

FHC January 8, 2017

Text: Mt 2: 1-12

Message: Finding Our Way in the Dark

Today's reading is a familiar one, the story of the wise ones who came from afar, following traces of a star, to see the baby Jesus. In the life of the church, the story has long served as a rich seasonal pivot, on the one hand looping us back to the light and love of Christmas, and, on the other urging us forward into the season of epiphanies, glimpses of the light of Christ breaking into in a darkened world.

Now, I have to say that I first thought to use this story for its warm Christmas afterglow. But in January's gloom, I find it speaks to me, most powerfully, not about basking in the light, but about finding our way in the dark, and about the gifts that will sustain us as we journey toward the light.

So today, I propose to mine the story for four sustaining gifts: getting grounded, making connections, looking for love in all the wrong places, and going home by another route. Are you with me?

To help us out I've brought along an old favorite retelling of the wise ones' tale, "The Story of the Other Wise Man," by Henry Van Dyke (perhaps you know it?): the story of the wise one who misses the caravan and spends his life searching for the Christ.

I've also brought an old favorite storyteller, my dad, who, as a young news editor, once had to "cut" the Van Dyke novel to fit a one-page holiday insert. (We'll see if I can get it down to a quarter-hour homily!) This week would mark dad's 97th birthday, and the third anniversary of his passing. Not coincidentally, dad was no stranger to dark times: Great Depression, world war, urban sprawl, racial strife. In the mix, dad lost his own father as a teen, turning his dream of a career with the New York Times into a "life sentence" with the penny-dreadful Hearst news syndicate. And yet—dad was a "wise guy" of the first order, who freely shared *his* gifts, and I hope you'll indulge me if I call on him for help.

So onward-- first, to the gift of grounding. The Biblical wise ones were, we think, astrologers, grounded in prophecy and astral patterns. Van Dyke's little book gives a flavor of their study, as he has his hero Artaban, the "other wise man," share news of a new star and its promise of redemption:

The star, he says, was "shown to me and my companions... as we searched the ancient tablets and ...studied the sky. [I]n the spring... we saw two [great planets] draw... together in the sign of the Fish, which is the house of the Hebrews. We also saw a new star there, which shone for one night and then vanished.// Now again th[ose] two great planets [make] their conjunction. If the new star shines again, my ... brothers and I will set out... for Jerusalem, to ... worship the promised one... born King of Israel."

Well, ancient texts, astral signs, stories of redemption written in the skies—while we may not share the wise ones' astral pursuits, their dedication to study invites us, I think, to

search our own texts and signs of the times, for patterns and stories larger than ourselves, that will ground our journeys in God's promises and redemptive love.

Now my dad was no astrologer (although for a brief spell the good folk at Hearst had him making up the daily horoscope column). But he *was* a seeker after patterns and redemptive stories. There was the year he and our pastor returned from Annual Conference sleepless but energized wee hours' collaboration on a universal but very Wesleyan "theory of perfection," with charts and graphs telling the story of a cosmos ever moving, in the flow of God's light and love, from creation through the Christ, through us, onto perfection in love.

In his best wise guy way, my dad would ever after use this theory to provoke conversation, and, more deeply, to ground his own connections with church and community. Especially in times of racial tension, he used his gifts as a force for good, ever urging his fellow-travelers to rise above dark or limiting circumstances and be their best, most giving selves. He had a special heart for kids, and particularly as his church became a haven for Afro-Caribbean immigrants, he would engage cut-ups in his back section of the church in wordplay, math games and boomsinging—that's where you add an extra syllable, boom, when you see a white note—offering grounding in language, logic and trust that, we learned in his passing, often seeded school engagement and career dreams.

Not, of course, that we all need grand theories of perfection for grounding. Dad was also a keen student of the human mind, and took *to heart* insights from neuropsychology that would ground us, in dark times, in personal disciplines of gratitude, humility, commitment, hugs, and—as we'll see—humor.

