

WGUMC January 6, 2019 “Flunking Christmas”
Matthew 2:1-12

I’m in my 30th year of ministry. You’d think that I’d have an advanced degree in Christmas by now. But in so many ways, I flunked Christmas 2018. From the moment I started studying for finals in early December, I started falling behind. The Christmas gifts I had bought for my family back in July and hid in a safe place I couldn’t find. I looked under every bed and in every box. I cleaned every cupboard. I rummaged through every closet and searched every square inch of the garage. I found several things that had been missing, but no presents. Then I got sick and couldn’t sing my favorite Christmas carols. Then I broke the porcelain figurine of Scrooge’s workshop that I bought for the Christmas Carol labyrinth walk. My daughter came home from college and burned the Christmas cookies. And after we all left for Colorado, I get a text that the Christmas tree fell over. While at my parents’, I tripped over my sister’s dog and landed hard on the kitchen floor, messing up my

knee and back. By then, I was wondering, “Is God trying to tell me something?”

Have you ever asked yourself that? Have you ever thought that there must be some heavenly warning sign that you didn’t see? Well, it turns out that, according to the front page of the Merc on December 21st, there was indeed a “rare and heavenly ‘cosmic coincidence.’” And I didn’t even notice it. The article called it a “celestial trifecta”: the winter solstice on Friday, a full moon on Saturday and a meteor shower throughout the weekend. But an astronomer was quoted saying that this unusual concurrence was of “no scientific significance whatsoever.”

Maybe so, but celestial events have often been given great spiritual significance, like the star of Bethlehem in our story this morning. Scholars sometimes like to amuse themselves by trying to figure out what this phenomenon really was. A star? A comet? A planetary conjunction? A supernova? Or perhaps something called a

“double occultation”? The last one is common enough and has a particular meaning for astrology.

The magi from the east in the Gospel of Matthew were astrologers. For them the heavens were full of signs and those signs had meaning. Whatever it was that they saw, they took it as a sign that something historic had happened, someone very special had been born, and somewhere a new world was about to begin.

We are not astrologers, but that’s no excuse for missing all the signs that something historic has happened, a new life has come and a new world has invaded our old one. I may have missed my star this Christmas, but I can still learn a lot from the stargazers. From their journey far from home we can pick up some important travel tips for our journey back home.

Tip #1: To get home, to get back to God, we have to get up and go. The magi had to travel to see where the star would lead. So why do we think that we will ever arrive where we want to be if we aren’t willing to leave where we are right now? This has lots of

applications in our personal lives and relationships and for this church and its ministries. We have a congregational meeting coming up at the end of the month, and we'll talk about that.

Tip #2: Know the purpose of your journey. The magi were looking for a newborn king. Do we know what or whom we are looking for? Because if we don't, we surely won't find it. I spent way too much time looking for Christmas presents when I could have been seeking Christ's presence. Let that be a lesson to all of us.

Tip #3: Look for signs. The magi saw a star, but they had to look up to see it. Did God hide my gifts? Did God make me sick? Of course not. But life has a way of telling us things. Our bodies send us signals, and we should get out of our own heads, our own agendas once in a while, look up and take notice.

Tip #4: Ask directions. The King Herods of the world have access to important information. Take what is useful and reject the rest. Be on alert for lies and deception and remember, you don't

owe Herod anything so don't share any information that could bring harm to anyone. That goes for in-laws as well as immigration laws.

Tip #5: If you're going to drop in on the Son of God, be sure to bring a gift. Gold, frankincense and myrrh seem like strange gifts to bring to a baby shower, but the church fathers took each of these gifts as a sign for something else. For Gregory the Great, gold was a sign of wisdom. "Precious treasure remains in the house of the wise." (Proverbs 21:20). Frankincense was a sign of prayer. "Let my prayer be counted as incense before you." (Psalm 141:2) And myrrh, one of the spices that Nicodemus brought to the tomb in John 19, was a sign of sacrifice and redemptive suffering. Gregory writes:

And so do we too offer gold to the newborn king if we shine in his sight with the brightness of the wisdom from on high. We too offer him incense if we enkindle on the altar of our hearts the thoughts of our human minds by our holy pursuit of prayer, so as to give forth a sweet smell to God by our heavenly desire. And we offer him myrrh if we mortify the vices of our bodies by our self-denial. [*Ancient Christian Commentators series*]

Though it isn't trending these days, self-denial is healthy for spirits and bodies. I think I should carry around with me a bag of myrrh as I start to try to shed those holiday pounds in the coming weeks!

Tip #6: Don't travel the same old road because you are no longer the same person. The magi encountered the Son of God. So they were not the same people heading home as they were when they headed out. They were warned in a dream not to return to Herod and went home by another road.

If we want to get home to God, we can't keep going back to the Herods in our lives, we can't keep returning to the lies, the deceptions, the lust for power and privilege that Herod represents. If we live long enough in Silicon Valley, we reach a point when we realize that we have to take another road because we can't get to the kingdom of God on this one.

I thought I was flunking Christmas, but then I remembered that God doesn't hand out grades, only grace. It happened during the candlelight service. Because the cold had taken my voice, I had

asked others to read at 9 pm on Christmas Eve. So Joyce Osborn read my favorite scripture of the season from the Gospel of John. I didn't find Christmas, but Christmas found me when she so eloquently read, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." [John 1:14] I had finally quit searching for gifts long enough to receive one. I got my joy. Thank you, Joyce.

Once again, Christmas comes to us in spite of us. And I'm really glad that Christmas is twelve days long so that we pastors have a little more time to figure that out. But the Christmas season is over now. Today is Epiphany. The word means "manifestation," and I'm thinking about what was made manifest to me during Christmas, what wisdom was given to me that I can take with me into the new year.

The wise guys from the east have one more travel tip for us. What strikes me most about this story is how the magi reacted to the news of Jesus' birth. Not surprisingly, Herod reacted with fear.

People in power are always afraid of losing their power. But the magi even though they were foreigners were not filled with fear. They were filled with desire. And when they finally found the one they were seeking, it wasn't fear that overwhelmed them, but joy.

All of us are embarking on a journey called 2019. The question is: are we going to be motivated by fear, by our worry about what might happen to us and to our family, friends, church, community, or country in this coming year? Or are we going to be driven by the desire to know what is possible for us, by the longing to experience the joy of meeting Jesus? Like me, you may have nearly flunked Christmas, but we can still ace the new year. The magi say, "Look up. Wise up. Rise up. Your light has come. Your star is waiting. Be on your way." We'd better pray.