

“Seek, Persevere, and be Empowered”

Matthew 2:1-23 & Psalm 29

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Prayer for Understanding God of starlight, every part of us is trying to seek you: our bodies that carried us into this space, our heads bowed in prayer, our hearts that keep whispering, “There is more than just this.” We are seeking you. Quiet the rest of the world. Speak to us in through these words. Gratefully we pray, amen.

Facets of epiphany involving seeking, persevering, and being empowered. In today’s scripture observe how each person has an epiphany and one does not: Magi through education, conversations, and a star; Joseph through dreams, keep in mind that dreams in scripture often entail sleepless wrestling with God; Mary through Joseph; and Herod who closes all of his senses to any form of love, peace, hope, and joy. A reading from the gospel of Matthew: **Matthew 2:1-23 NLT** “Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some magi from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him.” King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. Herod called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?” “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they said, “for this is what the prophet wrote: ‘And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are not least among the ruling cities of Judah, for a ruler will come from you who will be the shepherd for my people Israel.’” Then Herod called for a private meeting with the magi, and Herod learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then Herod told the magi, “Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!” After this interview the magi went their way. And the star they had seen in the east guided them to Bethlehem. It went ahead of them and stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were filled with joy! They entered the house and saw the child with his mother, Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasure chests and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. After the magi were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and his mother,” the angel said. “Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill him.” That night Joseph left for Egypt with the child and Mary, his mother, and they stayed there until Herod’s death. This fulfilled what the Lord had spoken through the prophet: “I called my Son out of Egypt.” Herod was furious when he realized that the magi had outwitted him. Herod sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the magi’s report of the star’s first appearance. Herod’s brutal action fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: “A cry was heard in Ramah—weeping and great mourning. Rachel weeps for her children, refusing to be comforted, for they are dead.” When Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt. “Get up!” the angel said. “Take the child and his mother back to the land of Israel, because those who were trying to kill the child are dead.” So Joseph got up and returned to the land of Israel with Jesus and his mother. But when Joseph learned that the new ruler of Judea was Herod’s son Archelaus, he was afraid to go there. Then, after being warned in a dream, he left for the region of Galilee. So the family went and lived in a town called Nazareth. This fulfilled what the prophets had said: ‘He will be called a Nazarene.’”

The names, identity, status, religion, culture, age, and gender of the magi are unknown. Often scripture does this when scripture wants us to put ourselves into the story. The magi were seekers. They sought wisdom, they sought the divine, they sought fortunes to tell the future. Their seeking leads them to Jesus, the newborn king of another culture and religion. And yet, their seeking is also what protects them from Herod’s deception and harm as they go home by another way. Despite the vagueness of their identities, we can learn much from their actions. They observe the star and discern that it is pointing them to the divine. Instead of ignoring it or simply observing it from afar, they decide to make the treacherous and arduous journey closer to Christ. They cross over geographic, political, religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries to seek out the newborn child. They are filled with joy at the sight of the child and humble themselves before him, bowing and bearing gifts. They listen intuitively to their dreams and evade Herod’s deception, choosing what is perhaps a more difficult journey home by a different route. Look closely at the actions of the Magi. What can we learn from them? What do they teach us about being a seeker, as in, one who persistently seeks the sacred?

Joseph seeks God through a dream. It sounds so clear, neat, and easy in scripture; however, a more detailed description of perceiving God's direction from a dream comes from Jacob. He is in inner turmoil, wrought with guilt over his unloving ways with his brother, uncertain as to how to reconcile with his brother who he is meeting in the morning, a herd of thoughts is stampeding through his mind as he considers his options. Scripture describes this as wrestling with God, wrestling with the "what if", wrestling with the "what should I do", wrestling with the "if only", wrestling with burdens trying to let them go, wrestling with change, wrestling with the invitation to transform, to become a more loving person, wrestling with all the things that come into our mind and heart on a sleepless night. Jacob awakes exhausted, bruised, battered, with a dislocated hip, with a new name Israel and with a blessing. Most of us have dreams like this, where we can't sleep because our mind is running wild, our heart is flooded with emotions, and we are seeking what should we do in the morning. Keep wrestling until you emerge with a sense of peace on a direction and a sense of blessing.

Mary seeks God through Joseph. I am curious about the details of Joseph sharing his perception of God's direction for their life. Joseph wakes up Mary, an exhausted mother, in the middle of the night and tells her that God wants them to leave their family and friends, no time to pack, flee with almost nothing to a foreign land. I am sure Mary had plenty of questions. I suspect Mary was skeptical of Joseph's instructions after all why didn't the angel come to Mary directly. And yet Mary seeks God's guidance through Joseph.

Jesus promised to never leave or forsake us. The Holy Spirit dwells in our soul. God is all around us and in us and we still should seek God. Humans have a hard time perceiving God even though God is always with us and loving us. One way to discern which ways are God's ways is with a peace test. If one is following God's guidance, there is usually a sense of peace. The way might be arduous, painful, and difficult and still be the way God desires for you if you are at peace with the journey. Keep in mind that God often offers a myriad of ways that are in accordance with God's will for you. God enjoys giving us an abundance of options. Other indicators that you are on God's way are love, joy, hope, and grace.