So let us pause to ask: what ancient Scriptures, what timely signs, what redemptive stories, what personal disciplines might *we* need to take to heart, to ground our own journeys in the dark this season? (Just a plug for some soulful living study experiences at St. Paul's this winter:)

Meanwhile, we're on to our next night gift, making connections. Clearly, our Biblical wise guys were not solo players. They made their journey *together*, pooling treasures in common cause; and centuries of storytelling have transformed their desert caravan into a rich connectional community, built around shared gifts, broad invitation, deep compassion and comment to the common good—a model, some say, for the past and future of the church.

Van Dyke's story, also, turns on his hero Artaban's heart for connection, in compassion that drives him to care for folks in need as he journeys toward the holy babe—so much so that, in caring for others, he repeatedly misses connections with his fellow sages, and must find his way through contacts made along the road.

Like Araban, my dad, too, was a driven connector, ever drawing folks in his ken into a larger story of inclusion and conciliation, most often through the medium of humor. Dad was the church Finance chair who led tense meetings wearing a Groucho Marx nose, the

lay leader who, with his council chair, used the Mother's Day pulpit to engage his multi-ethnic congregation in a living lesson on the power and variety of hugs....

And closer to home, at our last Christmas dinner together, Dad was the host who led the family in a comprehensive, itemized, tear-jerking prayer of gratitude—and then launched into his usual litany of old jokes, written around a theme, numbered on scraps of paper, and populated, as was his custom, by the folks around the table. (His final theme was “benched,” a reflection of his fading health, and his stories included this one: a wise guy at a nudist Bible camp approached the park bench where our friend Biff—one of dad's early back-pew proteges-- was reading Scripture. The wise guy asked, insidiously, if Biff had read Marx. “Sure,” said Biff. “We all have. I think they're caused by the slats on these benches....” Stripped of pretense, dad might say, we are all in this together....)

The Biblical wise ones, of course, push our connectional skills into darker territory. The text reminds us that *they* connect with the powers that be, as they seek word of the holy child from the minions of evil King Herod. What, we might wonder, were they thinking? For Herod, a Roman puppet, is ever ready to wield the sword to defend his hold on power; and although the wise ones themselves evade his wrath, we know, reading on, that their quest for direction ends in the wholesale slaughter of innocent children who might lay claim to the throne of David.

Their story presses us to consider, I think, how *we* connect with the powers of our world: naively, warily, evasively, with fangs bared or teeth gritted....

My dad's instinct, I know, was for insidious engagement. For example, as a young clerk at Hearst, he was working the reception desk when an entourage of arrogant gents demanded to see the editor. When Dad asked for a name, he found to his chagrin that the puffiest gent was Mr. Hearst himself. And ever the wise guy, Dad asked, “And *how* do you spell that?”

Later, as an editor himself, Dad took the train to New York from the Westchester station where many titans of banking also boarded. On one grey day, as the train approached the city, dad began whistling “As the Saints Go Marching In,” and by the time the suits exited the train, all were whistling along—transforming the day, perhaps, if not the world.

And more seriously, one of dad's late-life heroes was Nelson Mandela, whose patient and insidious engagement with the powers-that-be seeded the end of South Africa's apartheid regime. In his last weeks, I know, Dad prayed that he would outlive Mandela, so that he would not be held to the same high standards when *he* approached the throne of grace.

And so, in Dad's name and Mandela's spirit, I share this wisdom about insidious engagement with injustice, from Shane Claiborne's book on Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals:

“Peacemaking doesn't mean passivity. It is [about] disarming evil without destroying the evildoer, [about] finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a

revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free.”

Or, dad might say, it’s about persistent whistling in the dark, pointing saints and sinners alike to the hidden but ever-emerging Source of light and love.

So again, we pause to ask: what connections are *we* called to, this season? Who will be *our* traveling companions and allies? Where will we share gifts of compassion and care? And how do we approach the powers of this world, to pursue justice *and* reconciliation, as we journey together toward the light and love of Christ?

