



SUNDAY SERMON

Let us Go and Pay Homage

“The adoration of the magi” is the title often given to this Gospel story. I want to reflect with you on “adoration” as a spiritual practice. As the story begins in the East, that’s where I begin. On sabbatical some years ago, I went on pilgrimage to the Himalayas, to the foothills of a great peak, Nanda devi, considered a goddess by those who are Hindu. One of the tallest in the world, at nearly 26,000 feet, pilgrims do not seek to ascend Nanda devi, but to draw near.

Along the way, I learned of the Hindu practice of darshan. It is not unlike adoration, but darshan means both seeing and being seen. It’s a two way relationship between the devotee and deity. A Hindu goes to a temple not only to see and worship the god therein, but also to be seen by god. To be seen is to be blessed. One receives darshan.

With guides it took us several days to get up into the thin air of 16,000 feet. With the rapidly changing weather one is by no means assured of seeing any mountain peaks at all. On the morning of the eighth day, the clouds cleared and Nanda devi shone resplendent in the sunlight. She blessed us: we could see her and were seen by her. In my limited experience I found that the more one practices darshan, the more occasions one finds to do so – seeing and receiving the holy here, there, and everywhere.

Our magi today followed a star that they might go and pay homage. Adoration and homage mean much the same, the former from Latin, the latter from Greek. The biblical Greek is proskuneo. To pay homage was the act of a feudal vassal acknowledging his lord, falling to one’s knees with face to the ground; to pay allegiance either to God or king. When magi from the east came looking for Jesus they said ‘we have come proskunesai auto (to worship him). But the literal meaning of proskunesai is more tender. It means “toward a kiss.” To worship, then, is to draw near enough to the holy for a kiss.

Matthew uses the term with some frequency, translated variously. During the temptation in the wilderness, Satan offered to Jesus all the kingdoms of the world, “if you will fall down and worship me.” (4:9) A leper came to Jesus, “and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.’” (8:2) So also, a leader of the synagogue who sought Jesus’ healing for his daughter (9:18) and the Canaanite woman tormented by a demon (15:25). And finally, the disciples, upon meeting the risen Christ, “took hold of his feet and worshipped Him.” (28:9)

Acts of adoration, or paying homage, are not much in vogue these days. Are we too important to get down on our knees, to prostrate ourselves, to place our face in the dirt? It’s too bad that those in authority have too often abused their

continued

DATE

The Eve of the Epiphany
Sunday, Jan. 5, 2020

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

VERSES

Matthew 2:1-12

privilege or power at the cost of another's dignity or integrity. So we claim our independence, subject to no one. It's too bad that adoration can slip so seamlessly into idolatry of a thing or another. So we limit our worship to ideals or perhaps ourselves.

I haven't had much practice myself in acts of adoration in the way I'm describing it. I imagine it would be good for my soul to get down on my knees, face to the ground, and confess my love. Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return. A taste of humility.

Having paid homage to the newborn Christ, what did those magi ponder on their journey home? What was in their hearts? What did they tell their family or friends? We know nothing of how their lives may have been enriched or redirected. We know they followed the star... all the way... to the manger, to the child. Where they knelt. And offered their gifts with a kiss of love. The text says that the star went ahead of them and when it stopped, "they were overwhelmed with joy." Perhaps it was joy that carried them home and shaped the remainder of their days.

As I consider my own experiences of prayer – here in worship with you, or alone in my room or on a mountaintop – I am aware that I seek both to see God and to be seen by God, to find and be found, to love and be loved. When God looks at you, who does God see? As God loves you, who is the you God loves? A prayer: help me God to see myself as you see me, to see the world as you see the world.

During the Christmas holiday I read Ann Patchett's marvelous earlier novel, Bel Canto. An assembly of international dignitaries gathered in a South American presidential mansion are taken hostage. Relationships develop between the terrorists and hostages with a world-renowned opera singer, Roxane Coss, evoking passion for beauty and love. Even though he's exchanged no words with her, a Russian diplomat Fyodorov falls in love with Roxane. After much anxiety and fretting, he confesses his love to her.

"It is a gift. There. Something to give to you. If I had a necklace or a book of paintings ... I would give you these in addition to my love."

"Then you are too generous with gifts," says she.

Fyodorov shrugged. "Perhaps you are right." "But in this place I hear you sing every day... and what I feel in my heart is love. There is no point in not telling you that. These people who detain us ... may decide to shoot us after all. It is a possibility. And if that is the case, then why should I carry this love with me to the other world? Why not give to you what is yours?"

"And what if there is nothing for me to give you?"

He shook his head. "What a thing to say, after all that you have given me. But it is never about who has given what. That is not the way to think of gifts. This is not business we are conducting. Would I be pleased if you were to say you loved me as well? That what you wanted was to come to Russia and live with [me], attend state dinners, drink your coffee in my bed? A beautiful thought, surely, but my wife would not be pleased. When you think of love... you must think like a Russian... with a more expansive view."

He extended his hand to Roxane, and when she stood and gave him hers he kissed it and for a moment stretched it up to hold it against his cheek.

"I will remember this day forever, this moment, your hand. No man could want for more than this." He smiled and then he let her go."

Here is an extraordinary awareness – a stirring of the soul, the motion of love that seeks nothing in return; no reciprocity, no transaction. It is a love that needs only – and fiercely – to be expressed. It is, as Fyodorov says, a gift. Ours for the giving. Ours for the receiving. Showing forth the love within.

I will remember this day, this moment, forever, says he. As surely as those magi, overwhelmed with joy in the offering of their gifts. As I remember, and always will, being blessed in the presence of Nanda devi.

I am wondering about the love we each have within ourselves, and wondering if we are offering it, giving it as freely as we might, as it requires of us, to give with lavish abandon. Why would we carry this love – ungiven – to the other world?

So also I am wondering about the love being offered to us, for us – ours for the receiving. From a mountain peak, the love of Christ being born in our hearts, given from this table; from the blessings of this day, given through the eyes of strangers. What would it be for us to follow the star, draw near for a kiss on bended knee, and find ourselves overwhelmed by joy?