In contrast, we have Herod who refuses to seek God, refuses to worship God, wants only personal power, and hatefully kills innocent people to take what he wants. When Herod learns that the Magi are coming to pay homage to Christ, he is deeply troubled. The word for troubled is the same word used in Luke to describe Mary's initial reaction to the angel's news. Compare and contrast Mary and Herod. While they both may have had initial discomfort, they ultimately responded very differently. Compare their responses and how they each choose to act when God intervenes in their lives. Herod is an example of how a few bad choices coupled with refusing to seek God blinds and distorts. A bad way can quickly result in tremendous collateral damage.

Epiphany is seeking God. Epiphany is also persevering. The magi persevered on their long, difficult journey to worship Jesus. A persevering journey through uncertainty, past a murderous king and home by an uncharted way. Epiphany has the stark contrast of the already and not yet. God is with us. There will be joy for all people. The prince of peace is in our midst and yet Joseph, Mary and Jesus must persevere by fleeing for their lives as refugees to a foreign land. All the children under two years old in Bethlehem are slaughtered. Mary and Joseph likely had friends and family who had their child killed by Herod, because Herod was threatened by Jesus. Some of these grieving parents probably wished Jesus was never born. Mary and Joseph used all their resources and the gifts of the magi to make their escape. They likely arrived in Egypt with nothing, no job, no income, no money, no shelter, no friends, no family, and yet, they persevered believing that Jesus will bring peace, joy, and grace to everyone. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus persevered through tremendous trauma, pain and uncertainty.

It echoes the already and not yet perseverance of the exodus. In the wilderness the Israelites were already freed from slavery and not yet at home in the Promised land. The Israelites preserved for future generations. It was the freed slaves' children and grandchildren who made it to the Promised Land. No matter how bleak your life, keep persevering on the journeys that you sense are God's will for you. Each of us needs to leave forms of slavery again and again and again, throughout our life and continually be journeying to Promised Lands. Each journey changes, transforms, and expands our capacity for joy, peace, grace, and love.

As a boy, David sought God by playing a harp, singing, poetry, and through his friendship with Johnathan. David persevered by slaying the giants that blocked his path. David persevered by hiding from a king who sought to murder him. David persevered through his awful choices, adultery, lies, and murder. After persevering through these calamities, David sings of our God who empowers us. **Psalm 29 NLT "Honor the Lord, you heavenly beings; honor the Lord for God's glory and strength. Honor the Lord for the glory of God's name. Worship the Lord in the splendor of God's holiness. The voice of the Lord echoes above the sea. The God of glory thunders. The Lord thunders over the mighty sea. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord splits the mighty cedars; the Lord shatters the cedars of Lebanon. God makes Lebanon's**

mountains skip like a calf; God makes Mount Hermon leap like a young wild ox. The voice of the Lord strikes with bolts of lightning. The voice of the Lord makes the barren wilderness quake; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the Lord twists mighty oaks and strips the forests bare. In God's Temple everyone shouts, "Glory!" The Lord rules over the floodwaters. The Lord reigns as king forever. The Lord gives God's people strength. The Lord blesses them with peace."

Saint Anselm said: "God is greater than any conception of God we might have." If a journey to joyful, glorious, peaceful, love seems impossible then your perception of God is too small. Seek more of God's power. Imagine God creating light, effortlessly sculpting mountains, tossing around stars, creating you and sustaining the cosmos. Then, ponder how God is infinitely more powerful than your most spectacular conception. In Psalm 29, David is singing about God's power that is far beyond his ability to communicate. David has sought, persevered, and found that anything is possible with God, nothing is impossible for God. Psalm 29 is a prayer of empowerment that God will give us all strength to seek, persevere, and be empowered to complete our journeys.

Where did Mary, Joseph, and Jesus get strength for their journey? They sought, persevered, and were empowered by dreams, songs, and scripture, by stars, people, and adventures. Think of all the people who came alongside them. Elizabeth who empowered Mary with gracious hospitality. Shepherds who joyfully proclaimed the good news that Jesus will save all people. Magi who protected the Holy Family by going home another way and leaving gifts to finance their escape. Yet, surely, there were others too. People who helped the new parents and their child hide along the way to Egypt. Neighbors who helped settle the small family in a new country, among a new people. People who risked their lives as they helped them learn a new language, new ways of life and secure a job. They probably had many strangers who became family even though there was no blood relation. Imagine all the people who loved and helped, because they believed in a loving world, for a refugee family, for all people and for themselves. How does knowing that Jesus was a refugee affect your attitude, love, and action for refugees today? How does knowing that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus persevered through seemingly impossible journeys inspire you on your journeys and assure you that all will be glorious?

Like the magi, may we seek the divine and be willing to journey closer to God. Like those who helped the Holy Family, may we seek safety for all families who are under threat, seek a world of equality, peace, joy, and love for all. Like the magi, when the going gets tough may we persevere, when the known way is blocked may we seek God's strength to get home another way. Like Mary, Joseph, and Jesus may we persevere through ruthless murders, atrocities, and grief partnering with God in redeeming the world.

"A Blessing for the Seekers"

a poem by Sarah Speed

Blessed are you who turn your face up to the sky,
who open your arms to feel the wind,
who notice all the things that we should notice.
Blessed are you who are fluent in wonder and familiar with awe.
Blessed are you who, even now, dream dreams,
who have not lost hope,
who swear the glass is still half-full.
Blessed are you who plant trees
and sing the harmony,
who tell the children how this world can be magic.
Blessed are you who walk and seek and turn over every stone,
pointing out all the corners and colors
that God lives in.
Blessed are you.

Seek, persevere, and be empowered. Amen