

“Wise Ones Still Come”

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Scripture Reading – Matthew 2:1-15

Here we are on New Year's Day and it's hard to believe that it is actually 2017. I have to admit I feel like its still Christmas, I love these days in-between - that liminal time after Christmas, and before the New Year begins. These have always been days to snuggle up at home, to rest from all the work that goes into Advent and Christmas Eve, and for me...to watch all the Christmas movies I didn't have time for during Advent. I grew up loving old Christmas movies – Miracle on 34th Street, White Christmas, It's a Wonderful Life. But in recent years, my favorite has been Love Actually. Which Fred has declared he will never watch again.

So the week before Christmas, when the Fifield boardroom became Christmas central for First Church, we put some movies up on the big screen as we stuffed 1500 programs, and became Christmas elves - preparing the children's gifts. I was so excited when Ms. Julianne suggested Love Actually because I was getting to watch a Christmas movie BEFORE Christmas!

The premise of the movie is simple and silly. It all takes place in London, which these days - looks better and better to me. The movie is a series of vignettes about the lives of people who are connected in a myriad of ways. The stories are sweet and sad, filled with joy and heartbreak, and in some insidious way, the movie each year helps me remember that life with all its complications and triumph, is still good.

In the beginning of the movie, the now-aging heartthrob, Hugh Grant, sets the stage for the intertwined stories. As we see beautiful scenes of people arriving and being welcomed, in his wonderful British accent, Grant says –

*“Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world,
I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport.”*

Airports are magical places. They are where we begin and end many of our travels. But they are seldom, what we remember of our journeys.

I love the story of the Magi, the Wise Ones who searched and found Jesus. We usually weave them into the Christmas story found in the Gospel of Luke, along with the shepherds and the angels,, but their story is only told in the Gospel of Matthew, and what a story it is. We don't know if there were three or six or eight Magi, we are only told they brought three gifts for the child. Three gifts that were of great value. And even though, we only get a glimpse of their journey, I have always believed it must have changed their lives.

In many ways, the entire Christmas story is a series of small vignettes about the lives of people who were connected in a myriad of ways. Not all the stories have happy endings. There is fear and danger, monsters lurking at every corner, heroes and villains. And yet, we are told in the Gospel of Luke's version, that Mary pondered all these things in her heart. She pondered them in her heart...because in the midst of the gloom that hung over this miracle, she saw and heard, light and love.

For some of us 2016 has been an amazing year filled with new babies, weddings, promotions, graduations – all good things. For others of us...2016 has been more than a gloomy year. It has been easy to believe on the bad days that all is lost and on the better days, to hope maybe it was all a bad dream. For most of us, it has had its highs and lows, and even if rest of the year was pretty good, the final two months pulled a deep, dark cloud over all the rest.

As much as I hate to say it, we may need to step back and get some perspective. This is a time we need to listen for the wisdom of the ages and we need to look for the wise ones that are still coming, the ones that can help us on our journey.

As many times as I have read the narrative of the Magi in the Christmas story, I have never thought of them as people filled with doom and gloom. I think of them instead as people who, filled with optimism and hope, went in search of something magnificent. All was not right with the world and yet off they went without a map, without a clear destination, without assurances of safety. And they looked for people who could help them find what they were seeking. But they were wise enough to know that some of the people who were in positions of authority and offered help, were not to be trusted.

This year has made me take - a different view of whom I trust for wisdom. Some of the usual sources have proven sadly, unreliable. So I have had to go back to those who have guided me all along the journey. Great practical theologians like Henri Nouwen and Frederick Buechner, whose books I haven't pulled off the shelves in years. Brave justice seekers like Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King, Jr. Mystics and contemplatives like Thomas Merton and Julianne of Norwich whose quote for the ages still sustains me. These wise ones from the past, are like an anchor to me, in the midst of an uncertain storm. But just relying on wise ones from the past – won't get us where we need to go.

The wise ones of our day though, are not always so easy to find – you have to search for them, and if your heart is open - you will find them in the most unusual places. They are generally not in your Facebook feed, or on the evening news, although, every once in awhile they are in the Sunday New York Times. Often they aren't the people who get the most press or the biggest book contracts – instead they can be found working tirelessly in inner city schools or clinics for the underserved. They can be found praying in convents and monasteries. They can be residents of nursing homes and children in daycare centers.

They most certainly are not going to look just like you, or speak the same language – you may even need a translator. We always have to be ready to receive wisdom because we never know where and when the wise ones will appear. The magi didn't call and make an appointment to come visit baby Jesus – they just appeared, bringing their gifts and their wisdom.

We have to learn to look and listen closely or we will miss the treasures the wise ones in disguise, are bringing to us and to our journeys. Then maybe we won't worry quite so much about how we got here or where we will end up – but instead, we will look for the wise ones who still come, and the fellow travelers, who will join us in our journey.

So this morning, Happy New Year to all of you – may it be a year of wisdom and a year of love. Amen.