

## *Paying Attention*

Matthew 2:1-15

March 5, 2017

Years ago we began a little tradition in our family for Birthday Celebrations. This tradition is rather simple, but for me its beauty is found in its simplicity. The one celebrating the birthday chooses the menu for a home cooked meal for just the 5 of us, and the birthday boy or girl gets to eat from a “SPECIAL PLATE.” While Joshua, Jacob and Emma Grace have their own personalized “Special Plate” (courtesy of their YaYa & Papa Smith), Amy & I have a Red “YOU ARE SPECIAL TODAY” plate. Maybe some of you have similar plates and traditions.

Now, I may not remember every detail of every birthday celebration, but I do remember October (my birthday month) of 2008. After dinner, we sat together while I opened their gifts to me. The last gift I opened that night was from Amy and came in the form of a card. As I read the card I began to cry which without any warning turned to weeping. Not knowing what to make of my reaction, Amy asked if she had done something wrong, and through a cracked voice I told her “oh no, this is the most loving, thoughtful greatest gift I have ever received.”

Now, before I tell you what the gift was, it is important that we all realize the subjectivity of our lives. You see, I have since discovered (truth be told, I probably knew before) that what I describe as the most loving, thoughtful, greatest gift I have ever received, most people I know describe with opposite adjectives. Even my own Amy would never want this gift.

So, what was the gift? Well for a few years at this point Amy had heard me talk about doing a “SILENT RETREAT”, and while it seemed to me that she dismissed this idea, she had apparently been taking mental notes. Then she had taken the time to research silent retreats in North Carolina and remarkably landed on a website for “A Quiet Place” which turns out to be a “retreat” (I use that word lightly) situated in the Mountains of North Carolina just beyond Spruce Pine, NC. A Quiet Place consists of an old farm house and two 1 room cabins. A stream leading to a 50’ waterfall runs through the property. Neither cabin has running water, but none of that seems to matter when you are there.

The property is owned by Cecilia and Michael who met me as I arrived. Michael led me to my cabin and on our way, he asked “are you going to enter into the SACRED SILENCE?” When I responded that I was, he quickly asked if I had brought anything to read. I said as a matter of fact in addition to my stay at A Quiet Place, Amy gave me a Barnes & Noble gift card that I had used earlier that morning to purchase a couple of books to read during my stay. Upon hearing this, he suggested that I not read if I really wanted to enter into the SACRED SILENCE. This caught me off-guard a little, but believing him to be the expert, I did as he suggested and replaced reading with journaling without really understanding why he suggested this, but boy did I soon find out.

For the next 2 days, I hiked, wrote in my journal, hiked, wrote in my journal, and hiked and wrote in my journal some more. As I wrote I found myself often crying, which maybe does not come as a shock to some of you. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that my tears came from both anger and fear, all of which I directed toward God. Then as I sat on a hilltop around 4:00 PM that second day, God showed up and proceeded to talk to me for the next hour. It was such an incredible experience that I remember it like it happened just a few minutes ago. During that entire time, I never uttered a word, and to anyone who might have been witnessing my time with God, they would tell you they didn’t see or hear God. As though they would know, I have no doubt about this experience. God, in the form of a Ground Hog, spent close to an hour letting me know that I didn’t have to be scared. I didn’t have to fear life or where my life was headed.

You see, God demonstrated what my life had looked like for so long. 1 step forward then immediate retreat to shelter. Then 2 steps forward and retreat, 3 steps forward, retreat... and on and on and on. With each step God took forward, I heard assurances that God is with me each and every step I take in my own journey. God said, “You are not alone. You are my beloved child and I will never leave you. You are valuable beyond measure and I love you my son.”

Now some of you might think it funny that God came to me as a Groundhog, and I get that. Some of you may be thinking what have we done calling this guy as our Senior Pastor, (Hopefully that’s not the case). The funny thing is I am ok with these reactions to this part of my story, as the truthfulness of my lived experience seems to overcome others disbelief.

Something else can easily happen with other peoples' stories: they can captivate our imagination to the point that we want to know more and more about what really happened... and then our desire to better understand could even cause of us to make additions to the story.

