

The First Reading is from Numbers 24:10-14.

Let me first introduce the characters in the reading. Balaam, son of Beor, was a seer from Arma, internationally famous for the effectiveness of his blessings and curses. Balak, king of Moab, has summoned Balaam to curse his enemies, the Israelites. Balak has asked Balaam not once, but three times to curse the Israelites. Our reading follows Balaam's third oracle to the Israelites in response to Balak's request. Listen for God's word to us through this reading.

¹⁰ Then Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together. Balak said to Balaam, "I summoned you to curse my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times.

¹¹ Now be off with you! Go home! I said, 'I will reward you richly,' but the LORD has denied you any reward."

¹² And Balaam said to Balak, "Did I not tell your messengers whom you sent to me, ¹³ 'If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the LORD, to do either good or bad of my own will; what the LORD says, that is what I will say'? ¹⁴ So now, I am going to my people; let me advise you what this people will do to your people in days to come."

Balak wanted curses. Yet, Balaam gave blessings. Even though Balak was a king, Balaam didn't go beyond or against what he heard from God. The Word of God to Balaam for Moab's enemies was a blessing, so Balaam blessed Israel. I wonder if power influences our hearing of

God's word. Or will we listen and not go beyond or against the word we hear from God, even in the face of power?

As we prepare to hear our second reading, I ask you to recall the year that is nearing completion. Did this year unfold as you expected? Did it bring unwelcomed surprises that interrupted your normal? Like the wise ones, did you stop along the way and seek directions? Or like Balak, did you not get what you asked for? What has the journey been like for you from January 1st through December 31st?

Listen to these very familiar words from Matthew's Gospel, for the magi have traversed afar. They have journeyed from Persia to Jerusalem. We enter the text as they approach King Herod in Jerusalem. **Listen to our Second Reading from the Gospel of Matthew 2:1-15.**

¹In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² asking, "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." ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴ and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by Micah the prophet:

⁶'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of
Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸ Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” ⁹ When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹ On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

“O star of wonder, star of night, star with royal beauty bright, westward leading, still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect light.” The sweet scene of the manger is fading fast

as this year comes to a close. Christmas lights are being taken down. Christmas decorations are being boxed away. Christmas trees are finding their way to the curb. Stores are turning their displays into red hearts and candies. So, how do we hold onto the wonder – O star of wonder – as the calendar turns from 2017 to 2018?

The refrain of “We Three Kings” reminds us that the star is **still proceeding**. Or as poet Ann Weems writes “It is not over.” It is not over, this birthing... [for] God will be born in places we can’t imagine.” The way we can hold onto wonder throughout the year is to never stop watching for this proceeding, this birthing. Never stop wondering where God will be born in your daily routines. Never stop wondering where this birthing will take place in our world. This birthing is something we will see with our hearts, if our hearts are attuned to the truth of God’s extravagant love.

You have heard about Sunrise Advent Lectio Divina for six weeks now and our last gathering takes place this Thursday. I find it telling that this past Thursday, three individuals were touched by the phrase “**still proceeding**.” I sensed that “**still proceeding**” resonated with them because God is not yet finished with them or with us or our world. God, waits, like the stopped star perched over Bethlehem, and hopes that we will realize that this birthing that took place in Bethlehem and continues to take place in places we can’t imagine. This birthing in Bethlehem was simply a beginning, for this birthing is “**still proceeding**” in us or in the world around us.

The words that caught my attention this past Thursday were “**guide us**.” I heard these words in a

plaintive voice. “**Guide us**, please, **guide us**, God. Please give us signs as clear as the star of wonder. Illuminate the way before us, even if the journey takes us through fields and fountains, moors and mountains.

When I imagine the magi embarking on their journey, even though they didn’t know their exact destination, I stand amazed. I mean, how good of a traveler are you, if you don’t know where you are going? Do you like the suspense or is it just unnerving? I imagine most of us like to know where we are going. Somehow knowing our destination puts us at ease. We may not be there yet, but at least we will know when we arrive.

The text only tells us that the magi were from the East. Yet, their point of origin is only speculative. “The fact is,” writes Dwight Longenecker, “we don’t know where the wise men came from, and although early sources suggest they came from as far away as India, China and Arabia, most say Persia.”

