

## Sermon on Matthew 2: 1-15 Follow Your Dreams

Sisters, honestly, what would you do, how would you react, if your husband came home from work one night to tell you that he and two other colleagues had seen some mysterious things going on in nature, and that the three of them thought they had to follow these up.

It involves a journey of uncertain duration. And they have to set off at once. Immediately. Actually, now... Your husband has just come home from work to pack a few things and then meet up with the other two and leave. Would you please take care of the children and the household, make sure things run smoothly while he was gone, he asks. Eventually he will somehow try to let you know when you can expect him back.

Or, brothers, what would you do, if one night you had a dream. In the dream you can clearly see yourself and your family travelling in an unknown land. The dream is so clear that you remember the next morning an angel telling you that your child is in danger, and that the only way to survive is to take mother and child abroad... You aren't sure for how long you will be gone and when and whether you will ever return...

Would you dare to share this dream with your wife who'd just given birth to your first born son a couple of weeks earlier? She was still weak. And both of you were not yet experienced in caring for a baby, and especially not in caring for a baby while you travel into the unknown...

Would you dare to speak about your weird dream? And not only that, but ask your wife to quickly pack up the most necessary things and come with you into an uncertain future in a foreign land? Or would you rather keep this dream to yourself, do nothing at all, because your wife might otherwise think you'd gone completely nuts and find it hard to continue living with you?

Sisters and brothers, in today's Gospel reading we meet 4 men who follow their visions and dreams. Often the 4 are not given so much attention. The wise men serve as a colourful garnish to the traditional nativity story.

And Joseph hardly ever gets mentioned at all, even though he shares his destiny with many a parent throughout the history of humankind. He takes his child and flees, turns his back to places of war, violence and persecution, and seeks a better life in a new land.

*pause*

I connected these two stories, these people and their reactions to calls and dreams with my own uncertain future, my own hopes and fears for the New Year, and decided to give them a closer look.

So allow me to begin with you where we meet the three so-called wise men for the first time.

Matthew sets the date of the wise men's visit in the time of King Herod. We don't know where Mary and Joseph with their little boy live at that time? Still in the stable? Or in a rented place in Bethlehem?

One day, three wise men, professional star-gazers, come to visit... We learn no more than that they come from somewhere in the East.

By reading about that time it becomes clear that astrology was no unusual thing to practice, and that people believed in the significant meaning of bright new stars and special star constellations...

The tradition that these wise men were three kings has no foundation in history. The idea that they were kings may come from old parts of scripture such as Isaiah 60... old Jewish texts speaking of kings bringing gifts to God's son.

Matthew tells us that the wise men came to Judea and seemed to surprise Herod and his court. When asked about a new born king, Herod was speechless. He called his priests from whom he learned that according to Scripture Bethlehem was a possible place for a new king to come.

So the wise men set off following the star to Bethlehem, and finally find the object of their search. On seeing the young child they were overjoyed and presented their extraordinary and special gifts.

What springs to mind is that these three people who are already called wise, are asking... They did not seem to have to pretend to know everything and to be always in control. It seems okay for them to ask... to reveal that they did not know but so longed to get to know, to find out, to learn...

The wise men were the intellectuals of their day. They were skilled in philosophy, medicine and natural science. And they came because their curiosity had been awakened by a star.

Curiosity and the appreciation of it seem to be an important motif in the story. Other motifs are the willingness to face a challenge and the love for adventure. These wise men following their star were adventurers. Adventurers in the sense that they left their homes to find Jesus, a tiny little new born king.

They'd covered hundreds of miles... in a world where there was no motorway network, no intercity trains, no e-mail and no mobile phones.

They travelled on camels and risked getting awfully lost. And yet, they came looking for Jesus.

What they did was in many ways an adventure of faith. When they left home, their destination was unknown. They had no precise forwarding address. They simply followed a star.

The parallels to our life and faith as Christians seem clear: Jesus calls us to curiosity and adventure... He calls us to ask and search, to set off and be on the move, not only physically but also in our thoughts.

Don't get too stuck, stay flexible, try out new ways, seek and allow changes, take risks and be open to messages from above.

As the wise men did, people at all times seem to need a good mix of both: faith and knowledge, dreams and facts.

The star of Bethlehem invites its followers to be grounded in the earth from which we come, and reach up to heaven in order to know at all times where to go...

Back in the story however, the star was not enough.

If the wise men had only had the star to follow, they would probably never have found Jesus.

This does not suggest that the star had no role to play. For had there been no star, the men would never have set out on their long journey; they would never have begun their quest to find Jesus...

And yet, the star by itself was insufficient. It led them only to Herod. True, it later led them also to the place where Jesus was, but in the beginning it seemed to have lacked precision.

