

PRACTICING DISCERNMENT: COMMON SENSE
MATTHEW 2:1-12
JANUARY 6, 2008 – EPIPHANY
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Some of us, says Michael Palmer, are like moths attracted to the light.¹ I thought of this image when I read the story of the wise men this past week:

those three ancient travelers, making their way from a distant land, persistent in following the light of a star that led them to the Christ child.

The image fits because if you think about a moth attracted to the light what comes to mind is a certain desperate relentlessness. And while we may not get quite that sense of desperation in the story of the wise men, make no mistake, it was there.

One commentator compared them to a cadre of Ayatollahs from Kazakhstan visiting Kansas City – out of their element, in a strange culture, paying homage to a very dangerous idea: a peasant baby, not Herod, is king of the Jews and Savior of all.

This was no exotic curiosity tour: let's-go-see-Antarctica before it melts. The three magi – which could mean magician, astrologer, or wise man – were compelled to make the trip because they sensed that the answer to the world's problems lay in a crib somewhere in Palestine.

It didn't add up but they were willing to cross the boundary of rationality to get to the source of that truth; it would be a dangerous trek but they were willing to risk danger for the light; it might mean that their lives would change forever but they were ready to leave the comfort zone of predictability and status quo for something better.

My hunch is there were others who chose not to make the trip with them. The commentators note that the plural form for magoi, "magi" suggests that the actual number could have been anywhere figuratively speaking from 3 to 13.

There seems to be no qualification for these three making the trip other than that they were willing to do so. Others no doubt turned the offer down: Follow some star *where?* Infant *Savior?* Peasant *leader?* Jew? So they stayed home.

Nor did the team of advisors, scribes and biblical exegetes in Herod's court demonstrate much deeper insight or commitment. They did produce the helpful information for Herod that Isaiah foretold the birth of such a child. But beyond that their scholarly researches and academic rigor did not produce anything that helped lead them to the infant Messiah.

So what we have here is a striking message in the opening pages of Matthew's gospel – the most Jewish of all the gospels:

not only is it three Gentile pagans who find their way to the infant Jesus first—before Herod, his advisors and henchmen.

But the contrasting reactions to this discovery are also ironic and wonderful: the pagans rejoice at finding the Jewish savior while the Jews shudder in fear at the prospect of his birth.

And that is a message that puts any church or synagogue or temple on notice to approach their mission and life together with humility and honesty for we do not own the source of our light and truth.

It is a light that shines well beyond the liturgies of our worship and a truth that transcends the narrow borders of our doctrine.

It is a light, as we see in today's story, that may not attract some of us but surely will attract others not only in our midst but also some very different than ourselves—from other cultures, customs and world views.

I'd like to take a moment today and in the next couple of weeks to reflect a bit on the process of discernment – which the dictionary says is “discovering a hidden or obscure truth.”

The very word “epiphany” suggests something of the same meaning—“intuitive grasp or insight into reality,” says Webster. We use the word that way in our common language and say “I had an epiphany the other day” meaning I had an important insight or got to some new level of understanding.

I want to use these first weeks of 2008 to talk about discernment because I think it is one of the most important spiritual practices of the church. How do we discern God's will for us? There are many competing voices—reason, tradition, popular opinion (not to mention the seven deadly sins which offer their own seductive justifications) but are these the essential or only measures when it comes to discerning God's will?

I would submit that if the wise men allowed any one or even all three of those benchmarks to determine whether to make their trip or not they would've stayed home.

So today and in the next couple of weeks I'd like to explore what it is that helps separate the wheat from the chaff of options in life when we are confronted with a difficult or uncertain situation and wonder what does God want us to do?

The question is of paramount importance when it comes to marriage and family life, choosing a college, charting a career and of particular relevance for congregations when leaders ask where are we headed in our mission and ministry. Which in fact, Westminster will be asking in the next two months as we engage in strategic planning that will give us a new vision to update our last vision launched in 2000.

Thomas Merton one of the great saints of the 20th century said, “I do not know if what I am doing is your will O God but my desire is to please you and I know that that desire indeed gives you pleasure.”

Perhaps the wisdom in Merton's prayer is humility—we can never say with absolute certainty that we know God's will but we do know that if we pursue what we think is his will with the aim of pleasing him we are on the right track.

This is critical counsel to an American Christianity that has claimed God's approval for foreign and domestic policies that run quite contrary to the message of Jesus. Peter Gomes in a new book entitled *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus* says we are so eager to claim him as the content of our preaching that we have ignored the content of his preaching.

I'd like to conclude today's meditation by offering for our consideration the first step of discernment – using common sense.

No divining rods or tarot cards, just plain common sense. In fact, an entire school of philosophy devoted to common sense emerged in the 18th century when David Hume concluded that just because we say there's a chair and we see a chair doesn't mean that there is actually a chair.

Hume's radical skepticism was important to the development of western thought but so was the reaction of his Scottish peers—yes, Davy they said, but when we sit on a chair that means something. Common sense realism they called their philosophy and I mention it because we either doubt its veracity in this age of sophisticated science or discount its contribution until we can consult with an “expert.” But practicing discernment does not require an advanced degree, it begins with common sense.

The three travelers demonstrated common sense at the end of the story today when they “left for their country by another road” so as not to encounter Herod.

Rejecting the king's command, violating the law would have put them in grave danger. Herod was a psychotic ruler whose reign was marked by brutal killings of anyone and everyone including his own sons when they displeased him.

Common sense grounds us in the real world. It isn't the only tool for discerning but invariably it helps to step back and ask “does this make sense?” The wise men's dream, another way of discerning, told them not to cooperate with Herod but common sense got them out of the country.

I mention common sense as an important ingredient in our discerning of God's will because it helps to counter the passive notion that God's will comes to us in some flash of light or booming voice from above.

In fact, I believe we encounter God mostly in the simple everyday events of life. Discerning God's will has to do with accepting that beguiling fact, then cultivating spiritual awareness. It is more often in the ordinary and mundane that we see into the depths of heaven and sense the presence and power of the Holy One.

The person who embraces all of life, says Michael Palmer, finds clarity and wisdom. In his early years Palmer was under the notion that Greek mythology or religious doctrine held the key to the meaning of life. Yet, he came to realize that to “memorize precisely the tint of a plum, curve of a body at rest, or words to each popular song” is enough.ⁱⁱ In other words, to pay attention to each day and be alert to the present moment.

Surely that would be enough he says. Surely to receive the bread and wine today would be enough: ordinary elements that remind us of extraordinary sacrifice.

Luther said “in and with and under every empirical reality is the divine reality of grace.” The yearning in our hearts for the light of God's truth leads us to unexpected, ordinary places where we find such treasure.

Thank God the wise men were like light-starved moths compelled to discern the meaning of the star and follow their intuition that the world's Savior was an infant. How hungry for God's light are we? Amen.

ⁱ Michael Palmer, *Company of Moths* (New York: New Directions Press, 2002) 15.

ⁱⁱ Palmer, 15.