

FOLLOWING THE LIGHT AND LISTENING TO OUR DREAMS

Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches

January 3, 2009

Matthew 2: 1-12

I have a file marked "Favorite Cartoons" and it is made up of my favorite newspaper clippings of Calvin and Hobbes and The Far Side. As I was searching through some of them this week, I found a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon appropriate for this morning. For those of you who aren't familiar with this cartoon, Calvin is a young, adventurous, and typically mischievous boy. His stuffed tiger, Hobbes, comes to life for Calvin and talks and plays with him as long as no one else is around. In this cartoon Hobbes says to Calvin, "Are you making any resolutions for the New Year?" Calvin responds, "Nope! I want everything to stay the same as it was this year." Hobbes questions, "Everything?" "Right," Calvin says, "this year was lousy, but at least it's familiar. I hate change! It's too disruptive! When things are different, you have to think about the change and deal with it! I like things to stay the same, so I can take everything for granted! Besides, things keep changing for the worse! The longer I live, the more complicated everything gets! I say let's stop here before life gets any harder. From now on, no more change!" Calvin and Hobbes look at each other for a while in silence and the cartoon ends with Calvin running and

saying to Hobbes, "I'm bored. Let's do something different." And Hobbes responds, "Some things don't ever change!"

As much as we all tend to resist changes in our life, life without change would be in the very least boring. Leo Buscalia, who was famous for his perspectives on love and life, said this about change, "The greatest risk in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, and becomes nothing. I may avoid suffering and sorrow, but in doing so, I also avoid feeling, growing, learning, and living. Chained by my certitudes, I have become a slave--I forfeited my freedom. Only the person who risks is truly free."

From reading this passage in Matthew, it seems that the wise men were willing to risk change in their life to follow the star and find the Christ child. The Greek term for "magi" suggests that the "wise men" were priestly sages from Persia, who were experts in astrology and the interpretation of dreams. What distinguishes them in this story is their naïve, sincere and persistent search for the baby, "born King of the Jews." These wise men were known to be veteran, sophisticated travelers who used the stars to guide their travels as we would follow the voice on our car's GPS.

The comparison of life to a journey is a very ancient one, and we are all travelers whether we think of it that way or not, trekking from places and relationships that are fairly known and comfortable, to places and relationships that are unknown and uncomfortable and that beckon us to come anyway. If we, like the wise men, are to be led by the light and listen to our dreams, we must be willing to risk change and we must have passion and persistence for the journey itself.

One of the greatest stories written for children of all ages tells of a journey that a young girl took with three outlandish companions. In **The Wizard of Oz**, Dorothy is caught up in a Kansas cyclone and blown away to the Land of Oz, which was a strange and beautiful place but which she knows that she must leave in order to return to her home in Kansas. Dorothy is told that the only one who can help her to return to Kansas is the great Wizard of Oz himself, and so she sets off for the Emerald City to find him. On her way, she is joined by three remarkable creatures who have their own favors to ask of the wizard. As you know, the Scarecrow wants a brain, the Tin-wood-man yearns for a heart, and the Cowardly Lion is searching for courage.

Their journey along the yellow-brick road has some pretty hair-raising experiences and the climax occurs when, upon reaching the

Emerald City at last, they make the shattering discovery that the great wizard is not really great and not really even a wizard. He is a rather helpless man with a bald-head, who says himself that he is a humbug and cannot possibly grant the requests of this little band that has journeyed to him from so far. What he does do for them is to point out that each one of them already has what he or she traveled such a distance to find. As Dorothy and her three friends soon discovered, the Emerald City was not the destination they had hoped for, and the Wizard of Oz was not able to grant them their wishes. Likewise, if we are willing to risk the journey, be led by the light and listen to our dreams, we, also, must have an understanding that the journey itself, not Bethlehem or the manger, is our destination.

