

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC
Dr. David Renwick
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HITCHING YOUR WAGON TO THE RIGHT STAR

Exodus 1:11-15; 3:1-13; 4:1, 10-14a, 18; Matthew 2:1-12

The wise men brought gifts to Jesus: Gold, frankincense and myrrh. But gifts, of course, are not just tangible things that you can wrap up in paper. There are other gifts in this world on which we depend every day. Some of them have to do with virtues, or our intestinal fortitude: like the “gift of courage.” Sometimes people themselves are gifts to us – people who come into our lives in one way or another. The Bible speaks about both kinds of gifts. When God gives his people gifts, he doesn’t just give them tangible gifts, human talents or virtues, but people – specific people, like prophets and apostles and teachers, actual people, who come into our lives at just the right time with just the right ability, and we find ourselves saying, “Wow! You are a gift to me.”

Sometimes the tangible gifts, or gifts of character or virtue, are tied together with the gift of a specific person. For example, one of the gifts that God longs to give to us is the gift of guidance – and as we move into a new year, leave an old year behind, surely we all want this gift! And just as surely, this is a gift that God wants to give to every single one of us. But the gift doesn’t come to us apart from the gift of a person – Jesus. When we say that Jesus is our “good shepherd,” we’re saying that he is present to us as a guide: a shepherd guides the sheep, knows the best direction to lead the sheep so that they can have food, so that they can have water, so that they can be protected. The image itself is fundamentally related to God’s desire to be our guide (to be much more than that, but at the very least to be our guide). And yet the question still arises as to how God, how Jesus is to be our guide? How does God’s guidance come to us? The guide has come to us as a gift, but HOW do we discern his guidance?

Well, quite clearly we as Christians believe that God uses the book he inspired, the Bible to provide us with some guidance. God’s guidance comes to us from this Book. This is a book that God has given to us and when we read it, he will somehow speak to us through it, and guide us through it, helping us to know what to do, or where to go. One of the challenges for the new year as we seek and expect guidance from God our shepherd is surely for us to commit ourselves or recommit ourselves to read the Book so that we can hear what God wants to say to us.

Within the Book, of course, we find the stories of Jesus. And God’s guidance comes to us through Jesus’ life and example. He becomes our shepherd as we look at his life. As we look at his teaching. We allow it to fill our hearts and our minds until his thoughts become more and more our thoughts. This won’t occur fully until we get to heaven but it remains as a part of our job: to allow his life, his mind, his heart to enter our lives, our minds, our hearts until they are somehow blended together. We thank God for the gift of Jesus the baby, Jesus the shepherd, Jesus the guide, at this time of the year in particular. So God wants to guide us through the Bible, through the baby Jesus, through Jesus grown up, teaching us and meeting us as the resurrected-one, every day by his spirit.

But there are other ways in which we can think about God’s guidance as well, and one of the most profound ways, at least to me, in terms of affecting my sense of God’s guidance is described by a Baptist preacher by the name of Henry Blackaby. Some of you have completed his study called *Experiencing God* and really the word I want to leave with you today is not just

a word about the gift of guidance essential to what God wants to do with our lives in general but for you to think about what Henry Blackaby says about God's guidance in our lives in particular and this is where our sermon notes come in. What Henry Blackaby says is this that sometimes we are looking for God's guidance as "Lord, I wonder what you want me to do?" as if somehow God is way out there and we're here and we're begging God to somehow come close to us and guide us. But Blackaby says that this image is back to front: *that God is busy doing all kinds of things in the world and he is desperate to enlist anybody who will join him in his purposes*. Our guidance is not about "Well, I want to do this and will you lead me safely to do it?" but the guidance that God wants to give to us is the kind of guidance in which he draws us into his plans and purposes and says,

"When you hitch your wagon to my star, you will find your life safe, protected, blessed and meaningful. This is what I'm doing. You will find your life and your purpose if you join with me in what I am already doing."

Not "God join with me and guide me" but "Let us join with God" – and that's a reversal of how we often think about life, and a reversal which comes straight from the pages of Scripture.

It is seen most clearly I think in the story of Moses. I think we would all agree that Moses led a life which, in the end, was guided in the most fantastic way by God . . . but only in the end do we see it! Well, of course God was at work in all of it, but for his life to be truly powerful and meaningful, a significant transformation had to take place in the way he thought about life, his direction in life, and about God. Exodus 2 tells us about the time when Moses has just become an adult. He's in Egypt still, and he sees his people in slavery and he in his own strength wants to do something about it. It doesn't work out.

One day after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his kinsfolk. He looked this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. When he went out the next day, he saw two Hebrews fighting; and he said to the one who was in the wrong, "Why do you strike your fellow Hebrew?" He answered, "Who made you a ruler and judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "Surely the thing is known." When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh. He settled in the land of Midian, and sat down by a well.

At this stage in his life, Moses is doing things in his own strength. It's the right thing to do. There's an injustice before his eyes, and something needs to be done and he's doing it . . . but in his own way and in his own strength. Things go wrong. And Moses life goes wrong. He loses his way, and spends forty years wandering in the wilderness looking after sheep and then something happens and that takes us to Exodus 3.

Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. (Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai.) There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.

Now things have been turned the right way up. God takes the initiative. God shows up.

Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

Moses turns aside from whatever else he was doing to find out what is happening.

When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!"

