

The Other Wise Man

Message for Sunday, January 6, 2012

Scripture: Matthew 2:1-12; 13-18

I'm going to do something I've never done before. For my message, I'm going to read a story. It's partly based on the Bible, and has lots of imagination involved. But it's a great story about faithfulness to God and love to people. It's "The Other Wise Man" by Henry Van Dyke.

Introduction

You know the story of the Three Wise Men of the East, and how they traveled from far away to offer their gifts at the manger-cradle in Bethlehem. But have you ever heard the story of the Other Wise Man, who also saw the star in its rising, and set out to follow it?

In the days when Augustus Caesar was master of many kings and Herod reigned in Jerusalem, there lived in the city of Ecbatana, among the mountains of Persia, a certain man named Artaban.

He was a tall, dark man of about forty years, with brilliant eyes under his broad brow. His robe was of pure white wool, thrown over a tunic of silk; and a white, pointed cap, with long lapels at the sides, rested on his flowing black hair. This was the dress of the Magi.

He and three friends, all of them Magi, had each been excited when they saw the star appear on the horizon. They had sent letters to one another, showing that all had come to the same conclusion: the prophecy of the ancient writings was about to happen: the King of kings was about to be born. They agreed to meet at the Temple of the Seven Spheres, just beyond the city of Babylon. From there they would travel together across the desert to Israel, the land about which the prophecy spoke.

The three friends, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar agreed to wait ten days after the next appearing of the star, for Artaban to join them. He wasted no time, but set about immediately making preparations for the journey.

Artaban sold his possessions and bought three jewels — a sapphire, a ruby, and a pearl — to carry them as tribute to the King. The first one was blue as a fragment of the night sky, the second one redder than a ray of sunrise, and the third one as pure as the peak of a snow-mountain at twilight.

That night, as Artaban stood on the roof of his house, he searched the sky for the sign. His eyes opened wide with wonder! Out of the darkness began an explosion of color. It was as if the colors of the jewels in his hand

mixed together and finally exploded into a point of white radiance. The star shone in the distance.

"This is it... It is the sign!" He said. "The King is coming, and I will go to meet him!"

He chose Vasda, his swiftest, most trusted horse, to take him on the journey. Artaban knew he must ride wisely and well if he was to arrive at the appointed hour with the other Magi. The route was a hundred and fifty parasangs, and fifteen parasangs, was the absolute most that he could push the horse to travel in a day. At that pace, he would reach the Temple of the Seven Spheres just before midnight on the tenth day, the appointed time of meeting. He was in the saddle long before sunrise, and didn't stop until late into the night.

Artaban's prize horse was almost spent as he arrived, at nightfall of the tenth day, beneath the shattered walls of Babylon. He would have turned into the city to find rest and food for himself and his horse, except that he knew that he had three hour's journey yet to the Temple of the Seven Spheres, and he must reach the place by midnight if he were to find his comrades waiting. So he did not stop, but continued on.

They passed through a grove of date-palms, and in the gloom Vasda began to pick her way carefully. She seemed to sense some danger or difficulty. At last she stood stock-still, quivering in every muscle, before a dark object in the shadow of the last palm tree.

The dim starlight revealed the form of a man lying across the road. His clothing and face showed that he was one of the poor Jewish exiles.

He was torn between compassion for the poor soul and resentment over the loss of precious minutes.

Artaban dismounted. He knelt beside the still body and held the man's hand. His skin, dry and yellow as parchment, bore the mark of the fever which came in autumn. The chill of death was in his lean hand, and, as Artaban released it, the arm fell back upon the motionless breast.

He turned away with a thought of pity. But as he turned, a faint sigh came from the man's lips. The bony fingers gripped the hem of his robe and held him fast.

Artaban's spirit was in agonizing turmoil. If he lingered even for an hour he could hardly reach his rendezvous at the appointed time. His companions would go without him; he would lose his quest. But if he went on now, the man would surely die.

“God of truth and purity,” he prayed, “direct me in the holy path, the way of wisdom.”

Then he turned back to the sick man. Loosening the grasp of his hand, he carried him to a little mound at the foot of the palm-tree.

He brought water from a nearby canal and mixed a potent remedy which he carried always in his girdle—for the Magi were physicians as well as astrologers. Hour after hour he laboured . . . at last the man’s strength returned; he sat up and looked about him.

“Who are you?” He said, in the rough dialect of the country.

