

A Quietly Audacious Journey

Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church

January 6, 2019

Story

Matthew 2:1-12 (King James Version)

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,

² Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

³ When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

⁴ And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

⁵ And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,

⁶ And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

⁷ Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.

⁸ And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

⁹ When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.

¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.

¹¹ And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh.

¹² And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.

READING God Says Yes to Me

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is

I asked her I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to
Thanks God I said
and is it even okay if I don't paraphrase
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes, Yes, Yes

- Kaylin Haught

SERMON

A Quietly Audacious Journey

The Rev. Anne Bancroft

Here we are on the 12th Day of Christmas – Epiphany – the day of aha's! And, I have a confession for you, which is that I love words. I love individual words like epiphany and Grace, words like ineffable, or “delicious,” which sounds just like what it describes! Words are a little like music – aside from their meaning, they carry a tune. And when they're paired with each other – that can be even more melodic. Words from poems like Emily Dickinson's: I dwell in Possibility, or Pardon my sanity in a world insane; or Frost's invitation,

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

– how great is that? You're just there . . . You're just in it . . . in both Dickinson and Frost, seeing the breadth of possibility – which is, of course, our theme for the month.

Today's title – a quietly audacious journey – is a collection of words that stuck with me, that came from the writer Alain de Botton – from an interview with Krista Tippett. (She is not specifically listed as one of the sources of our living tradition, though I suspect many of the people she interviews could be!) They were talking about love. He has written about it from a very young age. He suggests that a wiser culture than ours would not be so focused on the high point of love, the romantic moment, but recognize that step as the first of a “far longer, more ambivalent, and yet quietly audacious journey . . .” A wiser culture than ours would know love to be a longer and more ambivalent quietly audacious journey.

Ah . . . it's such a great phrase for the experience of love – love of a person, or another creature, a tree, the mountains – whatever. The point is the journey, not the peak . . . quietly audacious. I have been carrying that phrase around with me for months! And I saved it for today because even when I first heard it, it made me think of the wise men from the Christmas story in the Book of Matthew. The wise men made a choice for love over power. Remember? Did you remember it before you heard it earlier? Maybe from the hymn, “We Three Kings of Orient are . . . bearing gifts we traverse afar; field and fountain, moor and mountain, following yonder star.”

The Book of Matthew is the only Gospel the magi are in, and it's not a long segment – but they play a significant role because Herod has heard that this baby has been born that he imagines will challenge his authority. Herod doesn't know where the child is, exactly – and, by the way, this is likely long after the birth when the shepherds were called to travel to the manger. Ruth sang about it for us this morning (“Rise Up Shepherds and Follow”). That story is in Luke. Similarly, there is a star, but the magi story happens later, when Mary and Joseph have likely left Bethlehem. Herod sends these magi out to find this baby – this “king of the Jews,” and instructs them to come back and let him know where the baby is so he can “take care of it.” These are the actions of a leader feeling threatened. Fake baby – not a king . . . I'm the king. The best king. Ever.

Now we can imagine it is possible the wise men won't find the child. There's only a star to follow. It is possible they WILL find him and go back and tell Herod. But ultimately that's not the story. The story is that they found him by following the star – they may have been astrologers of some merit, perhaps Zoroastrians, who were known for their astrological skills. We don't actually know how many magi there were, only that they brought three gifts – gold, frankincense and myrrh – and were so – what – transformed? touched? in awe? that they decided not to return to Herod, but instead to return home to their respective lands, on their – let us imagine – quietly audacious journeys.

What makes it that way? What do we imagine? I don't see wise men bouncing home on their camels with horns blowing and party favors streaming behind them . . . no – their choice lives in their hearts. We can almost see them smiling quietly on their way home . . . doing their thing without having to announce it.

That certainly changes the story, right? If they had gone back to report his whereabouts, Herod would have known and the baby would likely not have survived his wrath. He killed his wife, his mother, and his sons out of paranoia, apparently, eschewing the wisdom of all those around him, so it seems likely that would have been the end of things.

But something happened to these travelers, and they changed their course . . . they went home, and the baby survived.

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

I wonder how long they waited before deciding, and what – exactly – prompted them in that direction? The text says, “having been warned.” Having been warned, they returned to their own country by a different route.

They chose their own path in lieu of the one directed to them.

Humor break: What did the traffic light say to the car? Don't look. I'm changing.

