

Things Jesus Never Said: Follow Your Heart

Matthew 2:1-4, 7-12 and Mark 8:31-36

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

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Since I haven't said it yet: Happy New Year! It is that time of year when anything feels possible, when, if even just for a fleeting moment, the curiosity and anticipation of what yet might be looms a bit larger than our memory of what has been.

That was certainly the case for the Magi, those wise men who followed the star all the way to Jesus. And that makes them an excellent partner in our new sermon series, Things Jesus Never Said. If you've ever read the Gospels even casually, you know that Jesus said, well, a lot. He said things like, I am the good shepherd. Love your neighbor. Do not be afraid. Pray for your enemies. Forgive those who wrong you. Do not let your hearts be troubled. And yet, sometimes, despite everything he **did** say, we wind up giving him credit for things he **didn't** say — things like, God helps those who help themselves. Money is the root of all evil. God needed another angel. Everything happens for a reason. God doesn't give us more than we can handle. That's a short list, of course. We could keep going.

One of the churches I previously served had once upon a time had a Lenten devotion or study or something like that thematically centered around the Footprints poem. The one that includes a person walking along the beach with Jesus, and observing two sets of footprints... except, at times, noticing only one set. "Why?" the narrator asks the Lord. "You said you would walk with me always." And in the poem Jesus replies back, "When you saw only one set of footprints, during those hardest moments of your life, it was then that I carried

you." It's a beautiful sentiment that reflects sound theology. But they had heard that poem so often that more times than not, when I would meet with a family to plan a memorial service, when it came time to talk about scripture readings, they would ask if we could use the part of the bible with Jesus and all the footprints. And I would have to say that we could surely include that poem, but that we needed to include some scripture, too.

Now, again — I'm not mocking this. The idea that God carries us through some of our hardest moments is both theologically and biblically sound. It's just that Jesus never said those words, and we are people who profess to love him and follow him, knowing what he didn't say is just as important as knowing what he did. Because sometimes, as we'll see in later weeks, the statements that get attributed to Jesus can begin to reflect truly harmful messages about who God is and how God is in relationship with us.

Today we celebrate Epiphany, though, and the wise men who followed the star all the way to Jesus. Which reminds us of the many times Jesus himself says, "Follow me." Jesus never says, "Follow your heart." He knows that our hearts are important. And he cares deeply for them. He just never tells us to follow them.

Remember again that Jesus was a really good, faithful Jew. Which meant he knew the Hebrew understanding of the heart, which is actually quite similar to our modern day understanding. The Hebrew people, and thus the Hebrew scriptures, and by extension, Jesus, knew that yes, the heart was an organ in the body. And that yes, the heart is essential to life.

But really, the Hebrew people, when they spoke of the heart, they were not talking in medical terms. They were talking about the part of us that holds our emotions. The center of our being that responds to things with feelings. And I suspect you would agree — that makes our hearts incredibly important, but also not entirely reliable.

That's why Psalm 139, a psalm Jesus would have known, a psalm that is often cited as a source of tremendous comfort, ends this way: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

And that's why Jesus, when some people bring him a man in need of healing, but then go on to think to themselves that he is going about it the wrong way, he says, "Why do you think evil in your hearts?"¹

And it's why in talking with his own disciples, when they were debating which foods were clean and which were unclean, he says, "Whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile. It is what comes out of a person that defiles. For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, envy, slander, pride."²

But again, remember, he also says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid,"³ because he knows that a lot of times, our hearts are exactly that — troubled and afraid.

Our hearts are good. And important. And Jesus cares for them deeply. That's why he comments on them as much as he does. He just knows that they aren't 100 percent reliable when it comes to making decisions about our lives and actions. Our emotions and our feelings can sometimes lead us astray. A lot of

times, what the world lauds as "following your heart," is sort of code for "doing whatever it is you really want to do," or "doing whatever makes you happy."

Now, I believe that Jesus wants us to be happy. That Jesus wants us to know joy, abundantly. But Jesus is convinced that our deepest happiness, our deepest joy, comes from living a life of discipleship. From following him. Even when that's really hard to do.

