

WHAT'S YOUR SPIRITUAL PATH

So today we have two gospel readings, which is very unusual. We missed a little Christmas, we missed the New Year's, so the good news is you're not going to miss any of the great scripture for the Christmas holidays. The bad news is my sermon's going to be twice as long and based on the laughter that I'm hearing, I take that back, I'll keep it short. I don't want to lose anybody, I'll keep it concise. Even though all the stores are ripping down their Christmas decorations and everybody is throwing their trees away. In the Christian calendar, this is the last Sunday of Christmas- Epiphany Sunday and it marks the visit of the wise men and last week, we would have talked about the shepherds. We're going to do both and they actually fit very nicely together I think.

So these two stories of the shepherd and the wise men, if you have any connection to any church, ever grew up in anything remotely religious, you've heard these stories of these beautiful visits. These are the two beautiful visits to the baby Jesus. One the shepherds with their sheep at night, an angel comes, they're literally scared as hell. It says they are "...sore afraid" and He says "Fear not, the prophecy has come through, go visit the baby." So we know the shepherds go and visit directly. Now, on the other side, years from maybe Persia or Syria these wise scholars, we say three because there were three gifts but we don't know it's probably an entourage of people outside of the region were travelling a long distance following a star and they see that star and they get closer and closer and they get just in the neighbourhood of Israel and they know they're really close and they stop and they ask a king, king Herod for advice "Which way? Can you point us in the direction? This is a big deal. This is the big prophecy even in our faith we know about it, we've travelled to bring gifts." Herod being an evil king says "Yes tell me where the baby is and let me know, I want to worship him," which meant that Herod wanted to kill this threat to his

kingdom. And so these wise leaders come, visit Jesus and they're warned by an angel "Don't go back to Herod, go back to your country," and they do. These are two beautiful Christmas stories. So what do they have to do with us? At the literal level at the surface level, these are just beautiful stories of the two visitors to God coming into flesh into the world.

At the spiritual level if we go a little deeper, we can ask: what does this mean to us? How can we apply this to us and what are the deeper meanings of shepherds and wise men, what could they mean? And I think they fit nicely as two examples of different spiritual paths that people find to God. And as you're listening, you can ask yourself, are you more of a shepherd in your spiritual path or are you more like the wise men? So what's the difference? The shepherd symbolically right, the shepherds, we do the 23rd psalm every Sunday: "*The Lord is my shepherd...*" Shepherds are nurturing, love, innocence of a lamb. There is a simplicity to it. You've got to love the shepherds. They get spiritual connection directly through revelation. They are perceived by others as simple people sometimes: "They're not sophisticated, they're shepherds but God can speak to them directly and they get it directly and they go directly to God and they respond just by their love and it's direct, it's quick, it's fast and they're the first ones. When we see the manger scenes we always see like the wise men here and the shepherds here but the truth is that the wise men came a long time after the shepherds because they are travelling, so maybe Jesus was a year old when they get there, we don't know, but it's much later. They're on a track and they have a different spiritual path. While the shepherds are guided more by their heart, the wise men are guided more by their head; they are more intellectual; they study. They study symbols, the stars and they are not even in that surrounding spiritual community and yet their faith and their knowledge guides them. And they are tenacious, think about it, they're going to this far distance and they obviously didn't know the local politics because they asked Herod for advice in finding this new king so they are coming from a far distance but they are more the head. And generally people in communities generally operate either from more of the heart

or more of the head and so you can ask yourself, which are you? Are you more motivated in your phase of more direct; you don't need a lot of explanation, it can even be mystical in its connection, or are you more someone who has to really study it, you've got to really figure it out, you want to approach it like a scientist.

Swedenborg, who the teachings of this church are based on, he was interestingly first a scientist and then he used that scientific method to incorporate a mystical understanding so there's hopefully in each of us there is a meshing of both. And whatever side we're a little bit weaker on, we can actually, this year, in this coming year we might even look to grow that side of ourselves. So if you're more of a shepherd person, everything is direct, your heart moves you, you don't need to know the details, you're not really interested in the study of it. Maybe 2017's a time to be more like the wise men, incorporate a little bit more of the mind. But if you're totally wrapped up in your head and you are totally in intellect, it might be time to open up your feelings and your heart and have the direct mystical call of God, both are complementary. One is not better than the other both are beautiful, love and truth combined into the way we can understand God. So you can think of which path you're on.

But there is a third element here that I can't fail to observe. We know that they were visited by shepherds and they were visited by wise men but who weren't they visited by? Who didn't come? That might be the most striking part of the story. If God came in human flesh, God came into the world and this is a big moment, the most important day for the Christian calendar, if all that's true, what's really amazing is how few people did get it. Almost nobody got it, even the wise men are probably from a different religion they might be Zoroastrian or something else. It wasn't the local folks who had the prophecies. What's amazing about God coming into the world is who didn't get the message. And I find that fascinating right now. And I don't want to sound judgmental about our current country and our world that we're in right now but I just have to say, I'm struck in my work that I do, how many people are not on any spiritual path at all. And I

think that has very negative connotations for the world. I think it's very important to have a God guiding you and being on some spiritual path. It was startling the night we did a group on spiritual thinking with millennials here at the church. We did it upstairs in the upstairs chapel and there was a moment where I just asked, where do you find your own spiritual guidance? Where do you develop your inner life? We kind of went around the group and people said, "I don't, I don't have a way, what is the way?" And I remember Malcolm said "Do you read books?" You know, the wise man path, "No," on this topic. "Do you engage in prayer and meditation?" The closest was yoga; stretching, that meditation, but that was the closest. So I do think we're in a world right now where the need to bring in spiritual paths, whether they be more like the wise men or more like the shepherds is more important than ever so I challenge you for 2017 to re-examine your own spiritual path, balance it out a little bit this year and let's all do a better job in this church of being a place that could actually help those who are trying to get on the path itself. Amen.