

3 or More, Give or Take

I read about a man who decided to make only resolutions this year he could keep. He resolved to gain weight, to stop exercising, to read less and watch more TV, to procrastinate more, to quit giving money and time to charity, and to never make New Year's resolutions again. I imagine that to come to such a point, he must have made and broke a number of resolutions in the past. The excitement of Christmas and the promise of the New Year often fade before the last Christmas tree is recycled. Perhaps that is why over the years those "wise ones" have gotten moved closer and closer to Christmas, till they ended up right beside the manger.

Yet it is this day, or more properly January 6th, when we celebrate the Epiphany, the arrival, and that we share the story of those wise ones. Well, maybe they were wise; the term "magi" is the root of the word magician, and could also have described sorcerers or others who practiced magic and appeared odd to those around them. Most Christmas cards show three of them, though we really have no idea how many there were. The three comes from the number of gifts -- named, frankincense, gold and myrrh -- though there may have been other things offered as well.

They did not come to the stable, Jesus was not a newborn, and who knows what they did once they returned home. We don't know if they were friends, relatives or simply travelers who discovered they were following the same star. Much as many tend to make themselves over in their New Year's resolutions, we, the story tellers, have made quite a bit out of this small portion of the story. What we can't know, we assumed. We made them mysterious, we made them foreign, and we made them "the other." They add color and richness to the story, yet seldom have we paused to relate to them.

Perhaps it is because we've experienced how Christmas makes its promises, and we get wrapped up in the excitement, but in no time at all, the world doesn't seem much different this year than the last, or the year before that. Perhaps it is because by the time they enter the story we're already hurrying to box up Christmas, and with it our patience, our tolerance, our generosity, so they can be safely put back in the basement! On our own, we may be able to display such traits for a few weeks, just as we can belt out the first verse of many Christmas carols, but heaven help us should the musician begin the second; but how hard it would be, and what risk it would entail, should we strive to make them a way of life.

Yet changing our way of life is what we believe the child came to make possible. Those of you who worshipped with us last week, made bold promises to God about our way of life and habits of living. This morning we have focused on our lives together as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ, again making bold promises. That is why it is so vital that we do not box up our desire to hope and to believe, our openness to miracles and mystery. Relating to these travelers allow us to stand opposed to the message that the Christmas stories, feelings and attitudes, can't quite survive the rigors of real life the rest of the year. The Magi call us to continue our observance of Christ's coming after December is over.

They call us to consider our “oneness” in the midst of our uniqueness. There is much we don’t know about these travelers, yet we can look to them to see a wonderful model for the church in 2009. Their number was uncertain, possibility even fluctuated. Each may have joined the caravan at a different time and place. I suspect that they were not always in agreement, nor equal in resources, wealth, intelligence or reputation. Yet their story is told as one. Their faith and their purpose unified, because they sought something bigger than themselves, something they could not completely understand or explain. Just like we who are the church! We are granted the privilege of continuing the incarnation. We are to bring Christ into a world which is calling out for peace; which is calling out for a Savior.

These travelers joined together, united for one purpose, finding the child the star represented, and brought different gifts. Together they worshipped and gave. Their gifts are seen as one, and it was a one that they made the almost unbelievable choice to go home by a different way. This part of the story shouldn’t be looked at lightly. The church of our lifetimes has been much like those “wise ones”, accepted if not embraced, looked upon as good. They were the “insiders”, able to have an audience with Herod, welcomed into the palace. Their choice to return by another way, just as the man’s choice not to make resolutions he couldn’t keep, would put them outside, outside of the social norm, outside of their places of comfort and acceptability.

As the church of 2009, we will be called to go a “different way”. The world around us has changed, what was, is no more. What will be, God only knows. To heed and to call others to the ways of God, to the priorities and purposes that are not of this world or this lifetime, will stir some in power up as strongly as these travelers stirred up Herod. We may be entering into a part of the story that we don’t want to explore, just as we hesitate to explore the end of the Christmas story, Herod’s reaction to a new born king.

We, the church, are to be like the magi, looking for a future king; embracing that which is not yet fully realized. We are to be of one purpose and one heart, as varied and different as God created us. We are to undertake a strange and unknown journey, and to meet up with others along the way. We are not to proclaim or expect easy promises or a gift wrapped world, we are to proclaim the good news of great joy, that God came, that God comes, that God will come again and again, never leaving us alone.

We are to be 3 or more, give or take, working as one as we each travel our own journeys and bring our own baggage. We are to see all gifts as our gifts, and give all to God. We are the church!