
Courage of the Magi

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Christmas 2 – Year B

There's been some good news going around—that a savior is born, that a new king is here, that God is with us. It's such big news that it's reached all the way to the distant lands of the East—and to the ears, and hearts, of some magi there, court priests who practice astrology and probably magic. And it's such big news, that these well-to-do pagans set out on a journey to check it out for themselves, in the flesh.

Spurred by hope, they leave behind everything—their homes and loved ones, their status, the world and the competencies they know—to become seekers themselves: outsiders, dependent on others, and on a star, for direction. When they finally make it to Jerusalem a couple *years* later, they stick out like a sore thumb, everything about them screaming “tourist!” Vulnerable and lost, they look out for locals with friendly faces, and inquire in broken Hebrew where they might find the newborn king.

Herod, the not-so-friendly current king of the Jews, gets wind of this, and he feels threatened, and frightened. He's got a good thing going for himself; and he's not about to let some start-up boy-king mess it up. So he sidles up to the magi and asks them to find the baby for him—so he can, you know, “pay him homage.”

When the star finally brings the magi face-to-face with the Messiah, they're overwhelmed by joy. By exceedingly great joy. And these honored, esteemed men kneel down before this lowly child, and honor him, and give him precious gifts—gifts whose names he can't begin to pronounce, and whose meaning he'll understand only much later. Then, still overcome by joy, and having been warned in a dream to avoid Herod, they “leave for their own country by another road,” a new road, forever transformed.

The magi, you see, are pilgrims, seekers, willing to be foreigners, outsiders, beginners—to go out in faith, and to discover the how and why and where of their going along the way. And these foreigners—these *outsiders*—have something to teach us about the life of faith, which is a life of seeking. Faith-filled seeking. Faith seeking faith.

After all, we too have heard the good news, that Christ is here, that the Messiah has come to bring us peace and deliver us from sin and heal our hearts and our world. But do we dare believe it? Do we dare chase after it? Do we dare go down a new road, and search for the living God, and be changed by what we find? Do we have the courage to leave behind what we think we know, and what seems to work for us, and begin again?

During the beauty and excitement of the Christmas season, it's easy to answer, “Yes!” But what happens after December 25? What happens when the presents and visitors and good food—and those precious days off—are all gone?

After the anticipation of Christmas, after all of the talk of peace and joy and the world-changing birth of Jesus Christ, I sometimes look around, and wonder, “Is this it? Is this the new kingdom? I still see Herod's violent fear wielding way too much power! I still see poverty and war, racism and sexism. I still see broken families, abused children, homeless teenagers—so much suffering.”

At times, I've had trouble reconciling this world I see with the good news we've been celebrating. And this has made me uneasy. Even afraid. Do you know this feeling? Have you felt this tension, too? If so, then you also know the choice it presents us. We can close ourselves off to the world and to anything, or anyone, that threatens our convictions—our

certainty; or we can venture into the world, in faith, looking boldly, expectantly, for the incarnation of God's promise even in the most surprising people and places: in the person sleeping on a stoop across the street; in a struggling child, or your least favorite relative, or the dark corners of your own soul. At the office, school, hospital, even prison.

I've been involved in prison ministry for a few years now, and I'm often asked: "How did you get into it? Aren't you scared? Isn't it depressing?" Well, I'll never really understand how I got into it, because we rarely see where God is leading us until we're there. But I do know that it had something to do with the kind of longing and hope we see in the magi—with the desire to check out the power of the good news myself. And it had something to do with God's rather inconvenient habit of pushing me out onto the stage of my fears: into the very places I feared I couldn't handle; the places I feared God would not show up; the places, I feared, might expose the limits of God's power and mercy.

But I've got more good news: I've seen, over and over, that my fears have been unfounded; that there's nowhere God is not present and Lord; that there is no one beyond God's love and mercy.

In fact, on my own pilgrimage into faith, some of my best guides have been "outsiders": people who live on the margins of our churches and our society—people whose words and lives pose tough questions to my tradition's answers. Convicted criminals serving life sentences have schooled me in hope and forgiveness; addicts have taught me about gratitude and compassion and surrender; doubters have taught me about the courage to settle for nothing less than the one, true, living God. I've learned about God's power when I've been willing to be an outsider myself—when I've been willing to step out of my comfort zone and be a beginner in someone else's world. And to encounter God there, anew.

This practice of learning from outsiders and becoming outsiders ourselves is a spiritual discipline, and it's at the heart of Christian mission. This week, we'll turn from Christmas to Epiphany, a season when we celebrate God's ongoing revelation to ALL people, including outsiders. *And* including insiders: including those of us who think we already know all we need to know about faith and God. This season is a good time for us to take up, intentionally, mindfully, the spiritual discipline of mission: the discipline of reaching out, beyond ourselves, and relinquishing our closely guarded insider status; of journeying into our own fears and longings; of serving and seeking Christ in this world.

In this season and beyond, as we go out—as we're sent out on a God-seeking adventure, may we be filled with the courage of the magi to seek boldly, and to witness, in word and deed, to the good news that God is with us, *all*.