

Second Sunday after Christmas – January 3, 2016
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 84; Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a; Matthew 2:1-12
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

In our gospel today we hear again the story of the “wise men from the East,” travelers who are drawn to the mystery of the Incarnation of God born Jesus in Bethlehem. They were not so much seeking a way to explain or figure out this mystery, but rather seeking a real encounter with this God become human. And we, too—all of us—in our heart of hearts are seeking a peace and a purpose, a meaning and sense of worth beyond what our own lives and our world can supply. We yearn for something more. We look for a star to guide us, angels to lead us, but mostly for a Holy Family to embrace us. Our true yearning is for authentic lives lived with real connection to others, God, and ourselves. I am here today to say that I found the living Jesus and this connection here at St. Philip’s. This is my last opportunity to stand before you as I now move on. My time with you has been a substantial part of my faith journey and a real adventure. I have had a marvelous opportunity to live life fully and be observant to what God might be doing in this church and in the wider community day to day. I have seen my role not just as priest-in-charge, pastor, preacher, leader – but fundamentally as fellow traveler, discerning with you God’s call and presence and purpose in all the diverse elements that make for the whole of St. Philip’s, in order to help foster a growing, energized community that communicates God’s Love and Power.

In life and work in this parish, I’ve tried not to miss seeing the journey that I, you, that we are on, because I believe, as I’ve learned from various teachers, that any traveler who misses the journey they’re on misses about all he or she is going to get in life. So I’ve tried to be careful to be observant, to have an outer eye open that, in turn, can open my inner one. The more I’ve looked and listened, the more I’ve seen.

I recall and repeat the wisdom from an old professor who told me on my first day of seminary more than 41 years ago in Edinburgh, Scotland – “Young man,” he said, “don’t think you can come here and not be changed.” That has certainly been true for me here. Some of the edges I came with have been smoothed out a bit, and some habits have changed, though I still have a few I guess I’ll keep for a while. And for all I know of what’s been accomplished here – whatever that really means – I may be ending up where I started but I know I’ve not ended up who I started. For one thing, I’m learning to struggle less for a principle or a cause and more for and with specific people. The range seems to have narrowed down a bit, but it has gotten much more real. I am learning to see that it is the reality of personal relationships of love and our public relationships of respect – and our fundamental relationship with God – that saves and heals and changes everything.

I came here hoping to find adventure, and I’ve gotten into a few with you here. Moving on is now a necessary part of this adventure, and that is hard. The leaving is hard. Homer wrote in the Odyssey that “nothing is harder on mortal man than wandering” – I guess that is why the words “travel” and “travail” have a common origin. Of course moves are part of the fabric of modern life. Whether we work for corporations, follow spouses, teach, or pastor churches—or retire—an enormous number of us find ourselves moving,

sometimes frequently. There is suffering caused by the losses that go with moves (wanted as well as unwanted). Moving away from friends like you, losing our place in a beloved parish community – all this is hard.

This is all true for me. At the same time, from a perspective of vocation, the word “minister” shares the same root word as “minstrel” - a word which conjures up images of a wandering poet or music-maker who travels from town to town sharing these arts. Indeed, on the model of the apostle Paul and others, movement – from one field of ministry to another – is part of the pastoral vocation of many.

So what will Megan and I get from all our wandering? Lost? New insight? Maybe all that someone gets is strength to keep wandering, wondering and inquiring. Maybe what I’ll get is not so much the power of new vision but of re-vision: the power to renew my sight by revising my ways of thinking and seeing and acting as I continue on my way. One thing I know is that our destination is not a place—it is never a place – but rather, our destination is to be a new way of looking at things.

Of course, I know many of you are not leaving, but are well rooted here, or are still finding your way into this community, and so are on an adventure as wonderful as I could ever hope to be on. And you are a strong congregation in spite of your size. God has blessed you with passion, prayerfulness, persistence, resiliency, and above all, love.

One thing I know is that whether I move on or stay in one physical location, I have to keep seeing and learning, wondering and connecting, adventuring and often making mistakes, settling in but not settling for – or I cease to be faithful to God.

Megan and I thank each and all of you for your gift of yourselves in our lives. A fellow traveler, William Least Heat Moon, wrote in his wonderful journal Blue Highways that, “to be only a nub in the eternal universe is still to have a chance to see, a chance to pry at the mystery. What is this adventure of life anyway but an opportunity to poke at the universe and hoping the unseen will poke back?”ⁱ Well, I’ve poked at you, and you’ve poked back! I love you; we love you. I will miss you, we will miss you; and Good-bye.

ⁱ William Least Heat-Moon, Blue Highways (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), pp. 423-424 (See also pp. 229, 370 and 412 for the source of some other ideas woven through this homily).