**Following the Star**

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 The whirlwind of the holidays is nearly over.  I hope that each of you found some sacred moments during Advent and in these days after Christmas - perhaps some quiet time sitting by the Christmas tree, the chance to go for a walk on one of the beautiful days we’ve had this weekend, or the opportunity to be with family and friends and just enjoy each other’s company.

 One of the highlights of our Christmas week was when Em and I went “geo-caching” with my step kids and their families.  Have you heard of geo-caching? It’s kind of like a world-wide, 21st century treasure hunt. Basically, you download the geo-caching app to your phone.  On the app, you can see a map marked with different spots where people have hidden geocaches, little notes or treasures for others to find. There must be hundreds in Ann Arbor alone.  So, you choose one to hunt for and then off you go. The app gives you a description and clues for how to find it. We found one in a birdhouse, one in the stump of a tree in the woods, one tucked into a fence pole.  Some just had a paper you could sign showing you’d found it. Some had little prizes included. Most suggest that if you take a prize, you leave one, too. We had a group ranging in age from three to fifty-three, and we all had so much fun seeking treasure together!

 Today is Epiphany Sunday, the day in the church calendar when we remember the story of three strangers, wise men from the East, who went on a bit of a treasure hunt themselves.  Though we sometimes call them kings, they were probably more like astrologers or astronomers - Zoroastrians from Persia who studied the stars. We don’t actually know that there were three- that’s an assumption based on the three gifts that Matthew tells us they present to Jesus.  And, we don’t actually know that they were men! What we do know is that they believed the rising of a star indicated a new leader had been born and, through their studies, they determined this must be a new King of the Jews.

 So, they followed the star on a long and hope-filled journey to find and honor this new king.  So far, so good - except that there was already someone who believed himself to be king of the Jews. Rev. Kathryn Matthews describes him this way.  “Brutal King Herod was that most dangerous kind of powerful person: an insecure and fearful one, eaten up with worry about maintaining his power and his place and his comfort, his advantage, if you will, his *privilege.*..Just imagine, then, how thrilled this pretend king must have been on that day when a little band of "wise men from the East" showed up at his palace, with their camels parked out front, loaded down with treasure...and they asked him - asked *him,* the king! – for directions to the "real" King of the Jews!”

 Of course, what happens is that Herod feels threatened - very threatened.  He asks the wise men to go find this newborn king and then return to tell him how he might go and honor the child, too.  We know that this is not so Herod could honor Jesus but that he can kill him. The wise men leave Herod’s palace and continue to follow the star which eventually stops above Bethlehem.  There they find the child, Jesus, and offer him their gifts. Warned by a dream of Herod’s ill intentions, they follow another road home.

 There is so much in this story that I love, and every year I find there is some different part of it that speaks to me.  This year, perhaps because of my recent geo-caching experience, I am particularly struck by the journey of the wise men and the star that guided their way.

 It is the start of a new year - a time when many of us are thinking about the next steps in our life journey.  Like so often in our lives, we may find ourselves standing at a crossroads with choices to make - which road will we take?  Perhaps you, or someone you love, are at this point. What college to go to, which job to take. Should I change jobs or even careers?  Should we have another child? Buy a house? What should I do now that my nest is empty? When should I retire? Is it time to sell the house and move into a senior living community?  Should my ailing parent come live with me or move into a nursing facility?

 There are literally hundreds of these decision points in our lives when we wish that, like the magi, we had a star to follow.  Clues to guide us to the hidden treasure. Some way of knowing where God might be leading us.

 Unfortunately, we can’t just pull up an app on our phones or look up to the sky and follow the brightest star.  Discernment, trying to identify where God is at work in our lives and might be leading us, takes intentional effort.  Yet, I believe that God does provide us with our own stars, our own signs or clues to help us, if we take the time to find them.  So, if you have entered this New Year with choices to make, or even just the vague feeling that your life needs to take new direction, how can you find where God is calling you?  How can you discern which way God would have you go?

 Perhaps I have shared with you before Bishop Judith Craig’s three questions for personal discernment.  To me, they are questions that shine light on the path before us, much like the star broke through the darkness for the magi.  The first is “What does your past tell you”? When you look over the patterns and experiences of your life, what do you see about who you are, what is important to you, how have you approached important decisions in the past?

 Secondly, “What do the people who know you well tell you”?  Very often we learn what we need or want to do by talking to others.  Sometimes, we learn from their experiences but, even more likely, we learn from what they can tell us about ourselves.

 Finally, the third of Bishop Craig’s questions, and perhaps the most evocative, is “What gives you joy”?  Ultimately, joy is what makes life satisfying - joy is God’s deep desire for us. Joy makes the challenges worth facing, the growing pains worth enduring, and the risks worth taking.

 Above all, I think we discern God’s movement in our lives when we are willing to stop and listen - clear away all the distractions, settle into the quiet, and listen.  What do you hear or feel down deep in your gut or your heart or your soul? The Holy Spirit nudges, speaks to us, not necessarily in words or star signs but often in a deep, quiet assurance of what feels right.

 Much like we reach these crossroads in our personal lives, I think we are in a similar place as a congregation.  For the last couple of years, we have had brief bits of conversation about the future of our church. Pastor Doug laid out some of the questions that stand before us about our properties and our budget and what our goals are for the next few years.  Rather than just worrying about these things, it’s time for us to make some plans and decisions.

 That is why later this month we’ll be embarking on a strategic planning process.  A few years ago, we created a beautiful vision statement for our congregation. Now it’s time to take the next steps of figuring out what specific goals we have and how we will reach them.  We’ll be using a process outlined by Susan Beaumont in her book *Inside the Large Congregation.*  On January 20, we’ll gather for a meal with our youth and a time of celebrating our ministries.  After dinner, we’ll head for the sanctuary where you’ll hear my first ever State of the Church address. My hope is to give you all a sense of what the questions are that are before us.

 Later in February, we will have a Saturday retreat with representatives from as many ministries and demographics in the church as possible.  The purpose of the retreat will be to identify three or four goals or priorities for the next few years. We’ll then create teams to work on creating plans for how to meet those goals.

 Much like Bishop Craig had three questions for personal discernment, Susan Beaumont has three questions for congregations as they begin to discern the next steps they will take.  The first is who are we? In other words, what are our core values? The second, who is our neighbor? If the great commandment is to love God and love our neighbor, who is our neighbor?  And finally, what is God calling us to do or become? What is the work God has for us to do?

 As we move into this New Year, I invite you to spend some time prayerfully considering these three questions - listening within yourself for God’s guidance, much like I described listening for God about your own life path. Share your insights, send them to me or talk them over with other church leaders.  Come on January 20 to learn more. As a community, we will discern what our next priorities will be to keep our church vital and in service to the world.

 Our lives are full of decisions to make as we seek to live faithfully as individuals and as a congregation.  But, while it’s true that we don’t have a star to follow - or a phone app, for that matter - God will guide our next steps if we pay attention.  Through prayer and conversation, we will discern where God would have us go from here. Despite the Herods of our world, God is always at work for good, always using God’s people to be God’s hands and heart in the world. For almost 200 years, God has been at work through First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor. Let’s see where God leads us as we approach our third century together!

 May it be so. Amen!