

Home by another way

Pastor Cindy Lapp
Jan. 8, 2012, Epiphany

Psalm 72
Isaiah 60:1-6
Matthew 2:1-12

Tis the season — after the Fa la las — when people make resolutions, promising that this year will be different. “This year I will change my eating/spending/dating/parenting /relationship/work habits.” We want things to look different in the future but how are we going to get from here to there?

This is the season when the days are short and the nights are interminable. We long for light, literally and figuratively. Many of us find our way home in the evening, in the dark. Good thing we know the way from there to here by heart.

Epiphany, Jan 6, 1907 — Maria Montessori opened her first House of Children in Rome at San Lorenzo. It was a dirty, rejected palace-like building, where criminals and cast-offs had been living for years. She was asked to provide a place for the children who were born into this setting. It was not a school; it was just a room for children so they would stop running wild. Years later she said: *I had been asked to make a speech for the occasion (of the opening of the House of Children.). Earlier that day, remembering that it was the feast of the Epiphany, I had read the lesson in my mass book. When I made my speech I read it as an omen for the work to follow.*

"Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. For behold darkness shall cover the earth, and a mist the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall walk in thy light, and kings in the brightness of thy rising. Lift up thy

eyes round about, and see; all these are gathered together, they are come to thee: thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall rise up at thy side. Then shalt thou see, and abound and thy heart shall wonder and be enlarged, when the multitude of the sea shall be converted to thee, the strength of the Gentiles shall come to thee. The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Madian and Epha; all they from Saba shall come, bringing gold and frankincense, and showing forth praise to the Lord."
I don't know what came over me but I had a vision and inspired by it, I was enflamed and said that this work we were undertaking would prove to be very important and that some day people would come from all parts to see it.¹

How appropriate that Dr. Montessori would start this unusual project on Epiphany — the season when we look for the light, when we look to a child that will lead us.

As a psychologist, Dr. Montessori was interested in the research and observation of these children who were growing up in poverty. She said:

I brought them some of the materials which had been used for our work in experimental psychology. I merely wanted to study the children's reactions. I asked the woman in charge not to interfere with them in any way as otherwise I would not be able to observe them.

These children had only a half built, dilapidated and chaotic place to call home. And yet the smallest room that was given over to them became the place where they found their true home, within themselves.

Dr. Montessori continues in her speech:

What happened more than 30 years ago now will always remain a mystery to me. I have tried since then to understand what took place in those children.

¹ This and subsequent quotes from www.montesorri-ami.org/montesorri/mariala1942.htm

One day I looked at them with eyes which saw them differently and I asked myself: "Who are you, are you the same children you were before?" And I said within myself: "Perhaps you are those children of whom it was said that they would come to save humanity. If so, I shall follow you."

And in order to follow them, I changed my whole life. I was nearly 40. I had in front of me a doctors' career and a professorship at the university. But I left all, because I felt compelled to follow them, and to find others who could follow them, for I saw that in them lay the secret of the soul.

The gospel of Matthew gives us the Magi, the wise ones who must know so much and yet want to search for more. They leave their comfortable lives to embark on a questionable journey — following a star. They trek across miles and miles — perhaps more than a year — to find the place where the new king of the Jews is born. Because it is a king they seek, they go to the halls of power to make their inquiry.

Herod, the ruler, is threatened by even the thought of a new king but he tries to play it cool. "Do tell me when you find this new king; I want to go worship him too." Keep your enemies close as they say.

So the Magi go on their way, with a bit of direction from Herod and his priests, and they find the baby, in a humble house with his mother. They are overjoyed as they bow down and present their gifts. Though they traveled a distance their stay is brief and they are soon back on the road.

