



Sunday, Aug. 2, 2020
August Sermon Series: Values That Guide Us

Jesus is the Center of Our Life Together
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Matthew 2:1-12 NRSV

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² 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." ³ When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: ⁶ '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.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ 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." ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ 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. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

During the month of August, we'll be zeroing in on our core values here at Zumbro. Core values are defined in a variety of ways, but at the heart of it, these values are principles that shape us and guide our behavior. Individuals have core values - things like citizenship, fairness, honesty.

We had two funerals at Zumbro this past week. Funerals are a great time to lift up a person's core values. Jerry Alborn loved nature. After the great Rochester flood of 1978, Jerry got involved in flood control and ensuring that nothing like that would ever happen again. Ardis Witte was passionately committed to music. Over a lifetime, Ardis played piano and organ, and always made our hearts glad as she did.

Do you know what your core values are? If you're not sure, and are interested in finding out, ask the people around you to name them. That might take some courage on your part. You see, there's often a difference between our aspirations and our actual values, between what we want to be and what we actually are. I may think that responsibility is an important value to me, but if others say they can't depend on me, then maybe I'm not be as responsible as I think I am.

The values of a church are a bit more complicated. Again, these are the principle that shape us and guide or behavior. Some are written down, but many are not. For example, our Christmas Bazaar is a great way to celebrate our Norwegian heritage. We've been doing it for years, but I'm sad to say, not this year. Now, you can't have a Christmas Bazaar without making lefse, right? That's likely one of our values, but it's probably not written down anywhere. Then again, I doubt that it rises to the level of a *core* value, something so basic as to define who we are and what we stand for. Listen to our five core values and see if they reflect who we truly are and what guides our behavior:

- Jesus is the center of our life together.
- Everyone is welcome here.
- Worship changes us.
- Following Jesus is a life-long journey.
- We are sent to serve.

I hesitate to say it, but lefse and our Norwegian heritage are nowhere to be found on this list. But there are deeper questions to ask: do these values sound like us and what we're concerned about? Are they connected to our ministry and mission? I hope so. Are they challenging? Yes, we can spend a lifetime trying to live them. And this might be the hardest question of all: Do we mean it when we say them, or do they simply sound good on a piece of paper?

Lots of churches put a sign in front of their building saying: "Everyone is welcome here." But here's the truth: they regularly find any number of ways to exclude people. That value is often more aspirational than actual.

Let's take a close look at our first core value: *Jesus is the center of our life together*. This value comes out of a congregational assessment we did a few years ago with Holy Cow consulting. The assessment showed that we are a Magi culture. Like those Magi (those Wise Men) following the star to Bethlehem, we see ourselves to be on a journey of faith.

And like those Magi, we like to go on journeys, whether physical or spiritual, and we usually take our time as we do. We say it at the outset of our mission statement: *Our journey of faith leads us....* This journey invites us, at least

metaphorically, to follow stars, and as we do, to ask questions, explore options, and fully consider where we are going, and why.

Journeys are exciting, but there's often a downside. With a Magi mentality, there is always one more question to ask, always one more possibility to explore. It can be incredibly hard to make a decision and get us moving in the same direction. Want some examples? *When should we open up for in-person worship again? Should we change our constitution and make it possible for us to have virtual congregational meetings during a pandemic? And what should we do about our North Lot anyway?*

As we explore this first core value, we take our cues from the Magi. We don't know a lot about them, but the story hints of this: they are stargazers, probably Persians, and most likely Gentiles.

So, what are they doing in this Christmas story? They're following a star, looking for the one who's been born king of the Jews, and hoping to find someone worthy of their worship. They eventually find what they're looking for, but the journey has been anything but easy.

Notice the question the Magi ask when they arrive on the scene. It's directed at King Herod: "Where is the child who's been born king of the Jews? For we have observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." Their question sounds innocent enough. They want to worship the newborn king

But did you hear what happens? "Herod and all Jerusalem with him are frightened." You see, if the Magi are seeking the true Messiah, then perhaps King Herod is only a pretender to the throne. The birth of the Messiah calls his power, and the power of rulers like him, into question.

