?” All of us could see it, we reasoned, so it must be real, but I have to admit I could also see it when I closed my eyes, and the light did not diminish as long as I had them closed. Nevertheless, our journey had begun, and we were together, so we journeyed on, until dawn, when we found a grove of cypress trees and a small stream to water the animals.

This is how it went for weeks, waking as the light diminished, walking through the dark, following the light of a star that might no longer exist, if it ever existed in the first place. And we would make our camp as the daylight grew, sleeping through the heat and activity of the day. We did this, day in and day out, day out and day in, for months.

IV.

At some point along the way, we decided that our destination would be the place known as the City of David and Mount Zion, the city of Jerusalem. We had become convinced the star was leading us to someone great and powerful, to someone possessing extraordinary wisdom and might. We concluded, perhaps too soon, that the King in Jerusalem was either our goal or our final guide. We were half right.

Upon arriving in Jerusalem, we started asking around, “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.” The people in the city were friendly but clearly shaken by our question. “There is only one king that we know of,” they told us, “and that is Herod. Good luck gaining an audience with him.”

You can understand, then, how amazed and excited we were when Herod himself called us to him one night. But he did not call us to his palace. Rather, his servants brought us to a small structure at the edge of the city. It was as if he did not want to be seen speaking to us. Something felt wrong from the first moment we were in his presence. A voice in my head told me, “Whatever you are looking for, you won’t find it here.”

He spoke to us as if trying to be kind, but he sat on his soft cushions and never gestured for us to rest, nor offered even a cup of water. He nodded as if trying to be respectful, as we told our story in *his* language with our own accent, but we could tell he wasn't really listening. I could sense even then that he saw us only as a means to an end, his own end. "Bethlehem," he said, "that's where you need to go. 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."

We left Herod's presence laden with the weight of disappointment. And since when had it gotten so cold? This king was just like the kings of our homeland, puffed up and pious, never questioning their rightness nor their absolute authority. We had come all this way only to be shown a king like every other, and he was sending us where? Bethlehem? Who ever heard of Bethlehem? That's no city, just a shepherds' town. No. Why bother? Let's go home and let's begin our journey this very night.

V.

But then we saw it. Standing there in the road, resolved to failure, our spirits sunken in deep darkness, we saw it. The star. Now lower on the horizon, it pulsed and beckoned again. Struggling to contain our excitement, so as not to attract the attention of the king, we set out, with the star ahead of us, and it led us to (could Herod have been right?) the town of Bethlehem.

And in that dark, shy town, with so few lights of its own, the star seemed to hover over a particular place, not a palace, but over a small house carved into a hillside. Now I know it doesn't make much sense to say that a star hovered over a particular place on earth, let alone a single house. Stars are, after all, not up in the sky. They are beyond what we call "sky." They are in the great beyond. And yet, as sure as anything, this star seemed to linger here, in this place. It seemed to stop and then we realized: we have arrived. We did not yet know what we would find in that humble place, but we *did* know that, whatever it was, this was the end of our journey.

We entered the small home with smiles of anticipation on our faces and with giggles of joy quivering through our bodies. My eyes adjusted to the faint lamp light and I noticed a young child in the arms of his mother. When we saw them, without knowing exactly why, each of us fell: thump, thump, thump, thump. Our knees hit the soft earthen floor.

While this was a familiar scene, a child at home with his mother, I could not help but trust that this child was the one we had been searching for, this was the one the *world* had been waiting for. A different kind of king, not even a king, really. An anti-king who would expose the present powers of this world, saying, "Get over yourselves. You're really not all that you claim be." In that moment, I trusted that this one would reveal the nature of existence itself, the very personality of God, a God who refuses to play the games that divide us, a God who refuses to coerce or harm, a God who refuses to do anything but to love, to love what is closest and most familiar, and to love, every bit as much, what is other and most strange.

We gave our gifts, gifts we had brought for a king - gold that grants wealth, frankincense that adds austerity to a throne room, and myrrh to embalm a royal body.

I'm not sure they were the right gifts, but I was sure that this child could receive and transform any gift rightly given. I know this because the child played with these precious and expensive gifts as if they were toys. He shook the pieces of gold and was more interested in the box than the coins themselves. He broke the incense, releasing its regal odor into that ordinary room. He opened the jar of myrrh and made a mess as if mocking death and saying "I will not wait until my deathbed to be anointed."

For hours, we played and prayed, whispering our blessings and well wishes to the mother and her child. It was now late and the child had fallen asleep. The mother offered us the floor for us to rest and we said yes. I dreamed that it was time to go home and remembered that another child awaited me there. And I dreamed a warning, "Forget old Herod. He's up to no good. Go home, but by another road."

VI.

We rose before sunrise and gathered our things. The child was still asleep. We took turns saying goodbye, but without sadness. As I leaned over to kiss him, I closed my eyes and smelled his hair. It was as if I was already home.

Having journeyed to Bethlehem by night, we now returned by day, with the greater light rising in our eyes. After a long journey home, we arrived at night. My little girl was already asleep: "My, how she's grown over these months." I bent over to pick her up. She stirred, but now lay sleeping in my arms. I leaned over and kissed her head. Her hair shown like dark gold and smelled like frankincense and myrrh. This too, I thought, is the child. Now, the journey is over.

*Some say that the sun never does go down;
They say it's the world going round and round;
So even now in the middle of the night,
The sun is shining bright, and I think they're right.*

*Everyone says that it's news to them,
That a beautiful light could shine on Bethlehem;
Everyone, everyone, everyone, everyone,
Everyone says that it's news to them.*

*But here in the night, it's such a beautiful sight
Under in the sky;
Light shinin' down, on this common ground
New baby cry.
That's why we followed that faraway light
That's why we traveled only at night.*

· Refrain, verse, and chorus from "Only at Night," music and lyrics by Matthew Myer-Boulton.