

The Journey

Matthew 2:7-12

January 5, 2013

The two great stories of this season of Christmas and Epiphany are the stories of the journey of the Wise Men and the Holy Family to Egypt. And they are both journey-stories really. The wise men end their journey (if their journey ever really ends) at the home of the Holy Family. And next week we'll take up that story in our sequence of the "40 stories that every Christian should know".

The season of Epiphany (which technically begins tomorrow, Jan 6th) is a season in which Jesus is revealed as a light to the nations, as Isaiah puts it. And the revelation to the nations in the case of the wise men comes in the form of a journey.

I speak of journeys because we are all of us on a journey of one sort or another. Even those of us who spend most of our time in our lounge chairs with a TV remote control in our hands are on a kind of journey. Some of us may not be traveling as fast or as farther as others of us, but we are all traveling. Like the Wise Men on their journey, one foot placed wearily in front of another, we are each of us heading toward some unknown destination following only instinct and hope.

I wouldn't say what we used to say in the 60s that the destination is the journey, or the journey is the destination (I forget which way we used to put it). But I would say that the journey is far more real than either the starting point which lies in some distant place that becomes fuzzier and fuzzier the farther you get away from it. And the journey is far more real than is that unknown destination about which we know little. In that sense, the journey is all we know. And the journey, itself is the place of discovery.

There is the old Hasidic story about Itzak who is a very poor man who lived in a little village in Czechoslovakia. One night Itzak dreamed of a great treasure that was buried under a bridge in Prague. Itzak was one to follow his dreams, so he left his family and friends in his little village and headed off to Prague to find this treasure buried under a certain bridge. After many days' journey, Itzak found his way to the city of Prague and to the very bridge that appeared in his dream. Weary from his long journey, but overcome with joy at finding that exact bridge, Itzak began to dig into the earth under that bridge. He dug and he dug but found nothing. He fell to the earth and wept.

Soon there came along a policeman and he nudged Itzak with his night-stick. "What are you doing here, peasant," said the policeman. Itzak was an honest man

and he told the policemen about his dream.

“Oh, what a fool you peasants are,” the policeman said. “Who believes in such dreams? Why I just had a dream the other night in which there was an undiscovered treasure that was under the stove in the house of a certain peasant named Itzak in a tiny village of our country. But I would never have wasted such time and energy to have traveled such a distance at such a great cost to myself and my family.”

But Itzak simply thanked the policeman and went hurriedly back to his own village, to his own house and to the stove in his house. He moved the stove, and there was a great and unimaginable treasure.

And the rabbis tell us that the moral of this story is that there is great treasure at home, but knowledge of it is in Prague.

Probably the greatest “journey” story to ever come out of American literature is L. Frank Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz*, isn’t it? You know the story. They show it on TV during every spring tornado season. Dorothy is blown to some magical land by a furious cyclone and the only one who can help her return is the great Wizard who lives in the emerald city. So she sets off for that city and meets along the way a Scarecrow who needs a brain, a Tin Woodman, who yearns for a heart and a Cowardly Lion, who is searching, of course, for courage. (I always loved that way Bert Lahr—who played the lion in the movie—said the word CAW-rahge in his New York accent).

And along the way of their journey, each discovers that what they thought was missing in their personalities was really there all along. The Cowardly Lion gets them out of difficult situations by his bravery. Whenever the situation called for some thought, it was the brainless Scarecrow who came up with some inventive way out. And the poor Tin Woodsman who had no heart is always so moved by the plight of others that his friends have to come to him with an oil can lest his tears rust all his joints shut.

The climax of the tale comes upon reaching the Emerald city, they discover that the great wizard is neither great nor a wizard. He’s a rather helpless little bald man who admits that he is a fraud and cannot really grant them what they want, except to say that what they want most they had all along. And in convincing these three of this simple and enduring truth, the wizard himself is shown to be wise after all.

And the moral is that, like them, what we, each of us, most want will not be granted to us by some sort of unexpected wizardry.

Don't we, each of us, say from time to time that we are incomplete human beings who wish for some sort of fulfillment of our personhoods at some future time, but not yet? When things get straightened out. When all the pressures of the moment let up a little. When I grow up. But the hard and amazing truth is that this day of true human fulfillment may never really come in the way we dream it. But rather in the various dilemmas that face us--when we are most convinced of our inadequacies--from somewhere comes the courage to be.

And in an odd way, only when we are most convinced of our brainlessness, our lack of courage and heart, do we have the capacity to understand the source of real courage, heartfulness and wisdom. For us, in this tail-end of the Christmas story, we discover the "one who confronts us with ourselves and with this truth is not a wizard who is a humbug, but God who is a child."¹ A brain--a real brain--belongs to those who are convinced that they are as foolish as a scarecrow. Courage belongs to those who act courageously in the very midst of their profoundest fears. And a "heart belongs only to those who are willing to let it be broken."²

For us, like the wise men, and like Itzak, the peasant, and like the journeymen of the Wizard of Oz, the treasure is not fully discovered in Bethlehem, or in Prague or in the Emerald City. We must, like the wise men, depart into our own country by another route and there discover the true meaning of the Christmas story. These are rather the beginnings of the journey along which are discoveries of such epic proportions that we are amazed at every twist and turn.

As a pastor, it is my privilege to have witnessed so many good souls on their journeys. And again and again, I have heard these souls say to me and to others that they found courage to get through things in unexpected places along the way. I've watched so many overcome hardships that they didn't know beforehand that they had the capacity to overcome. And that they had no real idea where this courage came from. But should that surprise us? We who have been nurtured on this Christian story which is nothing if it is not about journeys. Bethlehem and Egypt are but places through which we must pass if ever we are able to reach home at last.

Amen.

1 Frederick Buechner, *Magnificent Defeat* p. 56.

2 Ibid.