In a sermon entitled, "**Journey in Search of a Soul,**" the Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner says this, "We want very much what Dorothy and these three creatures wanted, and that is to become fully human, to become more whole. And we want it for the same reason that they wanted it, because as things stand now, we know that we are only partly human, partly whole. Like them again, we expect that what we want will simply happen to us one day, by some sort of wizardry. At times, we all tend to say something like this: 'I am not now altogether the person I wish I were--I know that a part of me will always long for home; my heart

is less than one's heart should be, all shut off behind tin; my brain is a thing stuffed full of the straw of other people's ideas; and courage? Well, there are times when I don't even have the courage to face myself. I am not the person I would like to be, but someday I will become that person. When things straighten out. When all the pressures on me let up a little. When I grow up. When I get my children raised. But the hard truth is that this day may never come."

Buechner concludes by saying, "for us, at Christmas time, the one who confronts us with ourselves and with this truth, is not a wizard who is a humbug, but God who is a child. Home for the three wise men and for us is not the manger where the light is gentle and God is a child. Peace is there, the peace that passes all understanding, but it is not to be ours yet, for a while. We also must depart and journey into our own country again, where peace is not found in escape from the battle, but in the very heat of the battle. For outlandish creatures like us, on our way to a greater sense of wholeness, whether it be a heart, a brain, or courage, Bethlehem is not the end of our journey but only the beginning--not the destination but the place through which we must pass if ever we are to reach home and wholeness at last."

Our Gospel for today says that after the wise men offered the baby Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh--gifts suitable for royalty--they were warned in a dream not to return to Herod, and so they left for their own country by another way. I believe that if we are to be people on a journey, led by the light, then we must be willing to listen to our dreams and follow new directions.

I believe that dreams are God's way of breaking through our often distorted and limited perspective of looking at ourselves, others, and God. Dreams provide us with new ways of seeing our world and our place in it. If we don't allow ourselves to have day dreams, and if we don't listen to our night dreams, then we allow ourselves to get locked into what is conventional, what is traditional, what is expected, what is familiar.

One of the things I routinely ask the dying people I visit is, "What are you dreaming about these days?" Often they will look at me as though I'd been reading their mail, and respond, "How did you know?" I assure them that it is sometimes through dreams that people gain a level of acceptance and peace about their dying. Many people have told me they had dreams about God, Jesus, or loved ones coming for them.

The neatest dream story I have ever heard was told to me by one of our Hospice nurses. The nurse shared with me that her patient seemed to be having a particularly difficult time in accepting her death and letting go. So one day the nurse asked her patient what was keeping her here, and the woman immediately said, "I am afraid to die because I am claustrophobic and I've always heard that when you die you have to go through a tunnel and I am very afraid of that." Well the nurse was a little undone by the woman's response, but knowing that the woman had a strong faith, the nurse encouraged her to pray about it. Three days later when the nurse made her scheduled visit she noticed many changes in the woman. The nurse said to her, "Louise, what's happened? Your blood pressure is quite a bit lower today and you seem to have a real peace about you." Louise smiled and said, "Last night I had a dream. In the dream, my father, my husband, and John Wayne all built a ladder for me so I don't have to go through that tunnel. I am no longer afraid and I guess that now I am ready." Louise died peacefully the next morning. Louise was willing to listen to her dream and as a result she was given the peace and assurance she needed to let go. None of us who knew Louise will ever forget her or her dream. And just the mention of John Wayne makes me a little nervous!

In the book, **Wouldn't Take Nothing For My Journey Now**, Maya Angelou writes about a woman who followed her dreams and took a new direction in her life after the breakup of her marriage. As only Maya Angelou can so poignantly tell a story, this is what she says, "In 1903 the late Mrs. Annie Johnson of Arkansas found herself with two toddling sons, very little money, a slight ability to read and add simple numbers. To this picture add a disastrous marriage and the burdensome fact that Mrs. Johnson was a Negro.

When Annie told her husband, Mr. William Johnson, of her dissatisfaction with their marriage, he conceded that he too found it to be less than he expected, and had been secretly hoping to leave and study religion. William told Annie he thought God was calling him not only to preach but to do so in Enid, Oklahoma. William did not tell Annie that he knew a minister in Enid with whom he could study and who had a friendly, unmarried daughter. They parted amicably, Annie keeping the one-room house and William taking most of the cash to carry himself to Oklahoma.

Annie, over six feet tall, big-boned, decided she would not go to work as a domestic and leave her precious babes to anyone else's care. She also knew there was no possibility of being hired at the town's cotton gin or lumber mill, but maybe, she thought, there was

a way to make the two factories work for her. In her words, 'I looked up the road I was going and back the way I come, and since I wasn't satisfied, I decided to step off the road and cut me a new path.'