God knows his name. God knows all our names. God is not far off doing nothing. God has your name in his heart and on his lips at this very moment.

And Moses said, "Here I am." Then God said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals

from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

You know who I am. I’ve been at work in your forbearers before you. I’m still the same and I’m still at work.

And Moses hid his face for he was afraid to look at God.

Sometimes the guidance of God is a guidance that we really don’t want. To begin with, God may want to lead us to a place that we do not want to go.

Then the Lord said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.”

God has seen this oppression and God is going to do something about it. The question is who will be there for God to use? Who will be God’s hands and feet? So the next verse reads:

“So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”

God is at work in all kinds of ways in this world all around about us if we have eyes to see and God is saying to men and women just like you and me, calling us by name, “Will you come and join me in my work if you have eyes to see?”

That is his call to Moses and his call to us. Moses surely longs for a relationship with God but doesn’t want to do this particular thing, so the rest of the chapter and on to into chapter 4, we have a series of wonderful excuses that Moses makes.

This passage was really important to me when I felt God was calling me into the ministry: it was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. And it was of enormous comfort as I felt myself resisting God to know that Moses did that too! And that God still meets with very human people who know that by themselves they are inadequate for whatever task God gives.

So Moses makes his excuses left, right and center. First of all Moses says to God:

“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?”

God responds:

“But I’ll be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.”

You’ll come back to this very place. And then the excuses keep on.

Moses answered, “But suppose they do not believe in me or listen to me, but say, ‘The Lord did not appear to you.’”

And then later, Moses said to the Lord, “Oh my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I’m slow of speech and slow of tongue.”

I just can’t do this. Then God reminds him that he is the creator!

“Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak.”

In other words, God is saying that “I’ll give you every gift you need in order to accomplish the task that I send you out to do. You’re right. You can’t do it yourself. You tried to begin with. It didn’t work but I will equip you to do what you think at first is impossible.”

And then Moses has the clincher in verse 13, one of my favorite verses in Scripture when Moses said:

“O my Lord, please send someone else.”

This is the great verse of the church of Jesus Christ! “O Lord, please send someone else. Not me, someone else.” And then you have to read the verse after that.

Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses.

This is not a good thing!

And he said “What of your brother Aaron, the Levite? I know that he can speak fluently; even now he is coming out to meet you, and when he sees you, his heart will be glad.”

Now this is fascinating. God is angry but he does not end the conversation. This is a very human conversation in which God enters into a relationship with Moses that Moses’ weakness cannot undo. God persists again and again and again, even through his anger, and keeps on pushing until Moses finally backs down. The excuses have poured out of him. There are no excuses left and we read in verse 18:

Moses went back to his father-in-law Jethro and said to him, “Please let me go back to my kindred in Egypt and see whether they are still living.” And Jethro said to Moses, “Go in peace.”

And through that conversation, Moses discovers God’s guidance in the most amazing way. His life, which has been a good life doing good things, becomes an exceedingly meaningful life, filled with great purposes, accomplishing something which actually changes the history of the whole wide world.

I think that Henry Blackaby has understood this passage very well. He describes seven steps of God’s guidance, God’s shepherding, at work here

1. God is at work. Before Moses knows it.
2. God has a relationship with Moses. Knows him by name.
3. He invites Moses to join with God in God’s work.
4. God keeps on speaking, keeps the conversation going. Our prayer is in a sense a response to the fact that God is already speaking to us.
5. There is a crisis of belief and you see this repeatedly in the Scripture. “I don’t want to do what you want me to do. I don’t understand what you want me to do.”
6. There is an adjustment as Moses allows this new plan to become his plan.
7. And then he obeys and in the end he says, “How amazing. I would never have chosen this path. But this is indeed God’s path for me.”

You don’t see all of the details in some of the other stories in Scripture, but you certainly can find many of them in other stories as well.

Think about Mary, Jesus’ mother. If you were to go back to the story of Mary and read it, I think you’ll find some of these elements right there as well.

But we also find these elements in the story of the wise men.

1. They are people who look at the sky with wonder, believing that God is at work in the whole of the universe (sometimes in the church, we make our God so small). God is at work in the whole of the universe and they’re gazing at this universe as if to say,
2. “God speak to me through this universe. What are you up to?”
3. And as they do that, God takes them by surprise and they see the star. Maybe they’ve seen it before. Maybe they haven’t but they certainly see it in a new way and they realize that through this star, God is calling them to join him in what God is already doing and they decide to go with

the flow and follow the star.

4. There is a crisis in the middle. It gets tough when Herod enters the picture but they still keep listening and God guides them through that time to safety in the end.

This is what God calls us to do. In giving us Jesus, God is also giving us this amazing gift, the gift of guidance.

He doesn't want our lives to be aimless.

He doesn't want our lives to be ineffective, to add up to nothing much.

He wants our lives to be significant.

He gives to us his Book. He gives to us this baby to guide us.

He is busy in this world before we know it.

And he says to us through Jesus: "If you look, if you pray, if you watch, if you listen, you will find me calling you to join me in my work."

And when you do that as individuals and especially when we do this as a congregation together, we will find God empowering us in ways that we cannot even begin to imagine.

Moses could not have imagined how his work would turn out.

Or the wise men: what would happen with that baby they came to see?

Who knows what God will do with us as we receive the gift of his presence, his son, our shepherd, the one who promises to guide us, in the days and months and years ahead.