

SERMON: The Wise Men: See-ers@

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READING

Today is Epiphany, the date in the Christian calendar when the faithful tell the story of the Wise Men visiting the baby in a manger. I know that you are tired of Christmas. I'm tired of it too, at least the commercial side. But what about the twelve days of Christmas...on the first day, on the second day, and on the twelfth day? Christians of the Orthodox variety celebrated Christmas yesterday. So, despite our desire to be done with it, Christians are just now winding up the Christmas season, and Epiphany, which is today, marks the end of that season, just as Christmas day marks the end of Advent. Because today is Epiphany, my reading is the story of the Wise Men, somewhat revised from the version in the second chapter of Matthew.

Wise Men from the east came to Jerusalem asking, AWhere is the child, for we have seen his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.@ King Herod learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared and told them, AGo and search for the child and let me know where he is so that I too may pay him homage.@ So they set out, using the star as their guide and when they reached the manger, they were overwhelmed with joy. After offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, and having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their country by another way.

SERMON

Unitarian Universalists have an awkward and uncomfortable relationship with the Christian Bible. As a result, we tend to throw out the whole thing...a sort of baby and bath water response. Last May, Tom Harpur, the Religion Editor of The Toronto Star, wrote this commentary.

The most commonly asked question in the thousands of letters I have received over the past year is: Where can I find a place of worship where there is the kind of spirituality you write about? I have one strong suggestion for Unitarian Universalists. There are hundreds of thousands of folks currently looking for a spiritual home. But they are not looking for a debating society or for membership in a group of do-gooders, would-be intellectuals. They want a living experience of what is truly Holy. They want meaning now and a future hope.

When we lift up intellectual stimulation instead of spiritual depth as a purpose of worship, when we get too comfortable with our little idiosyncrasies, we isolate ourselves from those around us. And we block growth by not paying attention to the yearnings of people for a way to understand texts that have been at the center of our culture for two thousand years. In early December, I talked about Advent. Today, Epiphany.

Of all the figures in the Christmas story after Mary and Joseph, none have provided more inspiration to poets and story-tellers than the three kings of the Orient. They have taken on more personality and individuality than any of the shepherds. Picture the familiar tableau: a smelly, dark stall, the baby laying in a manger, Mary and Joseph, a few miscellaneous cows and sheep, and some shy shepherds hanging around the edges, trying to get up their courage to say something, anything! They might as well have been Norwegian bachelor farmers!

The most striking personalities in that scene are the three kings, the Wise Men, the astrologers, the Magi. They even have names: Balthazar, Melchior and Caspar. One of them is black. They are tall and distinguished, with richly decorated, flowing robes and jeweled headpieces. They have deep voices and long beards. They bear gifts -- gold, frankincense and myrrh. I dare say that if you were walking along School Street one early January morning, and one of the three kings approached, you'd know who he was, whereas the other men in the manger party, might slip by unnoticed.

Now, the only information we have on these three distinguished persons from the east is the passage I read from Matthew. There is no mention of them in Mark or Luke. Matthew says only that they were astrologers, persons who studied the stars and the moon and the planets, and who asked, "Where is the new born king of the Jews? We have observed his star rising in the east and we have come to pay homage to him." There is no mention of three astrologers. There might have been two, or four. We don't even know if they were men. Maybe there were two women and one man, the women disguising themselves for reasons of safety, as was customary until quite recently. We just do not know.

Yet the Magi, the Wise Men, the astrologers, the three Kings, have become beloved symbols in a season loaded with symbols. But symbols pose serious dangers to those who embrace them uncritically, who do not keep them in perspective and who, thereby, run the risk of worshiping the symbols rather than that which they embody. Christian pastors of all stripes spend the Advent and Christmas seasons in an annual ritual of struggle to capture the seasons' true meaning, the reality to which the symbols point, the universal truths which the symbols embody.

The quest for such universal truths is ultimately self-defeating, because truth is a human construct, ever-changing, ever needing re-examination and renewal. A more useful question is: How shall we interpret the symbols for this time and this place? I am interested in giving these symbols a sort of immediate resurrection so that they might live in us today. Or, so that we might live in them. In fact, that is one of the geniuses of our Unitarian Universalist way. We are less concerned for the original or ancient meanings of the symbols, interesting though that might be, than how they can come alive for us now, how they might enliven our lives.

What moved the Magi was a rising star. That is the essential information provided by Matthew. The Wise Men saw. Seeing and wisdom are related in this story. The shepherds did not see a rising star. They heard a voice, which they attributed to an angel. The Wise Men saw; the shepherds heard.

