

“New Direction For Your Life”

Sermon January 4, 2009

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"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree, putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes--some have gotten broken-- and carrying them up to the attic. The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt, and the children got ready for school."

So says the narrator at the end of W.H. Auden's fifty-eight page long, classic poem "A Christmas Oratorio," parts of which I read every Christmas season. Now here we are, where W.H. Auden was, near the end of the traditional twelve days, when the Christmas story reaches its climax by the journey of the three "Magi" or Wise Men, following a star to Bethlehem to discover the baby Jesus in a stable, the child who would be forever known as the King of Kings.

When we finish our celebration with the special Epiphany service here this Saturday night, will we simply pack away the creche scene and take down the lights and just go on with life? Is this all that a New Year in 2009 is about? That surely is not enough to keep me going out in the cold to buy a Christmas tree every year, or enough to keep us going into our storage closets to get out the boxes of Christmas decorations we've added to, year by year.

No, there's obviously more to this season than that. And you've demonstrated, by showing up this morning, that this Christmas season means more to you than just being an old tradition to hold onto. The story of the Wise Men is just the Epiphany climax we need to affirm the reality and power underneath our customs and traditions. The adoration of the Magi, as it often called, has no parallel in any other first-century Christian writing, and there's no way of telling whether it has been embellished or, indeed, whether it "happened" at all as a matter of literal fact. But many decades after Jesus' death, it was kept in Matthew's gospel narrative because it says so much about our need to keep the important truths about Jesus' life alive in our hearts, always.

If the story of the Wise Men can offer us something for the New Year, it will be: First, that we will only find something more in life if we are committed to be life-long searchers. Second, that we need a guiding star, a transcendent motivation, to sustain us in a life committed to new discoveries. Third and finally, that we need to find a star to help us look above and beyond the surface of everyday events to discover their depths and dimensions.

Yes, you're here this morning for whatever reasons bring you here. You know the reasons better than I do. But I do know that you will only keep coming back if you're looking for meanings and values and new direction that you can't find otherwise. Habit and duty will not be enough to hold you in your faith journey. While I was in the Army after college I started going back to church as a seeker, and I've never stopped going. I no longer think that there's a graduation - or finish line - in the spiritual search. I know from experience that it's a life-long process.

Yes, one's spiritual journey of discovery is a life-long process, and we need a guiding star, a transcendent motivation, to keep us on the pilgrim's path. With the allures and fascination - and the hectic pace - of metropolitan life, now coupled with the uncertainties and turbulence of the times we're living in, we can also get off the track of our lifelong spiritual pilgrimage. The star, just as it was for the wise men seeking to know where Jesus was born, is a spiritual sign pointing to the God who is far above our human reach, and a sign for our longing, not just for the inauguration of a new president, but for a Savior.

This yearning is wider and deeper than the heritage of any person or country or religious faith. The wise men searching the skies for a star to light their way are Christmas point-persons - pointing us now forward toward an answer to the universal need for meaning and value that can only be met from a transcendent source. They found what they were looking for in a baby lying in a manger, and that baby grew out of the cradle to be the one who, by his life, death, and resurrection, would radiate light ever more powerfully down through the centuries.

At times like these, we need more than ever to keep that spiritual star in our sight to sustain us in our lifelong journey of discovery. I think as we enter 2009 that we all share a common need and yearning for a spiritual gyroscope, or GPS system, for our mental and emotional navigational systems. I submit that the Church, whatever else it may be for us, exists primarily to be that spiritually for us.

But we will only know that to be true if we come to a Church service as a seeker and searcher. You won't find what you're looking for in just an occasional church visit

whenever it's convenient. That's like getting an exercise machine for Christmas and thinking by having it you'll get back in shape again. You have to keep coming back regularly to find what you need and yearn for. And no matter what happens or doesn't happen on a particular Sunday, you will keep coming back if you really are looking for the guiding star in your life.

But what is finally revealed is not so much about the morning star but about what the star illuminates. That was first with the portrayal of the three kings, or wise men, or magi coming to the cradle of Bethlehem from the distant kingdoms of the east, bringing precious gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That's a part of the awe and wonder of Christmas that is captured for us in scripture, music, art and poetry.

But that awe and wonder can only stay alive to make this a truly New Year if its radiance and resonance penetrate into the dimensions and depths of the way we respond now to events and people. It is there that we learn the most about ourselves. The three wise men spent an untold amount of time searching for the baby born to be a king, and then joyously offered him their most precious gifts. It was in that search and in that offering that they found the true meaning and value of their lives.

So it was for the poor couple in O. Henry's story "The Gift of the Magi." Do you remember that story? Jim and Della each wanted to give their loved one the Christmas gift the other wanted the most. So Della sold her hair to buy a gold chain for Jim's gold watch. But Jim, so poor but so much in love with Della, had sold his watch to buy Della combs for her beautiful long hair!

Were they both foolish to sell their favorite possessions? O. Henry tells us that, no, their love was ultimately wise. They were wise because each sacrificed their most valuable possession for the person they loved. The Magi offered gifts to the baby Jesus in the cradle. They were wise men indeed, because we know that baby now as Lord of Lords and Prince of Peace. We know that he not only lived for us but died for us, demonstrating the paradoxical truth that we gain life by giving of ourselves, we save what matters the most by spending what we have for others, and by losing our lives in the service of others, we are born to a life worth eternalizing.

And so, it is here now at this altar that we celebrate every Sunday of every new year that God has given us his very best, his only Son. What a wonderful gift for the New Year ahead! That's why we will sing leaving here this morning, "Good Christian Friends, Rejoice! Christ is born again today! Christ was born for this! Christ was born—to save!

AMEN.