In Jerusalem something more was needed to lead the wise men's journey the right way...

When Herod asked his own wise men, the priests and scribes, where the Messiah was born, they pointed to Scripture. The small book of Micah, a precious Old Testament text, played a crucial role in their search...

So, in the text we not only find an invitation to follow the stars, but also to take into account what we can find in the Bible. The two together make an almost perfect recipe to begin life in the New Year: with stars and scripture, visions and words, dreams and facts, faith and thought...

...only then we can find Jesus – the saviour of all.

To be honest, it had never before struck me how strange it was that these wise men from the East should have sought a Jewish king. When they came to King Herod they asked: "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."

Why on earth should they worship the king of the Jews? They were not his subjects. They came from elsewhere.

What possible relevance could this baby hold for them?

I think that they realized, however dimly, that this Jewish baby was the one who was going to fulfil all their hopes and the hopes of the world.

It was he who would bring an end to all suffering and strife the world had known. It was he who would establish a kingdom of peace!

Looking at history records of Jesus' time, it becomes clear that the Jews were not the only ones hoping for a saviour. People everywhere were looking for a world ruler who would bring peace to the world.

People were dreaming of a new age of peace in which there would be no more fear. Poets wrote about a golden age when everybody would have plenty to eat, when harvests would belong to all, and when everybody would trust everybody...

The wise men were children of their time and surely shared the same hopes and expectations.

So they set off... hoping to find a new beginning and a new life. And when they found it, it was still so small that one could hardly believe that it had a message of hope for a suffering people and peace for a war-torn world.

As the Herods of today still do, King Herod did his best, or his worst to wipe it out, but his time was limited.

The world can still confess today that Jesus Christ is Lord because these three wise men and the earthly father of the "tiny king" obeyed their dreams and not the rules of the rulers!

But before that happened, one more aspect of the story needs to be looked at: the gifts. The wise men offered costly presents.

Maybe we should not spend too much time on interpreting the gifts or differentiating between them... Maybe we should simply and merely see that the wise men gave Jesus their best!?

And they are inviting us to do so, too. As simple as that: they invite us to worship. Worship the new beginning, the tiny king, the love and peace he brings, - and give our best.

Give ourselves and serve him in the best way we can.

Serve him and save him, as the wise men did, by obeying to God more than to worldly rules and rulers.

When the three visitors left Joseph's small family, they went to their own country by another road. They not only avoided Herod, but actively refused to play into his cruel hands the innocent new born God who'd only just begun changing the world.

While the wise men were retuning home, an angel spoke to Joseph in a dream, warning him, hoping to enable him to prevent disaster...

As fast as he could Joseph had to bring the new born boy and his mother out of the country, out of the reach of a ruthless king and his destructive thoughts and plans.

We have no idea of where in Egypt Joseph took Mary and the baby boy. They may simply have gone a few miles over the border... Matthew sees in this again a fulfilment of the Old Testament scriptures...

Jesus came out of Egypt and back to Israel, when the country was safe for him again...

Herod died, but Jesus lives.

This is true then and now.

The history of humankind, our world today, has far too many Herods...  
They need to go...  
But Jesus and what he brings: peace and love and new beginnings, they live...  
...live when we do our share and help them survive.  
Let us follow in the footsteps of the four men in Matthew's Gospel who follow  
their dreams and obey their God, and by doing so keep God alive for his world.  
Nothing more and nothing less.

And to answer my question from the beginning...  
What would I do, if my husband came home from work one night to tell me that  
he and two other colleagues had seen some mysterious things going on in  
nature, and had to follow these up? Would I please take care of the family and  
the household, make sure things run smoothly while he was gone?

I think with the situation we are in, with all the changes we are facing, with  
Nicolas just before his Abitur exam and all the support he needs, with Jacob  
passing final exams in the summer, with a new job for Reiner, a new colleague at  
Friedenskirche for me, with our search for another home for us all, I think I  
would tell him to stay.

...to stay and let the others find another man to join them and set off.  
I would probably argue that there will be other stars in the sky in the future  
which he can follow, or I might follow, - or which we might follow together...  
This may not be correct in astrology, but it is surely true when we look at our  
lives from a poetic point of view, and when we take into consideration that the  
little life the wise men discovered at the end of their journey has already been  
found by us and has been entrusted to us by the God we serve with everything  
we do on every single day we live.

Amen.

### **Prayer or Poem**

Jesus  
may we not hold back  
but freely give  
the gold of our hearts  
the myrrh of our grief  
the frankincense of our dreams  
to you

(Mary Palmer, Hay and Stardust)