

[Augsburg College Chapel, January 15, 2008]

I love the story of the wise ones, the wise men (or kings, or magi) found in Matthew's gospel (and only there!) It is the quintessential Epiphany story – those outside the circle drawn to the light – and it is a love story, a story of longing and fidelity and surprise. It is a story that helps us understand both the nature of God – as Emmanuel, with us – and also what God hopes for and expects of us – a love story, God and God's people falling in love again.

Especially meaningful, I think, as we come together again in this chapel to hear God's word, to worship and to consider our faith journeys in the new year. And who better to guide us than the wise ones, whose path to the Christ Child is emblematic of what it means to fall in love again with our God.

The story is fairly straightforward – even cryptic some might say. The star appears in the East and these three men – rulers, magicians, priests – are drawn to leave their home countries and travel to see what the star proclaims. Along the journey, they meet up with Herod, who attempts to trick them into being his spies. They finally come to the place (not the manger, but a house) where Jesus lives with Mary and Joseph, where they likely are amazed to find a child. And they leave their valuable gifts of frankincense, gold and myrrh, worshipping God for what has been made manifest for God's people. They depart rejoicing by an alternative route so as to avoid Herod's edict.

This year I have been exploring the wise ones story through the lens of poet W.H. Auden's magisterial prose poem, "For the Time Being." In a section of the poem entitled "The Summons," Auden has each wise man remark on why he might follow the star. I find in these remarks an intriguing way to consider the logic of the story.

The first wise one comments, "To discover how to be truthful now - Is the reason I follow the star."

Imagine the situation. These mysterious kings from the East see a star – they feel its pull, its majesty, its danger, its promise - and they step outside their positions of power and privilege, they take the risk of leaving comfortable and predictable circumstances to follow a star. They want to know the truth in a world where what passes for truth is wrapped up in narrow and confining formulae, in dizzying reams of information, in insecurity and blind allegiance. They want to be free – and to be free they must be truthful. That is why they follow the star – to find the truth – and therein we learn one of the important lessons of the love story: God calls us out of our ordinary and comfortable circumstances to follow, to discover how to be truthful. Lovers step out of the expected to learn the truth of each other.

And the second wise one adds, "To discover how to be living now – Is the reason I follow the star."

The wise ones undertake the journey occasioned by the pull of the star – who knows the risks, the burden, the sacrifices – and therein they seek not simply to remember a distant past or to dream of a possible future, but to understand what God intends for us now. The star calls them to seek out the glimpses of truthfulness and fidelity and good that are here now to be embraced and engaged – not to dwell on precedent or speculation – and therein to find genuine faith. Here is the second lesson of this love story: God is with us, present now and here, and our journeys must be open to discovering what it means to live faithfully in the here and now. Lovers don't glorify the past or put all their hope in the future – they are there for each other in the present.

The third wise one continues, "To discover how to be loving now – Is the reason I follow the star."

The wise ones follow where the star leads them – to a surprise, a baby lying in its mother's arms – so counter-intuitive, so outside the realm of the world's definition of success. And here is perhaps the most startling aspect of the story. Think about it – you can step out of your comfort zone, even take the risk of a journey that challenges you to be open to life in the here and now,

but when it comes down to it, as humans we expect that at the end of this sacrificial, risky journey, we'll be rewarded with a result that measures up to our sacrifices, that satisfies our human longings in ways we understand. But instead it is a child, living in pretty squalid conditions. This is it? This is what we gave it all up to find? Surprise, yes this is what it is all about. Lovers are open to the awesome and life-transforming surprises we will know in each other.

And finally, Auden has the wise men together proclaim, "To discover how to be human now – Is the reason we follow the star."

Here is the culmination of our love story. The wise ones have reached their destination and they do only what they can do – they give rare and precious gifts, they stand back in awe at God's grand and mysterious ways. They suspend disbelief and proclaim God's great wonders and love for God's people. They learn to love again, to love a child whose work in the world is to save God's people. Lovers fall in love with their beloved, and therein find themselves most fully, find what it means to be truly human now.

May the story turn around our notions of a faith journey. How do the wise ones offer us a map for our lives of faith? Are we willing to be drawn out of our usual places of power and privilege and comfort to undertake the journey of faith to be open to surprises of love and to offer our gifts in response to the wonder of God breaking into our lives? How do we love as we have been loved? This is the love story of the wise men. This is our love story as God's faithful people in the world.

I had the privilege to hear Howard Gardner, Harvard prof, during the break, talking about his research on the frames of mind needed to be good citizens and workers in the world – disciplined, synthetic, creative, respectful and ethical – a vision of the liberally-formed person. As I considered the story of the wise ones for this morning, I recognized that what Gardner is calling for in his vision of the good person – good thinker, good leader, good citizen – is someone who, like the wise men in our story, has the courage and imagination and faithfulness to undertake a journey – scary as it might be – and to be open to the surprises along the way, surprises of ideas and experiences and relationships that demand of us our gifts in honor and service to our neighbors. This, too, is a love story – a story that each of us is undertaking in this college. This is a story of education and service that is grounded in love for self, each other, our neighbors and our God. God calls us to fall in love again here and now, and the wise ones teach us how! My beloved friends, may the epiphany of our good and gracious God inhabit your hearts and minds as we journey together in this new year to discover the surprises God has in store for us. May we be drawn into the love story that is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord. And may we proclaim, along with the shepherds and wise ones and angels, this wonderful chorus that concludes Auden's poem:

*He is the Way.*

*Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;  
You will see rare beasts and have unique adventures.*

*He is the Truth.*

*Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;  
You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.*

*He is the Life.*

*Love Him in the World of the Flesh;  
And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.