

“Epiphany: The Unexpected Journey” / Matthew 2:1-12 / 4 January 2015

Now, I know that whenever we read this text from the Book of Matthew, it's truly impossible to hear it apart from the mental images it inspires in all of us. We cannot hear this story without seeing three boys from the Sunday school in ill-fitting tinfoil crowns, sauntering down the center aisle in shiny old bathrobes, circa 1980, and whatever pageant finery the Christian Education Committee could muster. In years past, we've had those kings carrying ornate old jewelry boxes to represent those gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And every time I've ever climbed up into the church spire, I've always had a little fright when I spied the old camel's head staring at me from the semi-dark of the attic. We didn't see the Magi riding camels this year, but no worries. The life-sized camel is still up there, just waiting for his next day in the sun. The guiding star, and the mysterious wise men in their old Burger King crowns, held together with years of Scotch tape, that deceitful old King Herod... It's hard—I know—it's very hard to hear the story of this Epiphany journey without seeing all the churchly trappings of Christmas, and those trappings get this story assigned directly to the second-graders' Sunday school class.

But if you want a child-friendly telling of the Nativity, it's best to search in Luke, not Matthew. No, Matthew's is the adults-only version of the Christmas story. It's a tale of intrigue and deceit, disappointment and great violence. It's a tale of fear, fear! But most of all it's a traveler's tale. It's the story of a journey. Those “wise men,” who are really quite gullible, set off in search of they-know-not-what. And they come sneaking home by a whole different road, still not really knowing what they've just seen in Bethlehem, but forever changed by the journey. Ah, yes, the journey had taken them someplace they hadn't expected. And they thought they could just come home and get back to their regular Magi lives as usual. But they could not, poor Christ-haunted souls that they are. Now they'll spend their restless lives...on a journey they never intended, a journey they've come to love, a journey they cannot quit.

“The travel bug,” some call it. Like Bilbo Baggins the Hobbit, who goes on his life's one great adventure, then comes home and dreams of it by his fireside for the rest of his days, forever a curiosity to his untraveled neighbors, changed forever by the journey, made strange and dreamy. On my post-Christmas vacation, recently, I picked up a book of leisurely reading. “Lonely Planet” publishes collections of travel essays—usually first person accounts of someone's trips through exotic or less-than-exotic locations. The writers are typically Australians or Britons that no one has ever heard of. They tell their true stories about paddling up the Niger River to Timbuktu or peddling across Sri Lanka and getting caught in the jungle with nothing to eat but birthday cake. I got hooked on Lonely Planet's travel writing years ago, when I was myself a world traveler with dreams of glory. I used to entertain the notion of submitting some of my own adventures to them for publication, for one of the joys of reading Lonely Planet travel literature is the fresh realization with each new page that you could write a better story than most of these people. But I never did, which of course is the real difference between those unknown travel writers and us unknown travel...talkers. A bus crash in Vietnam, an encounter with a kangaroo in the Australian Outback, a hidden walled garden in Jericho. I was about ten or eleven travel tales into this book, when something tripped a chord in my memory, and I realized that I'd read this book before...and not all that long ago. One unmemorable book appealed to me so strongly that I bought and forgot it...twice! I hope I can remember not to buy it again in five years.

Now, why do I tell you that slightly embarrassing anecdote? Because I think it says something about the journey that we, all of us, make through this world. Did I choose this

book...or did it choose me? Apparently I like the idea of the travel book more than the thing itself, for I don't even remember it after having read it. Surely travel literature speaks to something that I want to believe about myself. Somewhere back there in a part of my spirit where the year is forever 1995, my own life was set on a certain trajectory, and now the choice I made long ago—the choice to live overseas as a young man—turns around and makes future choices for me. I'm no longer entirely free, not to say that I'm forever condemned to purchasing the same book over and over; reading it, forgetting it, reading it again. No, but it is surely true that we choose our way through this world, sometimes haphazardly, but mostly with great care. We choose our way through this world, and that way ends up taking us to places we never expected. It ends up taking us on journeys we never would have chosen. The road to addiction, for example, never begins with the sentence, "I want to wake up in a dumpster in Steubenville." It begins with the observation, "This feels good." The roads we choose always take us to places we didn't expect. We make one choice, perhaps early on, and that choice turns around and makes us again and again. We choose our path through this life of years, thinking that we are most fully free, but then the path we selected claims us. It makes other paths impossible. It beckons us forward into places that we never might have imagined. The path leads us on through discoveries, and disappointments, and moments of elation and pain that we would have preferred to avoid. So it is for anyone who would follow after stars, or saviors, or any passion. So it was for those Magi, and so it is for you and me. Beware when you go chasing stars.