The second scripture lesson this morning makes this clear — "Whoever wants to follow me," Jesus says, "let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will save it." That doesn't sound fun, exactly. But it does sound faithful.

The those wise men, and the shepherds, everyone who follows the star — they don't necessary do so with excitement and jubilation. The shepherds, when they go, scripture tells us they are terrified. The King James Version, being a bit more poetic, says they are "sore afraid." And as for the Magi themselves, the passage says that all of Jerusalem is frightened. That includes the Magi. And yet they follow the star, the sign given to them by God.

Two brief observations about this that may be instructive to us.

First: We have come to call them the three kings, but in truth, the Bible only refers to them as wise men, and they were almost certainly astrologers, people whose job it was to watch the stars and observe what is happening in the heavens. And their star, the star about which we sing, twice it is referred to as "the star they had seen at its rising." Not "the star they finally noticed once they stopped being distracted" or "the star that finally

¹ Matthew 9:4

² Mark 7:15-21

³ John 14:27

crashed down out of the sky and landed at their feet." It is "the star they had seen at its rising."

The star in this story is a bright, shining manifestation of God's presence and guidance. The star would have been there whether the wise men noticed it or not. They are able to follow it because they have been paying attention to it all along. Following Jesus is like that — easier the longer we have been doing it. Something that comes more naturally with time, and practice. Not something that we do instantly and perfectly. When we pay attention to Jesus — to his story, his scripture, his teachings — the more we pay attention to all that, the easier it will be to follow him.

And second: Those wise men don't know where, exactly, they are going. They are following a star, not a 14 day itinerary with every rest stop marked and every obstacle predicted. They set out, and they travel, one step after another, until they stop at the place where Jesus was. And then they go home by another way entirely.

It takes courage to follow when you don't know where, exactly, you are going. I cannot count the number of times someone has said to me, "I don't know what to do." It's almost — not quite, but almost — as high as the number of times I've thought to myself, "I don't know what to do." And the very best wisdom I've heard in such moments, in addition to prayer, is "just take the next step." Just do the next right thing. You don't have to chart the entire course, or know how to handle every potential challenge, or defeat every potential foe, or be able, at the beginning, to climb every mountain. Just take the next step.

We don't know when the wise men left or how long it took them to get there. What the story tells us, what tradition records, is that they got there. And when Jesus says, "Follow me," he doesn't say, "Follow me perfectly." Or, "Follow me unconditionally. Or, "Follow me without doubt." He just says, "Follow me."

Being a faithful person doesn't mean

always trusting. or always going in the right direction. It means being willing to try again and again. To keep going. One step at a time, even if turns out you need to rest in between steps or even if it turns out you need to change direction and travel another way altogether.

And maybe that's one last difference between following your heart and following Jesus. When it comes to following your heart, you have only yourself to consult on what it means. What it looks like, or where it might lead you. When it comes to following Jesus, not only do you have a giant book of instruction, you have a whole host of disciples sharing the journey with you.

In recent years, some churches have adopted the practice of receiving star words on Epiphany Sunday, just like our children did earlier in the service. We have prepared star words for all of you. A star word is given to you at random, and, the practice goes, the word can be considered a gift from God for the year ahead. You are encouraged to contemplate, pray with, and reflect on your word throughout the months ahead. It may be that you encounter it in ways you expect, and ways that surprise you. It is a chance to practice following a star of our own, a chance to practice following where Jesus will lead you. Jesus, who is himself the light of the world. Jesus, who is himself 100 percent reliable 100 percent of the time.

I will have a bucket of stars at the Narthex door. John will have some at the Sower's Chapel door. We will reach in and select one for you at random. Those of you worshipping with us online — send me an email or a text and I'll send you a picture of your star. Now, I've already been asked, "Can we swap our word out if we don't like what we get?" No! You can't! We'll happily give you a second word, or even a third, but you don't get to return a word given to you. Even if you can't imagine it today, each of these words can guide any of us, all of us, through the year ahead.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, once endeavored to write a prayer that everyone could pray, no matter who they were or where they were in the life of faith. Let this be our prayer today, and throughout the year, as we seek to follow Jesus, the giver of life, the source of all light, the one who is always reliable:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. There will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. Amen.