I am not a biblical scholar but I do think there is wisdom in some of the stories, particularly the ones that I think are actively, if quietly, in our midst but maybe don't get as much attention, because it feels like maybe something lingers of them in the back of our minds, in the choices they offer us in our own lives. Some of these stories have been in our midst for a long time even when we're not really aware.

Aoife's story, this morning, of taking gifts to a child born into a family she didn't know – we could imagine it was simply a thoughtful thing to do (and it was) . . . AND it has a resonance, doesn't it? A resonance of care, of connection that was intentional, that was a choice to engage rather than be distracted from.

But it begs the question: what does the story of the wise men and their audacious journey say to each of us? Perhaps that we get to choose to respond to an invitation to be bigger than small. Maybe this story reminds us that we get to choose to protect the idea of love alive in the world when it so often seems wanting – to focus on THAT light rather than the darkness. Maybe what it says is we can listen when we hear, “Sweetcakes what I'm telling you is Yes, Yes, Yes.” Be the fullness of your very own best inclinations.

• • •

We've got a little Herod thing going on in our leadership these days, right? A personality in power that we can imagine suffers paranoia; someone who practices getting out ahead of an issue or a person by targeting and belittling the individual or the agency (in effect, a sort of killing it); that practices distinction and difference rather than common cause; that seeks to protect authority by abusing it. This is not a solo act; it's just the most obvious one.

And we observe people who appear to be traveling in the magi's shoes, who have been told to find the one or ones who threaten the kingdom.

And the reality is, the present-day magi have to choose. We all have to choose, as the wise men did.

In the Book of Luke, during the time of the baby-now-grown ministry, Jesus suggests (Luke 16:13), “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

In truth, I think everything comes down to this at some point.

Let's not be too literal here, friends. God can represent many things: love, compassion, generosity, the voice that calls you "Sweetcakes" and reminds you of Yes.

Money, on the other hand, is not just cash or big numbers in the bank, but the representation of power, the illusion of control, the pretense of security. We spend a lot of time paying attention to those things. But ultimately . . . and often . . .

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

There are two roads . . . two possible journeys, and we don't get to travel both. Like the wise men, we have to choose – we humans appear to devote ourselves to one or the other of these mutually exclusive priorities.

We have the chance to listen to the voice that says to us, Yes – be the fullness of your loving best self – be melodramatic, wear nail polish or don't, paragraph your letters or not, those don't matter; travel a quietly audacious journey – not one that you are boasting about or crowing to make known, but one that is true to the spirit of connection and kindness that is available to us.

I am a huge proponent of both/and. I rarely say "but" . . . still, in this arena we are required to choose a priority. The wise men could not both protect the baby, the symbol of love incarnate, AND return to the house of power, nor can we.

It's not that money itself is bad. It's necessary, to some extent. It's that the commitment to it, the prioritizing wealth over connection, will isolate and divest you from what is of greatest value in our lives - that spirit that connects us, that sparkles and shines between and within us each – not selectively each, but every each.

It is an audacious choice to put that spirit before self or the illusion of safety – it is a humble, quiet choice.

And now that you have heard about it, I'm guessing you will start seeing it everywhere – you know how that happens? So many things come down to the choice to follow the resource that sustains you.

The "God" choice, or "Goddess," the spirit choice is the voice that affirms you as it affirms the inherent dignity of all others. It doesn't protect us from life's challenges, which is why it is indeed a quietly audacious choice because it is not easy. . . not so loud as to attract attention to itself but bold enough to be the resistance to competition, to quantification, to judgement, to exclusivity.

Our magi chose to take their newfound knowledge home, to protect the reality of a big new love in the world living right there in front of their eyes. I wonder how we each might express that choice in this new year, and I'm hoping we have equal courage to keep finding the quietly audacious path that says love matters more than any resource we could earn or accumulate.

Love matters more. And it will hold you and protect you better than all the other physical wealth you could imagine.

Our task this year is to discern how we will keep living that truth together and sharing it with the world around us. We have already begun but we dare not slow down because Herod wants his kingdom. Our commitment to the life of the spirit that says yes to love must be stronger.

Let's get on it, friends. Let's keep on it.

Amen.

In the spirit of the wise men, and all those who sought safety they rarely found in this life – let's rise in body or spirit for hymn 1018 – "Come and Go with Me to That Land."

Closing Words

May we each be guided and blessed by the star of truth
as we travel our own quietly audacious journeys to love.