Yes, this is the grownup version of the Christmas story, for it tells of all the uncomfortable longings, and the risks, and the fears that we grownups know best. It tells of those strange stars whose distant beams reach into our lives and beckon us out into the world in a new way, in search of something we've never known before. This journey of the Magi speaks of the journeys that we, all of us, end up making through this world: We will chase after some great light or another: fitness, financial solvency, respectability, education, power, beauty. You name the light you chase. We all end up as sojourners, throwing our energies into the pursuit of some distant star. Some pursue money, or reputation, or appearances, or things that do not last. Others will risk all of those in order to journey through the inner country of the soul—that endlessly fascinating terrain within. Some will pursue the well-being of the stranger, too. We will, all of us, find a light to follow, and the light we choose will choose us again and again.

And so, what was it in the light of that strange and long-ago star that bid the Magi follow? Like those fishermen Peter and Andrew, thirty years later, what would call those Magi to leave their families and their life's work, risk their professional reputations as Zoroastrian astrologers, on a journey to see some great king who turned out to be a mere peasant child? What bid them risk their own lives at the hands of a paranoid lesser king, Herod? What made their journey possible, necessary, preferable—even—to living the regular old lives that they had right there in front of them? Why did they up and follow a star? Well, these guys are astrologers. Reading the stars is what they do. Aren't they just living their lives to their natural conclusions? Aren't we all of us called to journey in the lights we're given and along the way to rediscover God in ever new and sometimes unnerving ways?

Garrison Keillor's radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" parodies life in rural Minnesota—and in all of rural America, really. Keillor claims that the Magi were probably Lutherans. He says, "They brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Myrrh is a sort of casserole made of macaroni and hamburger... You bring it in a covered dish, thus the speculation that at least one of the wise men might have been one of our guys. He was going to stop at the department store and get something expensive like frankincense or gold, but his wife—a wise

woman—said, “Here take this myrrh. They'll be hungry. And make sure you bring back the dish.”

As much as I like Garrison Keillor and all his many insights, I must admit that T.S. Elliot has a far better artistic interpretation of the Magi story in his classic poem. For Elliot, the Magi's journey is one of discomfort from beginning to end. As stargazers, all they could do when they observed a star laden with such meaning, was to put aside all their other pursuits and follow after it. It was just a matter of being true to their own God-given identities to follow. They sought majesty in the royal courts, of course, but there they found only jealousy and fear. Then they followed that same star to the humblest of places, only to find the object of their journey wrapped in swaddling clothes, a mere peasant child, a strange mixture of joy and...disappointment. And now, “no longer at ease,” they spend the rest of their troubled lives haunted by the glimmering light of that star, haunted by memories of its strange and dangerous journey, called forward still to discover truth, and themselves, and even God in bold new ways. They're no longer able to settle back into the lives of ease that they once knew because once, long ago, they were obedient to something inside themselves, and they followed after the light of that strange star. It changed them forever, made them seekers, or as Matthew says, sent them home “by another road.” They become spiritual sojourners, and the quest is endless and often perilous, but it gives their life joy and meaning that they never could have known if they'd stayed comfortably at home.

The problem with most of us is that we're not altogether true to who we are, and so we never follow our lives to their logical and natural conclusions, never risking everything to chase after a good star; we end up chasing after lesser stars whose quests for attainments and things can never satisfy our souls. Or else we follow to a certain point, decide we've found all we were looking for, then we circle the wagons to protect it. We put an end to the good and necessary journey that was meant to be lifelong and all-consuming. Where is the forward call in your spiritual journey? What new ventures would that same old star lead you to undertake now?

This journey of faith will change you, take you to places you never expected or desired. It will take away your easy answers and replace them with the quest itself. It calls you ever forward. And so, for all of us who teach, and preach, and visit, and sing, and maintain the building; for all of us who nurture the children, and sit on committees to think up creative solutions to old problems, who greet, and help with mission projects, and serve in whatever ways we can; for all of us whose life lands us in these pews time and again, a question: Did you choose all of this, or did it somehow choose you? Our calling, like those Magi of old, is simply to be who we were made to be...but then to follow those identities to their natural conclusions, our eyes and hearts open to the new ventures we are being called to risk out into the uncomfortable unknown. Oh, you will find God in the most unexpected places. The journey becomes a posture for living, a more open way of life. The journey doesn't end when you find Jesus in a bed of straw; it calls you back to your daily life, there to find him again and again. The journey gives you no rest...only peace. Amen.