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Epiphany, Matthew 2:1-12

“Guided”

David Brooks is a name with which many of you are familiar, I’m sure. He’s known for appearances on PBS *Newshour*, NPR’s *All Things Considered* and NBC’s *Meet the Press*. Some years ago, he came out with a best-selling book: *The Road to Character*.

In the book, he describes looking around the popular culture and finding the same messages everywhere: “You are special. Trust yourself. Be true to yourself.” He writes that movies from Pixar and Disney are constantly telling children how wonderful they are. He notices the same clichés in commencement speeches: “Follow your passion. Chart your own course. You have a responsibility to do great things because you are so great.”

Brooks mentions the wildly popular book *Eat, Pray, Love*. He parenthetically comments that he’s the only man who has ever finished it, but he goes on to quote author Elizabeth Gilbert who wrote that God manifests himself through “my own voice from within my own self.” She wrote, “God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are.”

I don’t think David Brooks would deny there is some value to these kinds of sentiments, but he sees the excessive focus on one’s self, what we think and feel internally, as an obstacle to developing character. He believes that individual will and reason are not strong enough to consistently overcome selfishness, greed and self-deception.

He writes, “Everybody needs redemptive assistance from outside – from family, friends, ancestors, rules, traditions, institutions, exemplars, and, for believers, God.” In other words, the way to developing character, according to Brooks, is a path we can’t necessarily navigate on our own. We need assistance from beyond ourselves.

I think the wise men in our Epiphany story are a great example of the need for guidance. They were foreigners, gentiles, from a faraway land, who longed for an encounter with the divine. We don’t know a lot about them, but it seemed to be their dream to see the savior with their own eyes. There was nothing that would bring them more joy.

Using the light of a star, God literally led to Jesus, the light of the world. The star the wise men followed to Bethlehem symbolized God's guidance. They saw the star at its rising. It went ahead of them. Finally, it stopped over the place where Jesus was.

The wise men did not "follow their own truth." They did not "chart their own course." They didn't "follow their bliss." They opened themselves up to God's guidance. They sought it. They watched for it. When they saw the star, they left home and committed to following it wherever it led them.

If not for God's guidance, they wouldn't have even known the Savior entered the world. If not for God's guidance, they could not have found the stable in which Jesus was born. If not for God's guidance in avoiding a return to King Herod, they might not have made it back home safely.

I think it's hard for many of us to open ourselves to guidance. You've probably heard jokes about men refusing to ask for directions. There have been studies that suggest there is a biological reason why men don't ask for directions. They say one of the effects of testosterone is that it leads people to go with their intuition or their gut instincts. I saw a cartoon with Moses standing on high ground, looking off into the desert. Behind him, a woman says, "We've been wandering in the wilderness 40 years. Now, can we ask directions?"

I want guidance. I want to live a God-guided life. I think their desire for God's guidance is the reason we call the *wise men* wise. And for anyone who wants God's guidance, I just want to mention two things I believe we can learn from them.

First, they were looking for guidance. They were open to it. In the story, the wise men indicated that they observed the star of Jesus, at its rising. That means they were looking for a sign. They were expecting some kind of guidance from above. When it appeared, they were ready.

In the church, we often talk about the Bible as guidance for how to live. We seek guidance from various religious traditions. Over thousands of years, wisdom is developed and passed on from one generation to the next. Knowing that, it's still hard to accept a lot of that guidance.

Years ago, I was at an ordination service for a friend. I'll never forget a comment made by the preacher. In referring to the role of the pastor in the congregation, he said,

“It’s a funny thing we do in the church. We call ministers and pay them to tell us what we don’t want to hear.”

Are we open to receiving guidance from outside? Do we allow our religious traditions to actually impact the way we live? When a person enters into our life, do we consider the possibility that God is using that person to guide us in one direction or another? They say that when the student is ready the teacher appears. The wise men were looking for guidance.

Secondly, the wise men followed the star wherever it led. Notice, when they saw the star upon its rising, they immediately went to Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the Holy City. It was the center of religious and political life. If the Messiah were born, one would expect it to take place in Jerusalem. Come to find out, the birth did not take place in the Holy City. The star took a sharp turn to the south. They were required to go the extra 9 miles, to an unremarkable town called Bethlehem.

I was thinking about my own life. I’ve vacationed in York. I’ve made the drive up here from Massachusetts a number of times in my life. If you were to have told me, the last time I vacationed here, I would someday serve First Parish Church in York, I would have smiled politely and given you half-a-dozen reasons why that wasn’t going to happen.

I realize that if I had relied only on my inner voice, if I had “charted my own path” or if I had depended entirely on my own sense of what was even possible, I might not be here today. It was seeking signs and listening to voices outside myself that made the difference. I’ll bet many of you have a similar kind of story about being mysteriously guided to an unexpected place.

There’s one more thing. If you’re going to live the God-guided life, if you seek God’s guidance, if you’re willing to move from where you are to where God leads, be prepared to be overjoyed. Be ready to celebrate.

Think about those wise men. When they saw the star at its rising, they didn’t just pack clothes and food for the journey. They packed up their treasures in anticipation of making an elaborate offering before the Christ child.

The text actually says when they saw where the star had stopped, the wise men were “overwhelmed with joy.” They weren’t just happy. They weren’t simply glad. They were overwhelmed with joy that the star had guided them Jesus. When they saw the child

with his mother, they opened their treasure chests and offered the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

There was no way those Wise Men from the East would find the Christ child on their own. Without God's guidance, they would not have known the time or the place Christ was born. Their lives and their joy would not be complete.

I would submit that those who are as wise as the *wise men* are those who look for God's guidance and those who allow themselves to be guided to unexpected places. It is they that are most likely to find themselves, not just happy, not simply glad, but overwhelmed with joy! Those are the people who can't wait to offer their treasures out of gratitude to God.

If you want to live the God-guided life, be on the lookout for God's light. Be ready to move from where you are. And be prepared to be overjoyed.