

“The In-Between”

Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
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Luke 2:20-21

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Matthew 2:1-8

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."

In the year 1480, Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned to paint an 8-by-9-foot work for the main altar of the San Donato a Scopeto monastery. He started his “Adoration of the Magi” and was well along with it, but then skipped town, went to Milan and never finished it. In da Vinci’s unfinished work of the Magi, there is a lesson for us today.

Today, on this first Sunday after Christmas, we are in the “in-between” time – between the start of our work, and the finish of our work. Today, on this one Sunday between Christmas and New Year’s Day, we are in-between our cultural celebrations. Today, on this Sunday between Christmas and Epiphany, we are in the middle of our journey, celebrating the birth of the child Jesus, and still searching for that epiphany, that revelation, of Christ to the world. Christ is born; one celebration is complete; now what? We have begun our celebration, begun our search; how will our journey continue during the in-between?

If we are to be faithful disciples of Jesus – the baby, the man, and the Christ – then we have to learn to be like the magi, not like da Vinci, and finish what we begin, and persevere during the in-between.

Who are those magi, the wise-men, or the “three kings” from the “orient”, according to our well-known Christmas carol? Most nativity scenes show the Magi crowded into the stable of Jesus’ birth – along with the shepherds, animals, an angel, Mary, Joseph, and the baby – but the Magi were almost certainly *later* visitors, coming perhaps as long as two years after Jesus’ birth. By then, Joseph had no doubt found better lodging for his family, which is probably why Matthew says the wise men entered “the house” instead of the stable to find Jesus. These magi were also not kings – the term magi refers to interpreters of dreams, fortune-tellers, astrologers who could read signs in the stars and planets. We do not know how many there were, but tradition refers to “three wise-men” because we have three gifts listed – gold, frankincense, and myrrh. We don’t know what they knew about the Hebrew Scriptures, but *something* told them that the star they observed in the sky was for the newborn King of the Jews. And so of course they go to Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world, to find this child. However, Jerusalem is also now the place where the Jews were currently governed by a gentile, Roman-senate-appointed “king,” King Herod the Great. Herod knows that in the Jewish perspective, he has no tie to the line of King David, and so is an illegitimate king. When people from outside the Roman world come asking about the *legitimate* king of the Jews, he gets a little antsy, and so does everyone who benefits from his rule, including Roman officers and their Jewish partners in Jerusalem. In the midst of their journey to honor a child, the magi almost certainly stirred up a lot of anxiety in the Roman world.

But they kept to their task, traveled to Bethlehem, and, as we celebrate next week at Epiphany, recognized the child Jesus as king of the Jews and honored him as such with kingly gifts. They finished what they set out to do.

But Leonardo da Vinci didn’t. Da Vinci *started* one of the most famous paintings portraying the visit of the Magi, and he worked on it for quite a while, getting the piece to its

brown ink and yellow ocher groundwork stage. But then he moved to Milan and left it behind, never to work on it again. Eventually the commission was given to another artist who provided the requested painting to the monastery. Da Vinci's unfinished work still exists and is on display in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Though uncompleted, it is recognized in the art world as one of his most important works.

Wouldn't it be great if our unfinished projects were also considered very important in their uncompleted states? Imagine all the stuff you could let go of, saying, "It's not finished and now it never will be, but it's got high value nonetheless."

Well that's almost certainly *not* going to happen...to start with, not many of us can rival da Vinci in terms of genius and artistry. But even if we could, do we really want our contributions to the world to be in the form of stuff we started but never got around to completing?

Da Vinci himself had a reputation as being unreliable at completing commissioned works. He would devote months to the concept and composition of the work, but he had no appetite for the actual labor of carrying out the painting itself. For the "Adoration of the Magi," there might have actually been good reasons not to finish, since the payment he would receive and the expense he would have needed to put in himself might not have matched up very well. The point is, for whatever reasons, da Vinci never finished the portrayal of the Magi adoring Jesus. The Magi finished their work of adoration; da Vinci didn't. **What about us?**

Usually, it's not that we don't plan to finish, or even that once into a project, we make a reasoned decision to let the thing go, which sometimes is the better part of wisdom. Rather, with those things we think important to finish, we still have to deal with decreasing energy and/or unexpected obstacles. Sometimes it's almost as if some chaotic force is triggered when we're within sight of the finish line. Think about some examples:

--You plan to write a really *great* paper for school next time, and start far in advance. You even have a good idea. But then other homework takes more time than expected, and baseball practice

starts again, and by the time you get started on the paper, there's only enough time to do something simple that's just good-enough.