And that brings us, to our third night gift, *where* we look for love:

Our story, our stories, suggests that love ever reveals itself in the most unlikely places. For the Biblical wise ones, it’s in the form of a toddler in a sparse cottage in rural Bethlehem. For Van Dyke’s hero Artaban, it’s in traces of love found, and care dispensed, as he seeks the Christ in some of the world’s darkest corners— during the slaughter of innocents, in prisons and plague-stricken cities, among the poor and desperate, the least and lost.

Now my dad, by and large, lived in less heartless times. But he too shared gifts of kindness and care along unlikely paths. Taking the church youth group to watch for flying saucers; giving tender home care to his stroke-ridden mother; working with an interfaith civil rights group to man a Salvation Army outpost in the dicey Hill section of town; doing the Electric Slide at the church’s centenary celebration — he was ever one to use his lights, as monastic wisdom puts it, to inhabit and illumine places where the light and love of Christ are most needed and yearn to be born.

So, we pause to ask: where do *we* look for light and love in unlikely places? Where do we whistle in the dark, or use our lights to illumine the way of love for others? And who shines the light that births love anew in us?

And that brings us, finally, to our fourth gift: another way. For, having seen the Christ, our text tells us, the wise ones were warned in a dream to return home by another route. Does this mean they simply evaded Herod’s murderous plot? Or were they so transformed by their encounter with the Christ that they couldn’t possibly return the way they had come—going instead, as legend has it, to India, or to Mongolia, or to martyrdom, leaving traces of their gifts and devotion to the Christ all along the way?

Another way home: for his part, Van Dyke’s hero Artaban-- an old man now, still seeking the Christ-- finally finds his way to Jerusalem, at the hour of crucifixion—and then, gives over a last gift of precious time to free a young woman from slavery. As the sky darkens and the earth quakes, a stone strikes his temple, and he sinks to the ground, to hear from afar these words of commendation: “what you have done to the least of these, you have done unto me.” His *other* way, the story concludes, was, *is*, the way of

love, given freely in the midst of, even through the medium of, death, darkness, and despair.

My dad's story ends on a like note. Now, you should know that, on the road, Dad never asked for directions, of Herod or anyone else. Our family trips often took another way home, simply because the route Dad chose led elsewhere. And so it was at the end. Dad spent his last week, reluctantly, in a hospice residence, after his care team invited him to give a last gift of relief to his family. Still, he tried various ploys to obtain release. One night, he summoned the nurse to demand that the fire department come to rescue him. Wise woman, she pointed out that there was an ice storm outside; if he wanted to get home, he would need his ice skates. And dad relaxed. Home by another way: her invitation was, I think, to let go of control and fruitless struggle and embrace, instead, a way of faithful, mindful, graceful witness *to love*, in, to and through the dark—an invitation apt for any stage of our life journey.

When darkness overcomes, or dreams are dashed, or former paths no longer bear fruit—what other ways will lead us home? What night visions or voices might warn, encourage or renew us, in or out of church? How can we better see, and be, and bring on the light? And, *when* are we called simply to lean into the dark, tenderly holding the questions that will invite love to do its mighty work of release, redemption, and reconciliation?

For, ultimately, today's story, like all our stories, insists that love, God's love, the flow of love from the moment of Creation out through the Christ and the wise ones, into, through and beyond us-- love will redeem. *Even as we speak*, love is offering words from ancient texts to ground our journeys; forging connections among colleagues, allies and enemies; breaking out in strange places and desperate times; ever transforming and leading us home, sometimes by the most unexpected routes. *Even now*, the genius of love, which ever places all the grace and power of love in the breath of a baby (I speak as a new grandma!)—that love is at work, ever inviting *us*, not only to open ourselves to its presence, but to place ourselves, again and again, in those places where love is most needed and yearns to be born.

And so, in this season of darkness, let us rise and shine! For our story, our *stories*, assure us that, despite the dark, the light of love is come, is coming, ever renewing us and all the world, in grace and power, courage, hope and tender care! And—as the old hymn puts it: a bold alleluia, alleluia sounds through the earth and sky! Amen.