

## **Matthew 2:1-12**

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.

## **The Power of Visions** - January 5, 2020

*Matthew 2:1-12*

When you think about it, we've been hearing quite a few passages which tell us God or an angel spoke to people directly or in a vision. Consider:

The angel Gabriel is said to have told Zechariah, an elderly priest, that he and his wife Elizabeth would be the parents of John the Baptizer. An unidentified angel appears to the Virgin Mary and informs her she will become pregnant and give birth to Jesus. Mary's husband, Joseph, has a dream in which he is told to remain with his pregnant wife, even though he is not the father of the child. When Jesus was born, a large number of angels are said to have appeared to a group of shepherds tending their sheep near Bethlehem, telling them to come and see the newborn Savior.

Finally, today we tell the story of the wise men or astronomers. Scripture does not tell us how many there were. We just assume there were three because three gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh were mentioned in the passage. The explanation they gave for coming to visit young Jesus (who was about two years old at the time) was simply that they saw his star at its rising and concluded that something of incredible significance was happening, so they travelled to Jerusalem then to Bethlehem. When they arrived in Jerusalem, they met with King Herod to explain they were searching for the newborn "King of the Jews," information that Herod could hardly have been pleased about!

The wise men proceeded to Bethlehem, found Jesus, and gave him gifts. However, the scripture tells us they were warned in a dream not to go back to King Herod, but go home a different way. Scripture goes on to tell us Herod was so upset at the thought of a new "King of the Jews" that he ordered all male babies in Bethlehem under the age of two killed! That might have been as many as 25 children! Joseph, in the meantime, had a dream telling him to flee Bethlehem with Mary and Jesus and escape to Egypt.

The Bible, furthermore, is full of passages in which God's voice is heard, whether in dreams, communicated by angels, or in other phenomena. Noah believed God told him to build an Ark, a giant boat, to escape a coming flood. Abraham believed God told him to uproot his family and leave his comfortable life in the city of Ur and move hundreds of miles away to what we call Israel. He later heard God's voice telling him to take his son Issac and sacrifice him, yes, kill him. Abraham heard God again telling him not to kill Issac and because his willingness to listen God declared him worthy to become the Father of both the Jewish and Arab nations. A fact, by the way, which has been verified by DNA testing.

Moses heard God speak to him from a burning bush, telling him to go to Egypt and liberate his people. Samuel had dreams from God telling him to be his prophet. In the New Testament, Paul was knocked off his donkey, struck blind, and heard Jesus telling him that he would proclaim the Good News to non-Jews. John had a dream which inspired him to write the book of Revelation.

Much ink has been spilled by biblical scholars and scientists alike trying to demonstrate whether these things really happened according to how they were reported in the Bible. Most planetariums, for example, have Christmas shows pointing out different theories on what the Star of Bethlehem could have been.

However, the point of all these encounters with God, either from God's own voice, angels, dreams, visions or whatever is not how it happened, but that human beings felt in some way that they were touched by something beyond their understanding or experience and, most importantly, they acted. When Noah heard what he believed to be God, he acted. When Abraham heard God, he moved. When Moses heard God in the burning bush, he went back to Egypt.

In Scripture, just about every important event was preceded by a person hearing God, believing what they heard, and then taking action. Without the Power of these Visions, there would be no Judaism, no Christianity, not even Islam. All three of these faiths rely heavily on human beings, just like you and me, believing to the core of their being that they somehow had a personal encounter with the Living God and then had the courage to take action.

This, friends, is what religion is about. This is what differentiates us as a church from other social and service organizations. With perhaps the exception of 12-step groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, the church makes the astounding claim that there is a reality beyond our senses. Worshipers at all churches, synagogues, and mosques participate in an experience that insists that the God who was active and alive in our holy books is still active and alive right now and is working in our lives today.

In our sophisticated, scientific twenty-first century, the notion of a working, active God who communicates with us can seem hard to swallow. We are raised to rely on the evidence of our senses. We are taught to measure data and evaluate it carefully. If we can't measure it, see it, hear it, smell it, touch it, or taste it, we question whether it is real. If we experience emotions such as love, awe, or wonder, we are taught such feelings are subjective and cannot be scientifically measured. Therefore, all feelings are suspect.

So when we tell the Christmas Story, it may be hard to accept. We talk of angels, voices, visions, dreams, and other non-rational events. The problem is even if we accept the Biblical account as real — at least to the people who were there, we struggle with connecting the idea of Biblical visions and experiences to our own lives today. Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men all accepted that God could and did communicate with them directly. They heard, saw, and felt God's presence and when they heard, saw, and felt, they took action. Mary and Joseph accepted the unusual circumstances of their becoming parents of Jesus. The shepherds heard and saw and travelled to Bethlehem. The Wise Men, just by seeing some kind of sign in the sky, convinced themselves that a new King of the Jews was being born and risked spending many weeks and traveling hundreds of miles just to visit and worship him. That is faith in action and every character mentioned in the Old and New Testaments could tell similar stories about their own lives.

