

“Awake, Alive, Alert”

Some years ago I read a seminal and for me life changing book. Despite growing up in a rural area I had become blind to the natural world in which I lived. Then I read Annie Dillard’s book *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. Then, as if scales had fallen from my eyes and ears, I heard geese migrating overhead, and really saw individual trees as they changed color. I experienced the natural world around me even as I was living in a small city. Reading the book was like a series of epiphanies as I became more aware the natural world around me.

This segment of Matthew’s Gospel is about epiphanies. The details of Magi, kings, pilgrimage and their actions may get in the way of the underlying message the Gospel. That is the revelations of the Divine will to regular humans. In the verses leading up to this passage we learn that the Magi, who were astrologers not kings, had seen a star that revealed to them that a great king had been born. They tracked the stars path through the heavens. Apparently, they lost sight of it around the time they got to Jerusalem and decided that would be a good place to ask for directions. Since no one there seemed to know anything about this king they kept traveling and were startled to find it resting over Bethlehem, just about five miles outside of Jerusalem.

After worshiping the toddler Jesus (shepherds and Magi did not meet in Bethlehem our crèches and Christmas pageants notwithstanding) and the Holy Family, the Magi decided to head home. They are warned in a dream not to go back to Jerusalem but go another way. This was another revelation from God. In this case, it was to prevent Herod from learning the identity of the Christ child.

As the Magi leave, Joseph has a dream; he has had a heavenly dream at least once before. In this dream he is warned to flee Bethlehem to save Jesus from the wrath of Herod. In his dream he is told to go to Egypt. That is where they will be safe. It is a trip of a mere 260 miles on foot to Cairo, with a toddler in tow.

After some unspecified time in Cairo he is told the Herod is dead, and with him the fearful harm he intended Jesus. But just in case the Holy Family is not to return to Bethlehem but instead to go to Nazareth. This is a Galilean town about as far from Jerusalem as Cairo is, but in the other direction.

In addition to being revelations from God, these movements are important to Matthew because they fulfill prophecies from the Hebrew Bible. That they messiah will come out of Egypt and that he will be a Nazorean, or one from Nazareth.

Matthew thinks it is also important for Jesus’ life to mirror that of Moses. You may recall that Pharaoh orders the slaughter of Jewish males and the baby Moses is narrowly saved from death. Moses also leaves Egypt for what will become Israel. He also meets God on a mountain as Jesus will later in Matthew

at the Transfiguration and when he gives the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus calms the Sea of Galilee as Moses parted the Red Sea. Moses and the Hebrews spend forty years in the Wilderness and Jesus spends forty days there also.

It is hard to know how much of this is historical. What is important is not the history but what these faith stories tell us about who the writer thinks Jesus is. The stories are also supposed to tell us something about ourselves. In this case it is the importance of listening to and for God. In Matthew Joseph encounters God in dreams, Mary encounters God in the form of a heavenly messenger, Magi see God's message in the stars, and so on; whereas, Herod the King hears and sees nothing. He has to rely on second hand reports to know what is up. When he does not get them he lashes out in frustration. He may think he is in charge but he isn't.

If we are to be in communication with God and not just passive followers or ignorant fools like Herod, we have to have our antenna on God's frequency. The way to get there is the way the people of old did. That is by hearing or reading scripture, regular worship, and most importantly prayer. These are what make us aware of what God is up to. These are what give our lives direction and purpose.