No GPS to guide them; no app to find watering holes along the way. A journey like this is a risk. And yet it is a journey we are all invited to take. Jan Richardson describes the dilemma in her poem:

For Those Who Have Far to Travel
An Epiphany Blessing – by Jan Richardson

If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it;
might never dare
the first step
that propels you
from the place
you have known
toward the place
you know not.
Call it
one of the mercies
of the road:
that we see it
only by stages
as it opens
before us,
as it comes into
our keeping
step by
single step.
There is nothing
for it
but to go
and by our going
take the vows
the pilgrim takes:
to be faithful to
the next step;
to rely on more
than the map;
to heed the signposts
of intuition and dream;
to follow the star
that only you
will recognize;
to keep an open eye
for the wonders that
attend the path;
to press on
beyond distractions
beyond fatigue

beyond what would
tempt you
from the way.
There are vows
that only you
will know;
the secret promises
for your particular path
and the new ones
you will need to make
when the road
is revealed
by turns
you could not
have foreseen.
Keep them, break them,
make them again:
each promise becomes
part of the path;
each choice creates
the road
that will take you
to the place
where at last
you will kneel
to offer the gift
most needed—
the gift that only you
can give—
before turning to go
home by another way.

It is one thing to finally get to where we are being lead — by something as unusual as a star. But then to turn right around and go home — by another way? How ridiculous is that?

In the first two chapters of Matthew's gospel dreams figure prominently. Joseph dreams that he should wed Mary even though she is already pregnant, surrounded by scandal. After the Magi visit, Joseph is told, in a dream, to take the family to Egypt

where they will be safe from Herod's rage. After Herod dies, Joseph again has a dream in which he is told that it is now safe to bring the family back to their homeland.

Though they are not Jews, though they are from a different land all together, the magi also receive a message in a dream. The dream warns them to avoid Herod and go home another way.

*We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time. for*
T.S. Eliot -from **Little Gidding**, #4 of "Four Quartets"

Is this taking another road? Continuing the exploration until we end up where we started, knowing it anew?

Like many young adults I discovered therapy in college. To me, the crisis that drew me to therapy was quite apparent but the therapist seemed to think the real issue was something altogether different. Her recommendation? I go home for the summer to live with my parents and see what I could learn. Go home? I was trying to be independent, trying to live on my own, trying to make my own decisions. Go home?

It has taken many years for me to see the wisdom of her counsel and to understand my journey. Eventually I went home by another way altogether; it was a circuitous route. Certainly I was changed by the journey. It is only now that I realize that the very thing with which I struggled as a child (the embarrassment of my father as a pastor) has become my own home.

It takes a certain bravery to follow the star. It takes an entirely new kind of courage to turn around and seek another way home. The path is not clear, and as Jan Richardson says,

If you could see
the journey whole
you might never
undertake it.

Matthew does not give us much information about the wise ones. We don't even really know how many magi there were; western tradition says three to match the three gifts. Eastern tradition says there were 12 kings. Matthew doesn't tell us what happens to the magi as they make their way home by another road. What we do know is that they were not alone. They had each other, whether they were three, 12 or many more accompanied by servants or families.

This caravan is something we might want to notice since so many of us drive alone. We prize our independence. It is much more convenient and efficient to travel alone than with others. But when we follow the star and when we go home by another way, we ought not travel alone. We need to make the journey together.

Certainly this is what Maria Montessori observed in the children she watched. They were in a room undisturbed by adults, but they were not alone. They had each other.

...the children began to work with concentration and the transformation they underwent, was noticeable. From timid and wild as they were before, the children became sociable and communicative. They showed a different relationship with each other...Their personalities grew and, strange though it may seem, they showed extraordinary understanding, activity, vivacity and confidence. They were happy and joyous.

But the most outstanding thing about these strange children of (San Lorenzo) was their obvious gratitude. I was as much surprised by this as everyone else. When I

entered the room all the children sprang to greet me and cried their welcome. Nobody had taught them any manner of good behavior. And the strangest thing of all was that although nobody had cared for them physically, they flourished in health as if they had been secretly fed on some nourishing food. And so they had, but in their spirit.

This joy that Dr. Montessori observed in the children came as they worked side by side. The children, though they had not left the squalor of the place where they lived, or the small room where they were observed, together traveled to a new place as they worked side by side. They explored the inner world and found a new way home together, without even moving.

In this season of star following, let us search for a new ruler. And as we return home by another way, may a little child lead us, together.