

EPIPHANY: Visitors and Teddy Bears

Matthew 2:1-12 [MW20-01]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 05 January 2020

At Massachusetts General Hospital, on the tenth floor

- there is a glass display case with various plaques and artefacts
- one display is particularly interesting, in fact, astonishing, maybe humorous
- but, I'm getting a little ahead of myself ... let me go back ...

I'm indebted to the great homiletical preacher, William J. Bausch

- who writes about it like this ...

Six-year-old Tony was born with an eye problem; he was almost totally blind. His doctor had read in the New England Journal of Medicine of a new surgical procedure at Mass General that might help. He sent the boy's medical record and in due time a decision was made to try the surgery.

Tony had a favourite teddy bear he kept with him at all times. This teddy bear had begun to show signs of wear. One eye was missing, one ear was chewed off, and the stuffing was oozing out through several holes. Tony's dad offered to buy him a new one but he didn't want a new one, so the old one went with him to Boston and remained close all through the x-rays, tests, and consultations. In fact, the boy and his teddy bear were not separated until the anaesthesia was applied for the surgery itself.

With the surgery completed, Tony was heavily bandaged and had to remain still for a couple of days. But each day the surgeon was in and out of the room to encourage him. Finally came the day for removing the bandages. For the first time in six years Tony could see. Though his vision was blurred at first, it gradually clarified and for the first time Tony could look into the faces of his parents.

Before long it was time for Tony to be discharged and to go home. On that final morning the surgeon signed the necessary discharge papers and gave Tony a big hug and said, "Listen, I own stock in you, I expect to get letters from you regularly. Do you understand?" Then Tony did something totally unexpected. He said to his surgeon friend, "I want you to have this," and he handed him his teddy bear. The surgeon's first impulse was to say, "Oh, no, I can't take that." But something stopped him. With a flash of sensitivity the surgeon understood what Tony was trying to do. He wanted to give his dear surgeon friend the most precious gift at his disposal, so full was his heart with love. The wise surgeon accepted the teddy bear with a hug and a thank you, assuring Tony that he would take mighty good care of his friend.

For over ten years that teddy bear sat in that glass case on the tenth floor, one eye missing, one ear half chewed off, and stuffing oozing out of several holes. In front of the teddy bear was the surgeon's card and just beneath his name he had written this caption, "This is the highest fee I have ever received for professional services rendered."

Now slowly and reluctantly let me break the spell of this story by adding that that incident of mutual kindness in one place in one city in one country took place during the Vietnam war where life was being violently extinguished; in Africa, where tyrants were massacring millions of people and fearful repressions and crimes were occurring all over. Yet, in the midst of all this global darkness, this teddy bear light shone. It was a pinpoint of brightness joined with millions of others and it still remains a sign of God in this world. That's why I tell the teddy bear story on Epiphany, a feast of revelation, light in the darkness, and visitors who travelled, following the star to seek out that light that would make a difference. As someone said, the candle says to the darkness, "I beg to differ." The Wise Men wanted to differ with the world's dark deeds and not just bemoan its terrible state. They would be a candle, a sign of presence and, as such, an example and pattern for us.

For as we look at our dark world today

- there is still trouble and fighting in Iraq
Iraq, ironically, the Magi's home as well as, the home of the Garden of Eden
and the home of Abraham, Jacob, Rebekah, and Rachel;
visited by Jonah, Daniel, Ezekiel and St Peter
and where the Hebrews were captive for seventy years
- and as we look at the violence in Africa, the escalating protests in Hong Kong
the seemingly never-ending parade of refugees
we too desperately seek the light, must *be* that light
and add to the witness of Tony and his teddy bear and his gentle surgeon

Or to change the imagery

- there is rumoured to be a dark cave in Afghanistan, or Syria, or Iran
where some suspect, stuffed with arms and weapons
the leaders of ISIS hide in the dark and plot their continuing reign of terror
- they hide in the dark because the rest of the world wants them stopped
they hide in the dark because the U.S. Administration wants them dead
from a bullet, a bomb or an American court of justice

There is another cave in the Middle East

- in a little town called Bethlehem, that has no weapons
only an animal or two and now a husband and his pregnant wife
- here a child is to be born, a Prince of Peace, the Light of the World

Question: How do we journey from the one cave to the other?

Along with little Tony, Marion Hill tells us how. Let me tell you her story:

She was born into wealth and prestige and literally in a Hungarian castle. Her first spoon was not silver but solid gold. She went to school in Vienna and became an actress. There she fell in love with a young student named Otto. Otto and Marion married and went to live in Hollywood. There they set up house and gradually he began to dabble in movies. In fact, he became so interested in the movies that he gave up his medical practice and went on to become the famed and formidable director, Otto Preminger.

Marion's beauty, wit, and charm got her everything and she became an international hostess. But the truth was she couldn't handle the fast life. She slipped into alcohol, drugs, and sexual affairs. She divorced Otto, attempted suicide three times before moving back to Vienna. There, like Tony and his parents, she met another doctor and she went to him for counselling. But this was not any doctor. He was the famed Dr. Albert Schweitzer, and when he went back to his heroic mission to the poorest of darkest Africa, she went with him. Marion, the rich, celebrated. In fact, Marion, spent the rest of her life as a hospital servant. She wrote a book called *All I Want Is Everything*, a title inspired by Dr. Schweitzer who once told her, "There are two kinds of people. There are the helpers and the non-helpers." Marion says, "I thank God that God has allowed me to become a helper and in helping, I found everything."

Let's go back

- I asked before, concerning the two caves
one of darkness and one of light:
how do we, like those visitors of old, the Wise Men
travel from the one to the other?
- now you know the answer: a teddy bear at a time