

January 4, 2009

Scripture: Matthew 2: 1-12

Title: "Follow the Yellow Brick Road...I Mean Star"

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Literature is riddled with stories about journeys. There's the Odyssey, Homer's Iliad, and the Lord of the Rings. Even the Bible is about a journey. It's a story about God's people and their journey towards finding meaning and a way to connect to the divine. As I was examining today's text throughout this past week I began to think about the magi and how tiresome it would have been and how they must've relied greatly on one another. As I began to put myself in the place of those magi those many years ago I began to think of another great story of a journey

This other journey story is one that also takes place in a strange time and place. That place ... is OZ! Yes I am talking about the 1939 Movie The Wizard of Oz. In the Movie the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy, a small town teenager from Kansas lives with her Uncle Henry and Aunt Em and her dog Toto. One afternoon Dorothy and Toto are swept away by a tornado and land in a very strange, yet beautiful place called Oz. When Dorothy lands in Oz her house lands on the Wicked Witch of the East. Dorothy is very confused and deeply concerned about the harm her house has accidentally caused. However, the majority of the inhabitants of Oz, are pleased with Dorothy's accidental act. Dorothy is less concerned about her seemed to be heroism and more concerned about how to get back to Kansas. Glenda, the Good Witch of the North greets Dorothy and encourages her to put on the ruby red slippers the wicked witch of the east was wearing when caught under Dorothy's house. Glenda tells Dorothy that the only way to get home to Kansas is to meet with the Wizard of Oz, for whom this wonderous land is named after. The Wizard of Oz is to be found in the Emerald City at the end of the yellow brick road. So Dorothy and Toto head out in search of this wonderful Wizard of Oz and are sent out with a great fanfare by the inhabitants of Oz.

As Dorothy and Toto go further and further down the yellow brick road they realize that this path was not what it first seemed. At first the road seemed delightful and happy and entirely safe. As they travel further and further they realize that this journey is not going to be an easy one and will be filled with obstacles they could have never in their wildest dreams come up with.

In addition to a number of obstacles, along the road Dorothy meets friends who join her on her journey to seek the wisdom of the wizard of Oz. First Dorothy meets a Scarecrow. This scarecrow is not very good at scaring away the crows. In fact ... he has a hard time even keeping his stuffing in. The scarecrow believes that if he only had a brain he would be a much better scarecrow. Dorothy explains that she is going to see the wizard to get back home to Kansas. The scarecrow joins Dorothy on her journey and seeks to find for himself, a brain.

As Dorothy, the Scarecrow and Toto head further down the yellow brick road they run into another unfortunate creature, a Tin Woodman. They stumble upon the Tinman frozen shut because he cannot reach his oil can to lubricate his joints for proper functioning. Dorothy and the Scarecrow get the Tinman into tip top shape and he explains that if he only had a heart he could be a better tin man. Dorothy and the Scarecrow explain the nature of the journey and the Tin Woodman joins their merry band.

As Dorothy, Toto, the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman travel further down the yellow brick road they run into yet another unfortunate creature, a Lion. This lion is far from the king of the jungle, no, he is afraid of even his own shadow. The lion explains that he, is lacking courage. And if he only had the nerve, he could be the best lion ever and scare the fur off any living creature. Dorothy, the Scarecrow and the Tin Woodman explain where they are going on and the Cowardly Lion joins them in hopes that the wizard will give him courage.

And so , a journey that started out with just Dorothy and her trusty dog Toto has now turned into a one that requires not two but five travelers. As these five weary travelers travel the long and treacherous road to the Emerald City and the Wizard who will grant them all what they need. They encounter and overcome many obstacles. What originally seemed to be a ragtag group of misfits has proven to be a most efficient group of travelers, ready to take on any obstacle that comes their way.

When the travelers finally get an audience with the Wizard he says that they must first kill the Wicked Witch of the West who rules over the flying monkeys. The group leaves the Emerald City upset, but travel to the castle to destroy the Wicked Witch of the West and prove themselves to the Wizard of Oz. On their way to the castle, the travelers are attacked in numerous ways by the soldiers of the Wicked Witch. Then the Witch summons the Winged Monkeys to capture all of the travelers.

The wicked witch gains one of Dorothy's ruby slippers and Dorothy, in anger, grabs a bucket of water and throws it on the Wicked Witch. The wicked witch soon begins to melt. Dorothy summons the Winged Monkeys to carry her and her newfound friends back to the Emerald city. When the travelers return to the Emerald City and meet the Wizard of Oz, he tries to turn them away. Toto however, pulls back a curtain and the Wizard of Oz is revealed to be nothing more than a tired old man, playing with smoke and mirrors to create the great wizard of Oz.

The Wizard of Oz explains that he too is from Dorothy's world. He came to Oz by accident in a hot air balloon. He believes that he can get Dorothy back to Kansas via this hot air balloon. Before he heads off the wizard gives the travelers what they had journeyed so far to find. To the Tin Woodman he gives a ticking heart so that he will always be reminded of his heart. To the Scarecrow, he gives a degree showing that he does indeed have a brain and to the Cowardly Lion, the wizard gives a medal of courage to remind him that he does indeed have the nerve.