Take today's scripture and the story of the Magi. Their story has so captured our imagination that over time poets have written about it, artists have painted about it and musicians have sung about it. When you consider how little we actually know about their story, this is quite remarkable. As my father-in-law, Dr. Mike Queen has said, "[O]f all the stories around the life of Jesus, it is this one about a visitation by so-called 'wise men' that is often the most misunderstood."

The thing is, when you combine imaginative captivation with a lack of knowledge, the end result always seems to be a story that sounds wonderful. A story without wholes or gaps. A complete story as some might say. This is exactly what has happened to the Magi's story for even though we might sing "We Three Kings," the reality is they were not kings and according to Matthew there were not 3. Add that we really don't know who they were; where their journey to Bethlehem began; how long the journey took, how old Jesus was when they arrived, or much of anything about this famous star, and we might find ourselves questioning everything.

Luckily even when we reach this point, throwing it all out as false is not the only option. There is another way for those who **PAY ATTENTION** when interacting with biblical stories. I love what Barbara Brown Taylor has to say when we find ourselves in this place with the stories of our Bible. She says, "[I]t is not that the facts don't matter. It is just that they don't matter as much as the stories do, and stories can be true whether they happen or not. You do not have to do archaeology to find out if they are genuine, or spend years in the library combing ancient texts. There is another way... You just listen to the story. You let it come to life inside of you, and then you decide on the basis of your own tears or laughter whether the story is true... it is always a good idea to watch other people who have listened to the story – just **PAY ATTENTION** to how the story affects them over time. Does it make them more or less human? Does it open them up or shut them down? Does it increase their capacity for joy?"

All of these questions point in the direction of the heart, you see, while pointing away from the head. These questions point to feeling and away

from thinking, which for some seems harder and harder to do. The thing is, reason and analysis don't help us much with this story because this **IS** a story of the heart. This is a story of those who listened to the promptings of God and responded. This is a story of those who **PAID ATTENTION** to the things happening around them and most importantly opened themselves up so they could **PAY ATTENTION** to God's call to journey, and to God's leading during the journey itself. It seems none of their story had anything to do with whether or not others believed in its truth because theirs was a journey toward hope.

When I am able to let their story work on me in this way I find that I no longer need to know each detail because it is enough for me to know that something called deep into their souls and caused them to launch this journey in the first place. I know what that feels like, and while my experience involved God speaking to me through a Groundhog while I sat on the top of a hill listening, theirs was different. Amazingly, both ended with us accepting God's invitation to journey. And just like the Magi needed to **PAY ATTENTION**, I did too.

The thing is **PAYING ATTENTION** can oftentimes feel so hard, but I believe it is a must. The fast pace of our lives can make **PAYING ATTENTION** to anything difficult, and cause us to say that God is silent. We should never allow our inability to **PAY ATTENTION** to cause us to believe God is silent.

Even in my life, I had to journey away from home and voluntarily enter into the **SACRED SILENCE** before I could **PAY ATTENTION** to God. But you know something, by doing this I can stand before any and every crowd and say that I know God still speaks to people today. Not all of us can journey away like I did, but I do believe all of us can **PAY BETTER ATTENTION**.

The handful of days I spent in the **SACRED SILENCE** remain the most loving, thoughtful greatest gift I have ever received. It was there that God and I spent about an hour together and I **PAID ATTENTION**. It was there that God assured me I didn't have to be scared; I didn't have to fear life or where my life was headed. It was on that hilltop where God said so clearly, Jason I am with you each and every step you take on your journey. Jason I want you to always remember that you are my beloved child and I will never leave you. You are valuable beyond measure and I love you my son.

My prayer today is that we all **PAY ATTENTION** to the promptings of God in our lives.

May we always know we are not alone.

May we come to realize fear does not have to dictate our actions and our lives.

May all of us remember that we are God's beloved children and God will never leave us.

And may we live our lives feeling and believing it is true when God says, you are valuable beyond measure and I love you my child.

In Jesus' name...Amen.