

Sermon: Travelling the other road

I recently overheard someone say, “I don’t want to work until I’m too old to live.”

They didn’t elaborate or explain what they meant but those words have stayed with me. I think it’s one of those statements that says more than the words which were spoken. My guess is that it’s not even about their work. After all, life and work don’t have to be mutually exclusive. People find life and meaning in their work, and work can be an essential part of a fulfilling life. I think they were talking about more than just work.

I wonder if they were talking about their longing, desire, and searching for something. And I wonder if they were talking about their fear – the fear of missing out, losing a part of themselves, and living less than fully alive.

Admittedly, those are my interpretations, but I think the experiences of longing and fear are universal. I recognize both in my life and I’ve seen them in the lives of others. For most of us it’s probably not one or the other, but both at the same time. We live between the two poles of longing and fear. And today’s gospel tells us that’s where epiphany lies. It lies amidst our longing and fear.

Longing and fear are the bookends on epiphany. At one end you have wise men from the East following the star. They’ve left their own country – the familiar, the usual, the known – in search of and desiring something new and maybe even unknown. They don’t know where this journey will take them, only that they have to take this journey. It’s as if there is a call on their lives that cannot be left unanswered. Who or what is calling is unknown. There is no caller ID with an epiphany.

At the other end is Herod, the bookend of fear. “He was frightened,” Matthew tells us, “And all Jerusalem with him.” He is threatened by the possibility of a new king. His power and identity are at risk of being lost.

Maybe he fears an impoverished and diminished life. He calls others to himself – chief priests and scribes – but he stays where he is, grasping and clinging to what is familiar and known.

The wise men and Herod are responding to the same thing, the child and the birth of new life. The wise men are open and give themselves to something new and maybe even unknown. Herod is closed and wants the same old thing. The wise men travel and search. Herod hunkers down and shelters in place. The wise men follow their longing.

Herod wallows in his fear.

Both, however, were about the child. Both were an epiphany.

I think we tend to hear the Epiphany story as being an epiphany to the wise men only. But what if it's also an epiphany to Herod too? I am not talking about epiphany in the usual sense of having a flash of insight or a sudden realization. I don't think that's what today's gospel is about.

I've come to believe that we don't have epiphanies but that they have us. Epiphanies are not so much those moments when we say, "Aha, I've got it!" They are, rather, moments when we say, "Ah, it's got me!" or "Oh no, it's got me!" Sometimes that happens in our longings and other times it happens in our fears.

Both situations are offering us something. And both are seeking a response from us. That's what epiphanies do. They give us a glimpse of ourselves, our life, our world, and then they call for and ask a response. That response is what distinguishes the wise men from Herod.

The difference isn't that epiphany happened for the wise men but not Herod. The difference is that the wise men observed and followed the star, opened their treasure chest, went home "by another road," and Herod did not. But what if he had?

What if Herod had observed and followed the star too? What if he had opened the treasure chest of his life? What if he had returned home “by another road?” How might his life have changed?

And what if we did those things? How might our lives change?

When I look at my longings and fears, when others tell me about their longings and fears, when I remember the words of that man I overheard – I am convinced that both the wise men and Herod live within us. They are parts of ourselves. And I am equally convinced that wherever there is longing or fear there is an epiphany awaiting our response. So let me ask you about your longings and fears.

What longing, searching, or desiring has gotten a hold of you? Picture the people who are involved. Describe what is happening. Feel the ache deep within you, that ache that hurts so good. What is calling to you today? What is being asked of you in the name of God? What matters so much to you that when you ignore it, it becomes the matter with you? For what do you hope? What future are you desiring that sounds to you to be impossible?

What fears have gotten a hold of you? Again, picture the faces, name the people, describe the situations, feel the adrenaline. What keeps you paralyzed and unable to leave the place where you are? What is it about your life or relationships you least want to face and deal with? Who or what situation creates waves of panic and anxiety in your gut? What do you most fear losing? What is fear teaching you about yourself, your life, your relationships? What would you do if you weren't afraid and how would your life be different? What is being asked of you in the name of God?

Whatever your answers are to those questions about longings and fears, they describe an epiphany. They are a star in the sky of your life waiting to be observed and followed. They are the treasure chest of your life waiting to be opened. They are the child of new life waiting to be held.

And in all that something is being revealed to you and something is being asked of you. It might be love, forgiveness, healing, hope, gratitude, courage, beauty, compassion, gentleness with yourself or another, mercy, acceptance of yourself or another, nonviolence, repentance, new life, truth telling, wisdom.

Aren't those the very qualities and values of the child whose life the wise men and Herod seek? They are at the heart of our deepest longings and on the other side of our worst fears. And they reveal Emmanuel, God with us. That's the epiphany and it's always before us, calling and waiting for a response.

What will you do with the epiphany before you today? How will you respond?

My hope for you and me is that today we will all go home "by another road."
Amen