SERMON – Pastor Ingrid Rasmussen
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
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The gospel according to Matthew, the second chapter:

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

“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.” ’

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 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.’ 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. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Word of God. Word of life. Thanks be to God.

You’d recognize Saint Francis of Assisi, that is, if his statuette could be found under the piles of snow in the garden. He’s the 13th Century Italian saint, who is often pictured with animals lounging on his shoulders, arms, and a bird perched atop his head. What you may or may not know about this patron saint of ecologists is that he was raised as the son of a wealthy cloth merchant. His father wanted him to become a businessman, just like him.

When Saint Francis was nineteen, he was called up to military service and went to battle against a neighboring town. The young Francis was captured by the enemy and held prisoner for a year before his father paid the ransom to free Francis. Over the next few years, Francis began to see visions from God that changed his life—visions of God calling him to help the sick, visions of God telling him to repair the church, which was falling into ruins. These visions led Francis to give all of his money to the church, which angered his wealthy father. Francis left home, took a vow of poverty, and created a religious community that would later become known as the Order of the Franciscans.

It’s stories like this one that we usually think of when we hear the word “vocation,” which grows out of the Latin word that means “to call.” We often imagine that God’s call is dramatic calling us from riches to poverty, from the life we’ve known to the life yet unknown. There is certainly a solid biblical foundation for this understanding of vocation, particularly around Christmas and Epiphany. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds—they all experience dramatic, angelic callings. And the Magi—the wise astrologers in today’s gospel reading? Even the cosmos seemed to be in on the delivery of God’s VIP message to them.

These are what I call lightning bolt call stories—unforgettable moments when God’s voice is a clear as a starry January night’s sky. Some of you have had experiences like these that have caused you to dramatically change course, pick up and move from one place to another, or totally reorient your value system. You’ve started a relationship or left a relationship, you’ve given everything away or you’ve decided to keep a little more for the sake of self-preservation, you’ve taken a risk or you’ve sought safety—all because a divine voice offered guidance.

I love to hear those stories from y’all, partly because I’ve never experienced something like this. There have been no angelic visits, no cosmic signs, no pronouncements from heaven that have graced my life’s story. When asked to talk about my vocation or call story in seminary, I struggled to find language that could convey my sense of God’s work in and through my life. It took me months to articulate that God’s movement in and through my life was through angels that doubled as next door neighbors, cosmic coincidences that looked like sunrises over corn fields, and heavenly pronouncements that sounded an awful lot like my best friend’s voice.

In the case of Saint Francis of Assisi, God’s calling led him out of the life that he had known. The same might be said for Mary and Joseph; after they were told that Mary would bear a messiah that wouldn’t really act like a messiah, they never quite returned to the life they had imagined for themselves.

The other characters in these stories, however, only take temporary detours from the life they’ve known. The shepherds leave their fields to catch a glimpse of a manger filled with hope. The wise ones leave their planetariums in order to walk, and walk, and walk, and walk some more at the urging of a single star. And after they’ve witnessed what they set out to see, the text says that these shepherds and these wise folks return to their fields, to their own countries, to the work and life they had always known.

Perhaps this is as miraculous as a vocational 180 degree turn. Maybe it’s just as miraculous that these witnesses, after experiencing love that they had never before known, return to the work that they had been given. Maybe it’s just as miraculous that the text says that they “returned [to their regular lives], glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen.” In the words of Howard Thurman, “When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flock, the work of Christmas begins.” It turns out that the love of Jesus wasn’t relegated to the manger. It went with them, imbuing their everyday lives with light and purpose.

Epiphany can feel otherworldly—stars, strangers, and strange gifts. But what if epiphany is a reminder that God is calling us back into ordinary realms—the home, the workplace, the neighborhood, the streets—and strengthening us for our many callings in life as friend, student, parent, partner, worker, volunteer, citizen, peacemaker…you name it. We need not abandon our circumstances to pursue a higher calling. God calls us, right now, where we are, in the fields in which we find ourselves roaming.

The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, famously recalls an experience he had while he was out running errands one day, saying, “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness…And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.”

Epiphany beckons us toward Bethlehem, but our journey doesn’t end there. Like the Magi, we turn right around and find that God is shining in and through all of creation, inviting us in our everyday lives to share in the light.

Thanks be to God. Amen.