We live in a visual culture. When someone tries to explain something to us and we want to assure that person of our understanding, we rarely say, "I hear you." We say, "I

see.@ We say, AI=m going to see my sister,@ not to listen to or to smell or to touch my sister. Cats and dogs go to smell their friends; we go to see our friends. We say, AI hear a ruckus in the basement; I=d better go see what is going on.@

Seeing is more trustworthy than hearing. The truth of sight is more reliable than the truth of sound. We act as if seeing is the essence of reality, as if we do not or can not really know what is going on unless we see. Hearing is not enough. I=ve heard people say, AI=m going to see a concert.@ A blind friend often says something like, AI saw her yesterday.@

When my twenty-eight year old son Peter was in primary school and came home particularly proud of a test score or a comment on a paper, he=d say, ALook, Dad!
@ When as young boys, my sons had mastered a new motor skill or made something out of blocks, they=d say, ALook, Dad!@ In truth, they were saying, AGive me your undivided attention because I am so wonderful!@ Or, AHere is a row of blocks that I have made! I am the creator and the master of this row. I took a jumble of things and I changed them to reflect my idea of the way things could be in the world. Aren=t you proud of me?@ But what came out was, ALook, Dad!@

There are moments when something we see sends shock waves of comprehension through us that transcends the moment. There are moments when something we see and the way we see it, transforms our world with freshness and a new perspective. I=ll always remember the exclamation of an American astronaut -- it was Neil Armstrong, wasn=t it? -- who on looking down from his space capsule was overwhelmed by the glory and the beauty of our precious planet. He saw!

I also remember the magic of going down the stairs into my childhood living room in Ithaca, New York on a dark Christmas morning some fifty plus years ago. I remember a brightly lit and magically decorated Christmas tree. I remember candles on the mantelpiece and a shiny new bicycle and a flashy red sled and a star on the top of the tree. ALook!@

Last summer, hiking the Kerry Way in southwest Ireland with Marta and two friends, I'd come over the brow of a hill to a scene that seemed to me just perfect -- a hundred shades of green moss covered trees and rocks, ferns, sheep grazing, a brook bubbling down in the valley, and I'd say, ALook!@

The Wise Men observed a star. Seeing transformed them, and they went to pay homage. They followed their bliss, to use the language of Joseph Campbell. They had a vision. It was sacred.

While such sacred moments were relatively frequent for me during childhood as I believe they are for many children, they petered out as I grew older. In recent years, however, such moments seem to be increasing in frequency for reasons that completely mystify me. Knowing this, I have resolved to do two things. One is to be prepared for them. I have resolved to prepare myself for those moments so that I can cherish them when they do come. The other is to tell others about what I see when they do come.

When I say I'm prepared for them,@ I mean that I bait hooks for them. I set traps for them. I seek them out in their lairs. I read in expectation of them. I listen to music which for me offers the best occasion for such transforming moments. I hold a child on my lap and compare her fingers with mine. I talk with people whose lives and experiences are peepholes into a world of beauty and love. I look everywhere I can.

Peepholes -- that is what we have. The Wise Men saw a peephole in the sky. Stars are peepholes into the universe. Seers, seers, are those who see and look into peepholes, who know the wisdom that comes from peeking into the dailyness of our lives. The Wise Men looked and they saw, and they went to Bethlehem.

Peepholes come and go. They are often unexpected. Some will take you by surprise and stun you with their power. Peepholes sit among us this morning. Some are available to everyone and anyone. Others will be discernible to you and to you alone, for the briefest

moment of time. They are what in German is called a Ablick.@ Some you will find whether or not you are looking for them. But you will find more if you look for them, if you bait hooks for them, if you set traps for them, if you rustle around in their lairs.

When you have found a peephole, looked through, and seen -- tell me -- tell anybody who is willing to listen. Share your visions with each other and with the wider world. In fact, we are obligated to do so. We are obligated to share our good news with a world that needs all the good news it can get. But first, we must keep our eyes open, to see with all the depth and clarity we can muster. Then we have an obligation to describe what we have seen, to point the way, so that none of us is left wondering, AWhy didn=t you tell me?@ is such a common and sad refrain.

Of all the gifts of life, the ones that we can be most grateful for are those moments when the scales are lifted from our eyes and we gasp at the sudden clarity around us. That is the message of the Magi, who saw a peephole in the east, and followed it to the end.

Among my favorite letters is one attributed to Fra Giovanni, 1513. Actually, the letter is contemporary and of unknown origin, found several years ago in a church basement in Baltimore. It seems to me to capture the true meaning of looking and seeing, and thus, the true meaning of the Wise Men for us today.

I salute you. I am your friend, and my love
for you goes deep. There is nothing I can give
you which you have not; but there is much,
very much, that while I cannot give you can
take. No heaven can come to us unless our
hearts find rest in it today. Take Heaven. No

peace lies in the future which is not hidden in this present instant. Take Peace. The gloom of the world is but a shadow. Behind it, yet within our reach is joy. There is radiance and glory in darkness, could we but see, and to see, we have only to look. I beseech you to look.

Life is so full of Meaning and Purpose, so full of Beauty beneath its covering, that you will find earth but cloaks your heaven. Courage then to claim it; that is all. But courage you have, and the knowledge that we are pilgrims together, wending through unknown country, home.

And so at this time, I greet you, not quiet as the world sends greetings but with profound esteem, and with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the Day breaks and shadows flee away.

AMEN.