

A Word about the scripture before I read it:

I am using the New International Version translation this morning, because it uses a more direct rendering of the Greek word that names the visitors in our story. Here they are called “Magi” which literally means “magicians” in Greek. Although church tradition has added to the story that they were three Kings, in fact the original text does not say how many the visitors were, nor that they were royalty, and does not have to imply gender. In the first century, those who performed magic would have been considered by many to be guides consulted for important decisions, wise ones who watched the stars and studied portents, looked for meaning in life’s events.

As you listen, consider also that when the scripture says the Magi came from the East, they are thought to have been from Persia, lands we would now call Iran and Iraq.

Hear now the reading taken from the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 2 verses 1-12:

Following That Star
An Epiphany Sermon by Marisa Brown Ludwig
January 2, 2011 South Congregational Church, Springfield

This week Time Magazine features a rare interview with Aung San Suu Kyi, a small 65-year old Burmese woman Time calls “The Fighter,” but to her people, she is known as “the Lady.” She is a Nobel Peace Prize winner who was recently released after spending 15 of the past 21 years imprisoned by her government.

In the weeks she has been free, she has immediately resumed the work she was imprisoned for: listening to her people’s poverty and suffering, visiting the sick and families of political prisoners, speaking to her people throughout the countryside to empower them for non-violent resistance against oppression, and reaching out to her country’s military government proposing a national reconciliation dialogue.

They ignore her still, blocking any press coverage of her, following and arresting people who support her and her party, The National League for Democracy. She herself believes there is not much time before she will be imprisoned again. Time quotes her, “My very top priority is for people to understand that they have the power to change things themselves . . . I want to do as much as I can while I’m free,” she says. “. . . we never know how much time we have.”

I am drawn to this woman because of her fearlessness, her compassion for her people, her courage in the face of such constant threat, and her unwavering commitment to non-violence and peace. How does she do it? How does she continue to carry her vision of freedom and justice in a place of such brutal oppression?

I am drawn to this woman because I recognize in Ms. Suu Kyi's life a prophetic message about the kind of power that wins a people by invitation not coercion, by kindness, not violence; by compassion, not fear. It is a message that says that peace is what is right but only if there can be justice for all. It is a message that says we must care for the sick, visit those in prison, feed the poor, win justice for the oppressed. Sound familiar? This is a message that defeats pragmatism and pessimism about the nature of human kind to say, "We CAN defeat greed and selfishness and war - we can be a people of love, of generosity, of healing."

As a person of faith, I recognize in this message the realm of God our scriptures call us back to over and over again – the New Jerusalem where the lion lies down with the lamb and scorpion plays with the child. This is the message that Jesus came into the world to witness – it is what he died to show us. It kindles my heart with hope and it makes my soul soar. This is a message for a people in darkness of any time or place. What am I willing to do to respond to a message like this? How far would I go to leave the darkness and despair behind forever?

I believe this is the true message of our gospel story today. It is this message of hope that the Magi saw in the rising of the Star. It is what they were willing to risk losing everything they had for – to journey a long distance after without knowing exactly where they were going. It is a message that, as with the Magi, is not only for one people. God is not just calling Jews or Christians. Ms. Suu Kyi is from a Buddhist country. This is a message for a people in darkness of any time or place.

It is this message of hope that terrified Herod, and all of Jerusalem with him – so the scripture says. Herod knew how to fight an army, but not how to stop the hope of the ages. Herod thought he could secretly work out a deal with the Magi to kill the infant King they found and by doing so stop the realm the sages had foretold. So terrified to lose earthly power and wealth was he that he didn't consider that God was actually coming for his heart. Herod thought that by killing the Messiah King he could stop God's plan but instead God's plan triumphed through a defenseless infant who would grow up to teach love instead of hate, who would die, instead of kill, who would become first by being last.

Like the Magi, God calls to each of us with this message of hope, this star of Wonder. What do we have to do to follow? Can we, like the Magi, see enough in the Star to leave behind all that we think we know to search for what we don't know? Can we step out on the path trusting the star to lead us, without a map, or compass, or GPS system to get us there? What if the others we think should see the truth with us don't seem to notice? Did the Magi wonder at how few others had seen the star? What if all we understand about the world seems counter to the truth we find? Did the Magi expect to find a child in a castle, rather than a barn?

But the story tells us that Magi knew when their journey was over. The star came to a standstill - and The Magi rejoiced, for they knew they had found what they were seeking. When they entered the stable, scripture says they knelt down, and paid him homage. Whatever it was they saw in Jesus, it humbled their hearts, and moved them to their knees. Notice that there is no more mention of the star after that. Perhaps the Star is the call from God to seek truth, to open our hearts to that which seems impossible in this earthly life of suffering – and that entering the

stable is when we glimpse God's redemptive love for us and we are changed forever. This is the love that opens minds, that expands life, that seeks justice, that can do only good; this is the love that kindles hearts and causes souls to soar. An Epiphany, we call this kind of sudden sight. We no longer need the Star, for we see love as it is: God –With-Us, Emmanuel.

But the story does not end there, for either the Magi or for us – for after their hearts were humbled, they gave their gifts, and then in a dream they were warned about Herod's evil designs and went home by another way. Sometimes it is the right hour to speak truth to power and sometimes it is best to go home by another way, and survive to speak again another day. The coming of God's realm on earth unfolds in God's way and time – it is a message for us to carry, and for God to fulfill.

Justice for oppressed peoples continues long after the lifetime of illumined leaders like Martin Luther King or Cesar Chavez, or Sojourner Truth or Harvey Milk; sometimes it takes 100 years for women to get the right to vote, or 150 years for slavery to come to an end; sometimes it takes many generations for same gender marriages to become legal, and for transgendered people to become visible in public life. Aung San Suu Kyi may not see the end of Burma's totalitarian regime in her lifetime. But her message of hope has a life of its own that will not be stopped – it cannot be killed by human hands. She knows this. The Magi knew this. We can, too.

May we, like them, see the Star of Wonder as it rises in our own lives – may we, too, find the courage to follow that Star. (Song: "Star of Wonder")