

Stars, Dreams and New Paths
First UCC 1.6.19 Matthew 2:1-12
January 6, 2019
Pastor Lauren Baske Davis

One of my favorite new books this year is by famous author, professor and preacher Barbara Brown Taylor. But instead of her commentary on faith and life like her books *Altar in the World*, or *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, or a compilation of her sermons on Matthew or Mark's gospels, my current favorite of hers is her first work in a different genre: children's literature. She tells the story we read today from Matthew 2 of the wise ones and their journey following the direction of their dreams and a star as they go to find Jesus. I love the details she chooses and imagines as she tells the story.

It starts out like this: "Once upon a time there were three very wise men who were all sitting in their own countries, minding their own business, when a bright star lodged in the eye of each one of them. The star was so bright that none of them could tell whether it was burning in the sky or in their own imaginations, but they were wise enough to know it did not matter all that much. The point was something beyond them was calling them and it was a tug they had been waiting for all their lives."¹

Stars in their eyes, or *real* stars? They weren't sure. She continues to tell how they were spending their lives seeking in various ways, by learning ancient languages, walking on hot coals, or living solely on dried herbs boiled in water. They were each looking for a reason to do something different, to get out of town. Isn't that all of our stories at some point in our lives?

They each felt the star was calling them out of the lives they knew—the "reputations they built, the high expectations, the disappointments."² Each thought they were the only one with a star in their eye until they ran into each other on the road to Jerusalem. Isn't that the human story? We mistakenly think we are the only ones experiencing a pull or tug in our hearts, a star in our eye so to speak, or an unsettled feeling in our belly that's trying to tell us something. But we know what she means.

Because it is my first Sunday I want to tell you how I came to be here, and where I came from. You see, it has seemed to me that each point of my life has come to be through an unexpected tug, "a star in my eye" so to speak, that I followed not knowing entirely where it was leading. It is an unsettling feeling to

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, 2018.

² Ibid.

be³ sure. To follow a path not knowing where it will lead. And I know I am not alone in having felt that way. I am a person who likes to collect all possible knowledge and information before ever making a decision. I suspect some of you are too. Yet, here we are, First UCC, headed on a journey in 2019 and we are not quite sure where it is leading us. But I think we can trust that God will provide some light to lead the way.

Okay, some basics about me. I grew up in the far north suburbs of Chicago. I am the child of two parents who found a home in the UCC before I was born. I was raised my entire life in the UCC at a small country church that was formed by abolitionists who ensured that the paths of the Underground Railroad went through the basements of the church. My home church was very proud of that. And so I find it both moving and fitting that this UCC church to which I *feel* called is also prepared to use its basement to ensure the safety of those who might need it.

I have one older sister who lives in the Cities with her family. My parents still live in Illinois near where we grew up. When I came to Minnesota for St. Olaf College in 2000, I didn't need to go home by any other way (like the wise ones did), because Minnesota quickly felt like home to me.

One summer, while a student at St. Olaf, I got to do a Lilly grant internship through St. Olaf and Luther Seminary on the topic of vocational discernment. I and three other interns worked at churches around the Twin Cities in a variety of neighborhoods. The experience just might have been the first glimmer of a star in my eye (or the sky), steering me towards seminary. But not right away. After college I was eager to not take classes for a couple of years.

So I graduated St. Olaf, moved to Rochester, Minnesota, worked at a nonprofit and hung out a lot with my soon to be spouse Jonathan. We married a couple years out of college, worked another year, then when we were both a bit burned out in our jobs, we went on a journey like those ancient travelers to Jerusalem who were looking for something else—though we weren't sure what it would be, what shape it would take, or how it would affect our lives. We both entered Luther Seminary.

After a year there, I determined I would not be continuing. I loved seminary but did not want to be a pastor. I also had thought my goal to be a chaplain would be the path, but in a required hospital internship, I found it to be unsustainable. So I worked hard to quit seminary. But I failed. I explored careers in baking, publishing and culinary school. The problem was that I had already paid for a

³ © First United Church of Christ, Northfield MN

seminary course abroad. Looking back maybe it was less of a problem and more of that star shining in my eye.

My class was in Geneva, Switzerland, centered around learning alongside seminary students from around the globe - Ethiopia, Nigeria and Argentina. We met together to discuss theology and global issues like climate change, AIDS, and colonialism. It was those conversations and the people I met there on the journey that convinced me that I had to keep pursuing this seminary thing. Eventually I graduated from United Seminary, a seminary where I found that I felt more at home. I gained a love for pastoral ministry over those three years at United by working part time at Macalester Plymouth Presbyterian UCC church in St. Paul.

By the time I graduated, my husband Jon was already working as a pastor, called to two rural churches outside of Owatonna, Minnesota. Along the way, our son Elliot was born, and after graduating I stayed home with him and parented for a year and a half. It was hard and messy and glorious. I remember that time for so many firsts—baby cooing, babbling, crawling, walking, peekaboo, but when I think back to that time I mostly think of all of the yogurt I cleaned out of Elliot's hair.

Then I got a call, out of the blue, one day, from a family friend who was a Lutheran pastor in town, saying they really needed a part time pastor, but even more, they wanted female voice from the pulpit, and would I be interested? It seemed like a dream. Not the kind of warning dream the wise ones have about Herod. The kind of dream that felt like an answer, to a question I didn't realize I'd been asking. Despite the denominational complexity, it seemed to be perfect place and timing. I became Associate Pastor there for five years. Later, we talked about that moment on the phone, because both my colleague and I experienced it as a flash of light. Maybe like stars in our eyes.

And now, after having just said goodbye to that congregation last month, God's leading, God's light has led me here. To you. What journeys will we travel together? Some are clear—Todd is doing this incredible thing, serving in the legislature—Abby has served you faithfully for six years. She and I are your primary pastors for several months. There is joy and grief in all of this. But we will walk this road together. I don't know all of the places we will travel. But I know I am here to love you and walk with you. And I hope that in our journey together, we can follow the Spirit's leading, seeking the ways of Jesus and the wisdom the God. And through that seeking, I trust we will delight in some unforeseen joy that, like the wise ones, may fill us in ways we didn't know we needed. Thanks be to God. Amen.