“I am Artaban, of the Magi, and I am going to Jerusalem in search of one who is to be born King of the Jews, a great Prince and Deliverer of All. I dare not delay any longer on my journey, for the caravan that waits for me may leave without me. But see, here is all that I have left of bread and wine, and here is a potion of healing herbs. That will give you strength to return home.”

As Artaban turned, the man stopped him. “I have nothing to give you in return—only this: that I can tell you where the Messiah must be sought. For our prophets have said that he should be born not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem of Judah. May the Lord bring you in safety to that place, because you have had pity upon the sick.”

It was already long past midnight. Artaban rode as quickly as was possible. The great horse restored by the brief rest, dipped into her last remaining strength and fled over the ground like a gazelle. Even so, the sun was peeking over the horizon as they arrived at the meeting place. No one was there. He climbed the steps to the highest point of the Temple and looked out toward the west; but there was no sign of the caravan, far or near.

At the end of the Temple he saw a little pile of broken bricks, and under them a piece of papyrus. He pulled it out and read: “We have waited past midnight and can delay no longer. We go to find the King. Follow us across the desert.”

Artaban sat down upon the ground and covered his head in despair. “How can I cross the desert,” he moaned, “with no food and with a spent horse? I will have to return to Babylon, sell my sapphire, and buy a train of camels, and provisions for the journey. I may never overtake my friends. Only God the merciful knows whether I shall not lose the sight of the King because I tarried to show mercy.”

After getting supplies, Artaban, Priest of the Magi, the Fourth Wise Man, moved steadily onward, crossing the desert.

He arrived weary, but full of hope, in Bethlehem, bearing yet his ruby and his pearl to offer to the King. “Now at last,” he said, “I shall surely find him. This is the place the Hebrew exile told me that the prophets had spoken of.

As he searched for the place where the baby lay, he noticed that the village seemed to be deserted. All was eerily quiet.

From the open door of a cottage he heard the sound of a woman’s voice singing softly. He entered and found a young mother hushing her baby to rest. She told him of the strangers from the far East who had appeared in the village three days ago, and how they said that a star had guided them to the place where Joseph of Nazareth was lodging with his wife and her new-born child, and how they had paid reverence to the child and given him many rich gifts.

“But the travelers disappeared again, as suddenly as they had come. And the man of Nazareth took the babe and his wife and fled away that same night secretly, and it was whispered that they were going far away to Egypt.

Ever since, something evil has hung over the village. They say that the Roman soldiers are coming from Jerusalem to force a new tax from us, and the men have driven the flocks and herds far back among the hills, and hidden themselves to escape it”.

The young mother laid the babe in its cradle, and rose to care for the strange guest. She set food out for him, what little food she had, graciously offered, and gratefully received.

But suddenly there came the noise of wild confusion and uproar in the streets of the village, a shrieking and wailing of women’s voices, a clanging of swords, and desperate cries: “The soldiers! The soldiers of Herod! They are killing our children!”

The young mother’s face grew white with terror. She held her child close to her, and crouched motionless in the darkest corner of the room, covering him with the folds of her robe, praying he would not wake up and cry.

Artaban went quickly and stood in the doorway of the house. His royal bearing filled the opening, blocking any sight of the home within.

The soldiers came hurrying down the street with bloody hands and dripping swords. At the sight of the stranger in his imposing dress they hesitated with surprise. The captain approached to thrust him aside, but Artaban did not move. He said in a low voice, "I am all alone in this place, waiting to give this jewel to the prudent captain who will leave me in peace."

He showed the ruby, glistening in the hollow of his hand like a great drop of blood.

The captain's eyes expanded with desire, and greed wrinkled around his lips. He stretched out his hand and took the ruby.

"March on!" he cried to his men. "There is no child here.

The clamour and the clang of arms moved down the street. Artaban re-entered the cottage. He turned his face to the east and prayed:

"God of truth, forgive my sin! I have said the thing that is not, to save the life of a child. And two of my gifts are gone. I have spent for man that which was meant for God. Shall I ever be worthy to see the face of the King?"

But the woman said very gently: "Because thou hast saved the life of my little one may the Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord make His face to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee; The Lord lift up His countenance upon thee and give thee peace".