Annie knew that she wasn't a fancy cook but that she could mix groceries well enough to scare hungry away from a starving man and so she made her plans meticulously and in secret. Early one morning she left her house carrying homemade meat pies, lard, an iron stove and coals for a fire. Just before lunch she appeared in an empty lot behind the cotton gin. As the dinner noon bell rang, she dropped the savors into boiling fat and the aroma rose and floated over to the workers who spilled out of the gin, covered with white lint.

Most workers had brought their lunches of pinto beans and biscuits or crackers, onions and cans of sardines, but they were tempted by the hot meat pies Annie ladled out of the fat. She wrapped them in newspapers, which soaked up the grease, and offered them for sale at a nickel each. Although business was slow at first, Annie was determined. On Mondays, if she offered hot fresh pies at the cotton gin and sold the remaining cooled-down pies at the lumber mill for three cents, then on Tuesday she went first to the lumber

mill presenting fresh, just-cooked pies as the lumber men covered in sawdust emerged from the mill.

For the next few years, Annie never disappointed her customers, who could count on seeing the tall, brown-skin woman bent over her stove, carefully turning the meat pies in all sorts of weather. When she felt certain that the workers had become dependent on her, she built a stall between the two hives of industry and let the men run to her for their lunch-time provisions. In years that stall became a store where customers could buy cheese, pickles, canned goods, fresh fruit, soft drinks, coal, oil, and leather soles for worn-out shoes."

Mrs. Annie Johnson had indeed stepped from the road that seemed to have been chosen for her and cut herself a brand-new path. She, like the wise men, left for home by another road. In this story, Maya Angelou reminds us that we have the right and the responsibility to follow our dreams and to assess the roads we have traveled and the roads that lie ahead. She, like the wise men, tell us that if the future road looms ominous or unpromising, and the roads back uninviting, then we need to gather our resolve and step off that road into another direction. Just imagine the adventures we will have and the people we will become, when we follow the light and go home by another road. As we celebrate the Season of

Epiphany and begin a new year, may we allow ourselves to be led by the light as we risk the journey, embrace our dreams, and, when necessary, take new directions filled with challenge and grace!

AMEN.

Intro to Scripture

On this Epiphany Sunday we celebrate the journey of the wise men. Epiphany is a Greek word that means "appearance." In the western Church, Epiphany is celebrated on January 6th with the focus on the star and its light that led the wise men to the infant Jesus. The symbol of Epiphany is light--light that shows the way; light that leads those who journey to understanding, faith and wholeness. The story of the Magi coming from the East to bring gifts to the infant Jesus is part of the divine plan, an accomplishment of the promises made long ago. The Magi, as representatives of all non-Jews, belong here in the company of those worshipping the infant Jesus. One of the commentaries I read said that, "This story telegraphs for the reader of Matthew's narrative the opening of the gospel beyond Jewish boundaries and the reminder of the worldwide mission of the church."

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Holy God,

We come to worship on this winter morning tired from our celebrations and travels and in need of inspiration and fresh perspectives from you O God, as we begin a new year and get back into the routines and rhythms of our daily lives. As we focus on the journey of the wise men and the light of the star that eventually lead these three men to the manger of baby Jesus, we are reminded of the light that leads all who journey toward greater understanding, faith, adventure and wholeness.

In the midst of our hectic schedules at work, at home and at school, help us O God to know that your light shines on our way whether or not we can always see it, distinguish it, or feel the warmth and security of its glow. May your light that shines on us in good times and hard times, give us new eyes with which to see our old and familiar life. May we be open to the surprises, subtle affirmations and meaningful inspirations of life and love that come to us in the unsuspecting events of our lives that remind us of our humanity, our need to have meaningful relationships with you and other people, and our need to contribute some of our time and talents to making a difference in our world.

We pray that your light and love would shine on us and our loved ones who are experiencing illness and recovering from illness, dealing with loneliness, grief, death and depression, or facing decisions and uncertainties. May we reach out to them and to others and in so doing help us to know more of the life and the love that not only claims us but sustains us. Let us know pray together, Our Father....