Faith. Both having faith and acting on that faith is the essential component of being church. Without faith we are nothing. All that we do here, the prayers, the songs, the Lord's Supper, the mission projects, the fellowship groups — all of these mean nothing without a core belief that there is a Loving, Living God actively guiding the World and our Individual Lives. Without faith in our lives, without faith in this congregation, without faith in our nation, we are little more than slightly intelligent animals, bumbling our way around for a few decades, and then dying.

Now there is a steep price for having faith, which is why so many people have very little or even afraid of having it — even in this room. To have faith means that sometimes, usually at very inconvenient, unexpected times, we are presented with difficult choices. God is going to meet you. God is going to meet me. God is going to ask us to do something. So, on the one hand, we can ignore God, by choosing to follow the supposedly solid evidence of our senses, trusting in our bank accounts, and embracing everything in life that is comfortable and familiar. On the other hand, we can choose to believe our encounter with the Living God is real and proceed to set out in a new direction, a direction that may turn our worlds upside down, operating only on feelings and visions. Scary? You bet.

In 1986, I was finishing graduate business school. I was on track to receive a lucrative job offer at a prestigious consulting firm. I wanted them, they wanted me, the call would be coming soon. But, I had a dream. I had a dream of about the students I had been teaching in Botswana, Africa, while I served in the Peace Corps. The dream was simple. My former students were looking at me and asking, "What are you doing for us?" Because of that dream, I called my prospective employer and withdrew my application. A few months later, I found myself at home with my family, caring for my father who had been diagnosed with cancer.

A few years later, I was working as a computer IT consultant. It was a good job, but I was feeling dissatisfied. I prayed for months for guidance and spent many evenings walking around my town. One night I heard a voice, a voice as plain as hearing you. The voice said three words, "Go to seminary." Three months later, I began my studies at Princeton.

Many of you know that before my call to Collingswood, I had been without a church for four years. I spent much of that time driving for Uber. Believe me, they were years of anger and frustration as I questioned God over and over again why I was spending late nights parked outside bars waiting to take drunk patrons home. In many ways, at many times, I felt, just felt, the presence of the Holy Spirit simply giving me the inner peace to wait for the Lord. I waited, and here I am before you today.

So what is it to have visions? What is it to take risks based on the evidence of our spirits and nothing else? How, in the face of our reality-driven society, can we possibly justify uprooting ourselves, like Abraham did. Or accepting a pregnant fiancée as our wife, knowing we were not responsible, like Joseph did. Or daring to hear God telling us to venture into enemy territory to proclaim the highly controversial Word of God, as Amos did.

I firmly believe that God speaks to all of us, frequently, and in many different ways. The God who spoke to Abraham thousands of years ago is speaking to us today. The problem is, are we listening? Or, more importantly, do we dare to believe what we are hearing and have the courage to act on what we are hearing?

There are three guidelines I can offer you today so you can discern for yourself whether God is speaking to you. Test your visions on these three points and you may want to start talking to trusted friends about God's plan for you.

First, when God asks us to do something, it will be difficult. Whenever God asks something of us, we will have to change something. It may be a job. It may be a relationship. It may be a point-of-view or long-held idea. Whatever it is, we will have to try and do things we have probably never done before. Yes, it is scary.

Second, when God asks us to do something, it will almost certainly help others far more than it helps ourselves personally. God blessed every one of us with extraordinary gifts and abilities, gifts and abilities we seldom use. But God knows what we are able to do, not just what we want to do or like to do. God will ask us to use our gifts to help other people and in so doing, glorify God. God is not going to tell us to plunk down \$1000 on a sports team or invest in the stock market so that we can get rich. If, on the off chance, God does, the only reason would be for you to use your newfound wealth to help other people. We are on this earth for one reason and one reason alone: to serve God by making the world a better place for those around us.

Finally, there is nothing that God will ask us to do which is not in full agreement with Scripture. The Bible is a big book. It is so big that most of us have not read it from cover to cover. The Bible is many, many things, but one of the best things about the Bible is it contains the stories of dozens and dozens of people, all of whom put their faith on the line in response to God's call and vision. Whatever God is asking you to do, it has almost certainly been done by one or more of the men and women whose stories are recorded in this Holy Book. If whatever you may think God is asking you to do isn't in here, it is not God's will.

As we begin a new year, I have a challenge for you, Collingswood Presbyterian Church. My challenge is simple: Have faith and act on your faith. We are a church. As much as we enjoy our fellowship times and as much as we enjoy serving our community, we are first and foremost a church. At first, that seems obvious. It's in our name, after all. But being a church means the most important thing we can offer worshippers and our community is the ability to build and strengthen our relationship with Jesus Christ. And that takes faith. The more faith we dare to have — and by that I mean the more we open ourselves to God's living in us and our listening more and more to what God wants us to do with our lives, the stronger you will be, the congregation will be, and our ability to witness to the Collingswood Community and the entire world will be. This year, 2020, the world needs us more than ever. There are so many things going wrong on so many levels. Our faith, in obedience to God will be part of the answer. Together, let's make a difference.