So, the Fourth Wise Man traveled from place to place. Beginning in Egypt, he searched among the people of the dispersion, he saw hunger and famine, plague stricken cities, imprisoned and enslaved. In all the morass of humanity, he found none to worship – but many to help. He fed the hungry, and clothed the naked, and healed the sick, and comforted the captive; and his years went by more swiftly than the weaver's shuttle through the loom, leaving behind a pattern of love and compassion. It seemed almost as if he had forgotten his quest.

Thirty-three years of the life of Artaban passed away, and he still was a pilgrim, and a seeker after light. His hair was now white as the wintry snow.

Worn and weary and ready to die, but still looking for the king, he had come for the last time to Jerusalem. He had often visited the holy city before, and had searched through all its lanes and crowded hovels and prisons without finding any trace of the family of Nazarenes who had fled from Bethlehem long ago. But now it seemed as if he must make one more effort, and

something whispered in his heart that, at last, he just might succeed.

It was the season of the Passover. The sky was dark. Thousands of people passed along the street that leads to the Damascus gate. Artaban joined a group from his own country, and asked were they were going.

"We are going," they answered, "to the place called Golgotha, outside the city walls, where there is to be an execution. Haven't you heard what has happened? Two famous robbers are to be crucified, and with them another, called Jesus of Nazareth, the so-called 'King of the Jews.' He did many wonderful works among the people, so that they love him greatly.

Artaban's heart beat quickly. Could it be the same one who had been born in Bethlehem thirty-three years ago, at whose birth the star had appeared in heaven? He said within himself: Could it be that my last pearl is just in time to offer for His ransom and save his life?

So the old man followed the crowd. Just beyond the gate, a troop of soldiers came down the street, dragging a young girl with torn dress and matted hair.

As he paused to look at her with compassion, she suddenly broke from the hands of her tormentors and threw herself at his feet, clasping him around the knees. She had seen his white cap and the emblem on his breast, the symbol of the Magi.

"Have pity on me", She cried, "and save me, for the sake of the God of Purity. I also am a daughter of the true religion, which is taught by the Magi. My father is dead, and I am seized for his debts to be sold as a slave. Save me a fate from worse than death". Artaban trembled.

It was the old conflict in his soul, which had come to him in the palm grove of Babylon and in the cottage at Bethlehem – the conflict between the plan of worship and the impulse of love. Twice the gift he had consecrated for worship had been given to the service of humanity. Was it his great opportunity, or his last temptation?

One thing only was sure – to rescue this girl would be a deed of love. And is not love the light of the soul?

He took the pearl from his bosom. Never had it seemed so full of light. He laid it in the hand of the slave.

"This is thy ransom, daughter. It is the last of my treasures which I kept for the King".

While he spoke, the darkness of the sky deepened, and the earth shook. Stones were loosened and crashed into the street. Dust clouds filled the air. The soldiers fled in terror. But Artaban and the girl crouched beneath the wall.

An aftershock quivered through the ground. A heavy tile, shaken from the roof, fell and struck the old man on the temple. He lay breathless and pale, with his white head resting on the young girl's shoulder, blood trickling from the wound.

As she bent over him, there came a voice, very small and still, like music sounding from a distance. The girl turned to see if someone had spoken from the window above them, but she saw no one.

Then the old man's lips began to move, as if in answer, and she heard him say:

"Not so, my Lord. For when did I see you?"

The sweet voice came again. And this time the maid understood the words:

"Truly I tell you, as you have done unto one of the least of these, you have done unto me."

A calm radiance of wonder and joy lighted the pale face of Artaban. A long breath of relief came gently from his lips.

His journey was ended. His treasures were accepted. The Other Wise Man had found the King.

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Two comments about this.

- 1) May we also be diligent as we look for Jesus this week. Day by day, let us be aware of his presence, and day by day be thankful for opportunities to love and serve others.
- 2) Not so much about Van Dyke's story, but about the story of the Magi in the Bible. You know the really amazing thing about all this? That they are even included. What have they got to do with the God of Israel, the God of the Jews?

That's the wrong question, though. It should be, What does God have to do with them? Answer: EVERYTHING! God so loved all people — the whole world — that he came and lived among us to show us that. God still is with us today.

Theme for today: Magi – “wise ones” – came to see Jesus. Not as a tourist sight, though – the miracle kid of Bethlehem: “*Get your picture taken with Jesus; t-shirt and a genuine piece of swaddling cloth for only two silver coins.*” No, they came to worship, to present gifts. Wise people still do that today.