

Stargazing

January 8, 2023

Home a Different Way

“Because of what they learned in a dream, they went home a different way.”

My prayer for all of you, all of us, is that we’ll go home a different way. That’s what following Jesus is, no? Going home (finding our way back to God, to the source and summit of all that is good) and doing so a different way (through Jesus’ ways of mutuality and relationship and justice, rather than the societal ways of dominance and control).

This verse is the reason I chose Epiphany, the end of the Christmas season, as the date for my ordination. Heeding God’s call to formally dedicate my life to teaching and preaching the Good News of Jesus is a homecoming. In the very core of my being, it’s what I know I’ve always been meant to do. And doing so in the United Church of Christ, a denomination that, at its best, encourages both clergy and laypeople alike to a profound level of integrity is so very different from much of Christianity today.

Going home. A different way. We’re all called to go home a different way. In the Gospel, we’re told that the wise ones went home a different way because of what they learned in a dream. Dreams? Really? Most of the time, the only reason I remember a dream is if it’s really odd – if there’s someone in it from my past or I do something really bizarre.

But one of my best friends is a Freudian analyst, and she’s adamant that even our wildest dreams come from somewhere. Maybe something earlier in the day reminds your subconscious brain about a person from your past and that, in turn, manifests in that person being in your dream. A recurring dream I had in my 20s and 30s was of driving a car in which the brakes weren’t working. Her take on that is that it was about feeling out of control in my life. In short, our dreams don’t come from out of the blue, they come from somewhere deep within us and, most importantly for our purposes today, our dreams are a result of things we have steeped ourselves in.

I’d like to suggest to you today that the reason the wise people followed their dream, the reason they had the courage to engage in the civil disobedience of actively going against Herod’s orders, was because of their character, because of the depth of morality and ethics that had been developing in them over decades. With that in hand, I’d like to suggest today part of how we’re going to be able to follow the dreams that God plants deep within us, and therefore be able to go home a different way, is if we do deep soul work along the way. Then, we too, will have the depth to follow the dreams God plants deep within us.

Stargazing

It’s easy, tempting even, to listen to the voices of the Herods of the world. There are so many voices that have the potential to pull us off of our Godly path. The great 20th century theologian

Henri Nouwen says that there are really three big voices that draw us off track. He calls them the three big lies:

1. I am what I have.
2. I am what I do.
3. I am what other people say or think about me.

These three big lies find their way into all of our lives, but in most lives one of them usually takes the lead. Nouwen says that which of the big lies is taking the lead in someone's life determines how they pursue happiness.

Brian Mann, from Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, calls these different ways we pursue happiness the three hustles:

1. Security & Survival (I am what I have.)
2. Power & Control (I am what I do.)
3. Affection & Esteem (I am what other people say or think about me.)

The problem with lies is that they're tempting. It's tempting to listen to the voices that say that the ways that I pursue security and survival will bring me happiness. It's tempting to listen to the voices that say that we'll find happiness when we have everything under control. It's tempting to seek approval and affection and esteem and to think that these things will make us happy. The thing is with temptations is that they're never fulfilling for long. We can never get enough. And over time, these hustles to find happiness draw us further and further from Godliness and into disordered living. They draw us away from God and toward Herod.

So how can the wise people inspire us to turn away from these big lies, to stop ourselves from believing that these hustles will result in happiness? Stargazing! There are three spiritual practices that can help us to realign with God, our deepest selves, our bodies, even other people, and all three happen to be part of stargazing: silence, stillness, and solitude.

First, silence. Taking time for quiet is a lost art. We're reminded over and over again that Jesus took quiet time away. Silence, whether the silence of stargazing or of meditation, helps to quiet the voices that lie to us about scarcity, that tell us that I am what I have – whether it's a nice house or full bank account or perfect body. Silence helps us return to the Godly center that we are already enough. The new dress, the fancy car, don't bring lasting happiness, and the struggle to keep what I have safe results in a whole added cluster of anxiety. Silence helps to quiet the lies and realign us with God. We are enough.

The second practice of stargazing that realigns us with God is stillness.

“Stillness helps calm the busyness that maintains the illusion that we control things because ‘I am what I do.’” (Mann)

Have you ever gone on vacation and been positively restless the first day or two? This is a manifestation of the big lie that we are what we do. It's a manifestation of the lie that the more

power we have, the more we have things under control, the happier we'll be. Quite frankly, I've never met someone who had very high control needs who was very happy. It's a lie that doing and doing and doing will bring us peace. And so, if this is a lie that you're particularly susceptible to, follow the wise peoples' lead and be still. Engage in the spiritual practice of NOT DOING.

Last, the wise ones' practice of stargazing can help us to realign ourselves with God when we're tempted by the lie of "I am what other people think about me," by reminding us to take intentional time for solitude. Others' images of us are fleeting, and their esteem for you is based on who they are and what they value, not on your intrinsic worth. Time in solitude can help to realign us with the deepest truth of the faith: that we are God's beloved, and that nothing can separate us from God's love.

Conclusion

Friends, the wise ones went home a different way because of what they learned in a dream, but that dream wasn't some random blast from out of the blue. The habits and patterns of their whole lives had been preparing them to be the humble and wise figures who left all they knew to follow a dream, who generously shared their gifts with a poor stranger, and who courageously disobeyed the empire. The wise ones were foreigners. They weren't part of God's chosen people. They didn't practice the religion that Jesus' family did. And yet they have so much to teach us about aligning ourselves with the ways of God in this world. My prayer this week is that, if the voices of the three big lies are drawing you off course, maybe the spiritual practices we find in stargazing - silence, stillness, and solitude - will help you find Jesus' new and better way home.

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