--You finally start the kitchen remodeling project, but then the sump pump fails and you have to deal with a flooded basement. The money for the remodeling project disappears, and you never get back to it.

-You vow to spend more time helping your son with his homework, but then you're pressed into longer hours at work.

-You've been working in your community to establish a shelter for the abused. Just as it seems you've finally gotten popular support for the idea, your attention to the project starts to wander.

-You resolve to be more intentional about your devotional and prayer life, so you rearrange your schedule to allow yourself a half hour of quiet time at home. But just as you are getting into your prayers, the first of three telemarketing calls interrupts, then you remember a really important email you *have* to send before six o'clock, then the kid next door rings the doorbell asking you to buy candy for her school fundraiser.

Where does the time and energy go?

Some of these are things in our daily worlds in which we have to choose certain priorities. But if we want to be faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, that means following through on intended good deeds, missions to which we are called and resolutions to let go of prejudices and hatreds. It means doing the right thing *long-term* and following Jesus as consistently as we can in the situations of daily living.

In these things, it's not uncommon for us to make a good start and, in some cases, even make a lot of headway toward where we think God is pointing us. But then, we shouldn't be surprised if that's when a fresh wave of problems and hindrances hits us. We shouldn't be surprised if things that have never gone wrong before go wrong. We also shouldn't be surprised if our passion for the project suddenly evaporates. Life is like that.

In light of that, one prayer for our ongoing discipleship might be, “Help me, O God, while my enthusiasm is leaking away and my energy is failing and problems are multiplying, to continue to show your love.”

The signs of our being *Christians*, followers and disciples of Christ, are not just using that label, not just attending church, and not even being able to quote the Bible and tell others with confidence what it says. One of the best signs of following Christ is a continued commitment to searching for God and acting with love in all things, and persevering in the face of obstacles and flagging enthusiasm. As Paul told the Galatians, “So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

Paul, of course, modeled such perseverance, dedicating his life to traveling, teaching, and building up communities to teach them about God’s great love. For Paul, a life of perseverance and following Christ is *more* than about completing a mission project or seeking more spirituality in living; it means the completion of a whole life of discipleship. But how do we attain a life of discipleship other than by completing the “faith projects” along the way? Think about the Magi whose example we follow in worshiping Christ the baby – do you think this long journey is their one act of worship, their one act of seeking and following God? The Bible verses don’t *tell* us any more, but I would guess that such a dedication was not random, not unique. I would bet that it was simply one big instance in a *life-long* search to seek direction towards what is good, and right. They sought it in the stars and in dreams, and God spoke to them there. Think about the shepherds in Luke’s gospel. God spoke to them, and they followed. The scripture says, “And then they returned,” still acting out their worship. They returned, “glorifying and praising God” as they went. Their acts as followers of Jesus the Christ were only just beginning.

The life of faith is not a tourist jaunt; it’s an ongoing pilgrimage, stopping at all the ordinary places of our lives along the way. There are some projects en route – such as sticking with the not-so-easy task we feel God has called us to do, such as continuing to root out our unrighteous attitudes and behaviors that impede our spiritual growth, such as continuing to work at loving our difficult neighbor as much as we love ourselves.

As we stand here in the in-between – at the start of our own adoration, right before the cultural new year, it's a good time to think about the faith-projects before us.

--What's the project you are struggling with?

--What has God called you to do that is suddenly seeming to fall apart?

--What last-stage problems are reminders to call afresh on God?

--In the coming year, how can you build accountability into your life to encourage faithful discipleship of God's love?

We are in-between – we are on the journey, seeking the Christ, like the Magi. Seek God in love and with perseverance, continuing this journey glorifying and praising God.

Amen.

(Note: some of the wording and the idea behind this sermon come from homileticsonline.com, "Adoration of the Magi", Jan 6 2013).