As Dorothy is saying her goodbyes, Toto runs off and Dorothy chases the creature. By the time Dorothy has Toto in hand, the balloon and the wizard are long gone. Distraught Dorothy cannot think of what to do to get back home to Kansas. Glinda, the good witch of the north reminds her of the power of her ruby red slippers and says all you have to do is click your heals three times and say ... there's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home. Dorothy wakes up again confused but this time at home, underneath the shade of a tree on her aunt and uncle's farm, never so happy as to be in Kansas.

Our Biblical text today also starts with a journey. Jesus has just been born in Bethlehem in a very turbulent time, the reign of King Herod. Herod was known as Herod the Great, perhaps a great misnomer due to the fact that he killed two of his sons, his wife and numerous others during his

paranoid quest for ultimate power. Can you imagine the pressure cooker of such a time? People never really knowing what they would say or do that would set off the paranoia of their king? Our travelers in this story are the Magi. We are not told how many magi there were, only that they came from the east. From other mentions of the magi we can gather that these were most likely well educated and fairly wealthy men. Some scholars believe that these magi came from Persia in which case their travels would have taken them over mountains and through deserts a journey that would've not only tested their physical limits but the strength of their spirits as well. These Magi finally arrived in Jerusalem and asked "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him". These men have come to Jerusalem, not to Bethlehem. Why? Because kings were born in capital cities, not in border towns! King Herod was furious when he hears about this new born king of the Jews! He was terrified that this child would overthrow the status quo and him with it! He called together all the chief priests. From research we can gather that these chief priests and teachers of the law were the best of the best when it came to the holy scriptures. Herod gathered them together in order to learn more about this so-called newborn king of the Jews and destroy him as soon as possible. The chief priests came up with a text from Micah 5:2 " But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." Herod immediately called the Magi in a secret meeting and sent them to Bethlehem in order to find the exact location of this newborn. Herod's message to the Magi was that he too wanted to worship this King and to come back and tell him where to find the child.

The magi went off and followed the same star they had seen in the east. After traveling over what is hilly and treacherous country, the magi finally found the child. They came upon a most startling sight. They didn't see a king surrounded by fine linens and a bed made of olive wood. No what they found is a tiny child, wrapped in torn cloths, and lying in a manger beside his mother. But yet the Magi knew this was the child they had come to see. They opened their treasure boxes, ordained with jewels and detail such as that Mary and Joseph had never seen in their modest lies. And they presented this tiny, unassuming child with gifts of Gold, incense and myrrh. After staying awhile they went on their way back to their home country, but they were warned in a dream not to go back to Herod and so they went another way.

Paranoid kings, wicked witches, unexpected kings and false wizards, these two stories might seem unrelated, but they both have one common entity. They speak of the journeys in our lives. And isn't that what all great stories are about? Journeys from the way things are to the way they ought to be. These two stories have many commonalities. Both stories have travelers, and those who aided, and hindered them along the way. Dorothy found help in the scarecrow, the tin woodman and the coward lion. All that at first seemed to merely be a hinderance but later ended up saving her life. And the Magi met King Herod who first helped them find where the Christ child was but who ultimately sought to serve his own selfish needs and who probably, if he had seen these magi again would've killed them as soon as look at them. We all have these kinds of people in our lives who we meet along our journeys. There are those who at first seem like a hinderance. Like that person who got you to go to church for the first time, or to camp, or to volunteer on that committee or even that person who made a point to greet you every morning, no matter how hurried you looked. We all have companions on our journeys. Some that we recognize as such and some who just hang out on the edges of our lives and only later we realize

what they truly meant to us. We all have a path to follow. Although our paths may look a little different, they're all leading to the same place. Mine might zig where yours zags and there will even be times when we can't even see our fellow travelers or even the goal to which we strive. All we can see is what's just ahead of us and keep following the road or ... the star ahead. Perhaps the most common point in both of these stories is that both Dorothy and her gang and the Magi, didn't find what they expected. Dorothy and her gang were expecting to find an all powerful man who could give them anything their heart desired, and the magi were seeking a great king, born in a capital city, surrounded by other kings who also came to worship the newborn king. All Dorothy found was an old man playing with smoke and mirrors and all the magi found was a baby, lying in a manger, born in a border town, and surrounded by livestock, shepherds and his parents. But here's the key ... even though Dorothy and the magi didn't find what they expected, they found what got them home. It's so easy in this world of wars and death and sickness to gravitate towards the most alluring, flashy and easiest solution to our problems. But it is not in the alluring, the flashy or in the easy that we find our way home. No, it's in the unassuming and the hard and treacherous journeys that we find our way home. For it is by following the yellow brick road that Dorothy found her way home, and it is by the star that the magi found the king of the Jews. And it is through Christ, humble and unassuming, that we find, our true way home.

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