Each Christmas the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City has a nativity scene on display. In many ways, the elements are familiar—sheep are grazing, cattle are lowing, and Mary and Joseph are gathered around the manger. What's different, however, is that the manger is placed, not in the rustic setting of Bethlehem but amid the fallen and ruined columns of a once-proud Roman building. The theological claim of this nativity scene is clear, and it's the same claim being made by Matthew: the humble birth of the Christ child shakes the very foundations of the world. It announces that the mighty are on slippery ground.

The second part of the Magi's question is equally intriguing: where is the Messiah to be born? Herod orders the chief priest and scribes to search the scriptures. They come back with an answer: "In Bethlehem of Judea." Their answer makes a subtle but significant point: The Magi need scripture to tell

them where to go. The answer is not immediately clear. They want to be sure who to worship, and where?

Why is the question of the Magi so important? Because there are always pretenders to the throne, those who are not as deserving as they think they are. Because there are always stars to chase, and we can't be sure if they're worth our time and attention unless we stop to ponder what we're looking for. Why is this question important: Because there have always been chief priest and scribes who are all-too-willing to interpret the scripture for us, but often their opinions are not worth a hill of beans.

In ancient times, it didn't take much to turn our well-ordered world upside down. It doesn't take much today either: a potential rival to a seat of power; the onset of a nasty virus that has forced us to rethink our ways of doing things; the death of a black man at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer.

Friends, in your once well-ordered world, do you know where you're going? Together we claim: *Our journey of faith leads us...* Like the Magi, we keep pressing forward - asking questions, exploring options, and - hopefully - fully considering where we are going and why. We're searching for the newborn king - not another Herod - and we want to bow down and worship him. We want him to be the center of our life together.

That newborn king, you see, will soon grow up. He will call people to follow him...and not simply follow a star. He will usher in the kingdom of God, a kingdom unlike any other. He will teach the crowds and help them wrestle with some of life's most perplexing questions.

Jesus is the center of our life together. That's where we stake our claim. He's just what we need to find the way forward. He's the one before whom we bow down and worship.

Let's be honest: following this king will shake us every bit as much as it shook Herod, and those chief priest and scribes too. Jesus' life and teachings, if we take them seriously, will often turn our comfortable little world upside down.

You know what I mean: Should I work to repair differences with a brother or sister of mine with whom I haven't spoken in years? If I turn to Jesus, I hear his challenge: "Forgive, just as your Father in heaven has forgiven you."

Should I wear a face mask? If I turn to Jesus, I hear his caution: "If the health and well-being of someone is at stake - and it is - - then love your neighbor as you love yourself."

In our big, complicated world, where lutefisk and lefse are not nearly as important as they once were, should I open my heart to those who think and act and look differently than me? If I turn to Jesus, I feel his welcome: "All of these children are God's children. I'm willing to die for every last one of them."

Friends, *our journey of faith leads us...* I've been greatly moved by the testimony I've been hearing about John Lewis. I'm sorry to say, I didn't know that much about him before he died. I knew a little the walk over the Edmund Pettus Bridge and Bloody Sunday, but not as much as I should.

I've been moved by Lewis' words, and how he heard, as a young black man, the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King. There's a lot of Jesus in those words, especially the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence.

Shortly before he died, John Lewis encouraged us to stand up for our core values, for the highest callings of our hearts, for what we truly believe. He wrote: "In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring."

John Lewis went on to share one last paragraph: "When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression and war. I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide."

Well said, John Lewis! Your words sound like Jesus to me. And to this Magi culture, who are engaged in a journey of faith, who are regularly asking questions and exploring options, we want to live them, we want them to be, not simply aspirational, but actual.

For Jesus is the center of our life together.