We don’t know where their journey began, but we do know where they were guided. Do you remember where your journey began on January 1st? Where were you? What were your hopes? What were your dreams? Was there a sense that God would guide you through this year?

The characters in our texts this morning sensed that God would provide guidance. Balaam said, “What the LORD says, that is what I will say.” Balaam didn’t pronounce curses as the king had wanted. Balaam listened first. He inquired of the Lord and then shared what he had heard from God. God guided him, even though it caused him to defy power. The magi listened to Herod, who listened to the chief priests and scribes. Yet, in a

dream God spoke to the magi, and warned them not to return to Herod. Instead, they left for their own country by another road. God guided the Magi, by the rising of a star, through the political and religious powers of Jerusalem, and in a dream. An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and Joseph got up and took the child and his mother by night and went to Egypt. God guided Joseph once again in a dream, do you remember his first dream? An angel said to him, "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Joseph was open to God's guidance.

I wonder if we are open to God's guidance. Do we listen for the stirrings of God at work in our lives? Do we trust that God is present as we journey through life?

A journey of faith... Balaam didn't know what Balak might do to him, given that he didn't do what was requested of him. Yet, Balaam stayed true to the words given to him by God. In reading the larger story in Numbers again, I personally was surprised that Balaam didn't have to run for his life. He basically said, "No to power." Yet, the text simply said that he got up and went back to his place. God's provision for Balak was enough.

A journey of faith... the magi left on a journey that some believe may have taken up to two years and they weren't even sure of their final destination. Yet, they were compelled to make the journey, so that they could pay homage to the child born to be king of the Jews. They came to worship and bring gifts to this child heralded by a star of wonder. God's provision was enough for them.

William Sloane Coffins has a wonderful description of these faith journeys, for he writes, “I love the recklessness of faith. First you leap, and then you grow wings.”

First you leap... did you leap at some point this past year trusting that you would grow wings? I know I did, as Paul and I moved to Redlands and I began this new call. In many ways, this journey felt riskier than leaving the corporate world of chemical engineering and becoming a pastor. My first call, only required that I change jobs. This journey of faith required me to pack up all my belongings from a home I had lived in since 1982. It required me to move to a community I did not know, which was miles away from our family and all of our friends. In a very short amount of time my journey of faith caused me to leap again and again, from accepting this call to finding out I had breast cancer, from surgery to recovery, from leaving a community of faith I dearly loved to beginning this new call among strangers. This past year had been a journey of faith, for I have leapt, trusting that God would provide for wings. God’s provision has been more than enough!

First you leap... this is where we are as a church on this last day of 2017. As I imagine our 2018 together, we are going to have to leap, not once, but often, trusting that God will give us wings. If we don’t leap, then new beginnings will not be possible. If we don’t leap, decline will be inevitable.

The good news is your session has already made a leap of faith in hiring Dr. Alina Artemova, as our new Director of Music and Chancel Choir. Alina is making a leap, just as I did last January when I began my call among you. Alina is trusting that God is going to help her

grow wings in this new community. She is trusting that God will help her establish teaching opportunities and voice students in our geographic region. God's provision will be enough for Alina, just as it will be enough for us.

The good news is I have heard through our 2018 commitments of those among us, who are going to leap first, trusting that God will give them wings as they journey into unknown territories and serve our community. I know I will be making more than one leap in the coming year... my first is to participate in the homeless count slated for January 25th. Although, I have years of experience in the area of homelessness in Orange County, I don't have much experience here in San Bernardino County and the systems and structures in place to respond to this issue are very different in this county. I also have never participated in this annual count. I am trusting that God will give me wings that I need on January 25th. Another leap I am being prompted to make by the Spirit at work in my life, is to engage in a local school as a volunteer. I'm sure you will hear more about this as the new year unfolds and I begin to volunteer in a classroom.

A journey of faith requires a posture of listening, for the star of God's presence among us is **still proceeding**. God goes before us to guide us towards the Perfect Light. This still proceeding, this birthing, as Ann Weems wrote, is something we will see with our hearts, as we open ourselves to the wonder of the Perfect Light among us.

We don't have the luxury of hearing Balaam or the Magi reflect on their journeys of faith. Yet, we have each other's. As I reflect on this year that is coming to a close, I

am so thankful that I leapt, trusting that God would give me wings. What about you? Amen.