

FROM BEAR CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
A Vision, a Journey, and Gifts

David Orendorff

Matthew 2:1-12

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They had a vision, these three astronomers, mathematicians and sages. They were the elite scholars of their age, educated and hopefully wise. And in the stars they saw something more than just lights, they saw what was to be. They were fools to many, but the vision, the vision of a savior for the world, was so clear, so compelling, that they left family and friends, left academia and country, and followed a star toward, perhaps, their own deaths. But the vision was so compelling, so real in the stars, no matter the ridicule or the danger, no matter that they were Gentiles and not of this savior's faith that they followed. They followed into the west, their lives beckoned in hopes of finding the one that would be king of kings and lord of lords.

Eventually, some say it took twelve days or even twelve weeks, but eventually after meeting with a jealous king, they found that their vision was real. They found in a poor baby, a foreign child in a simple family's house what they had only been promised in the stars. They knelt and worshipped before this holy child. They gave to him their allegiance with gifts of gold, for Jesus had the power of kings, frankincense, for Jesus was the answer to their prayers, and myrrh, for Jesus would conquer death.

They could have stayed with the baby Jesus forever. It would be so easy to stay in the glow of the vision found, to watch him grow and write a book for the great library in Babylon. But visions must not only be seen they must be lived. So once these three had seen God made flesh, had seen for themselves that the promise of cosmic salvation was fulfilled, they turned back toward the east and home.

It is an amazing story. It may be true as fact, or it may be true as wisdom, or it may be both. It is certainly wisdom for it outlines for us our experience and our call in the birth of our savior Jesus. We too have visions so real, so compelling that we leave home in pursuit of their truth. And when we find the truth we give our lives to it, worship it, offer whatever gifts we might have. We too become visionary sages who on the journeys of a lifetime and give generous gifts.

Take Ethel Waters for instance:

To Ethel Waters, singer and actress who enthralled audiences for nearly 50 years with a remarkable career on stage and screen, one of the greatest pleasures of life was the joy of giving. Miss Waters gave liberally. Not only did she impart immense pleasure to the theater goers who witnessed her performances, but also a great sharing of love. To many she was "Mom." Though she had no children by birth, she had many to whom she was a mother in every sense of the word.

Miss Waters was seen live in theater and concert and in motion pictures and on television to the delight of millions. It

might be lesser known, however, that she also was a regular contributor to the Christian crusades of Billy Graham and others, performing gospel music and spirituals with a special richness that came from her own heritage....

Ethel Waters had a favorite hymn, one that became virtually a trademark for her. It was "His Eye is on the Sparrow," and for many years she sang it with a meaning given by no other artist. To Ethel Waters, she was the sparrow that God had touched.

A large sparrow, to be sure, amply structured, Miss Waters at one time weighed 350 pounds, and while she could joke about her bulk, it limited her mobility and she often spent long hours self-confined in her apartment, finding it easier to stay home than go out.

Therein was the contrast that dogged this remarkable human being much of her adult life. To the public who saw and knew her, she was an ebullient, giving, loving person - which she was. Privately, she often was lonely, spending many hours in hotel rooms or suites. Even when home she sometimes did not seek out company for long periods of time. But, give her an audience, and Ethel Waters was at her best.

What were the forces that shaped the life of Ethel Waters? Born illegitimately and in poverty to a 12-year-old mother who had been raped at knife-point, she was raised primarily by her grandmother and aunts, though she spent much of her childhood living in the red-light districts of Philadelphia and Camden where housing was barely affordable. A large child, Ethel also was quick-minded and tough. In situations that she couldn't talk her way out of, she usually could fight her way. She became an excellent judge of character at a young age, knowing a scam or a con when she saw it and often labeling it as such... She also developed life-long abstinence from alcohol and drugs, for she had witnessed their horrors in the ghetto.

While Ethel's schooling was spotty, she learned rapidly, for she had a superior intellect and absorbed knowledge easily. Oddly, the one thing she did not learn was to read music, even though her stage career initially was as a singer and she continued to perform musically nearly to the time of her death.

One factor she desperately missed in her young childhood was the true demonstration of affection. To her mother she was a constant reminder of the worst moment of her life. Even the grandmother she called Mom did not show love for Ethel, and the youngster built her defense mechanisms accordingly. Thus Ethel was not prepared for the genuine love and concern expressed for her when she began attending a Catholic school, where her nun teachers were captivated by her innate charm and skills. Gradually Ethel learned to return the warmth and affection.

Not only did Ethel change her behavior, but she opened her mind and her heart to God. As her ghetto behavior tamed, her search for a closer relationship with God intensified. She learned to pray and maintained an honesty that sometimes even

shocked the parish priest.

Ethel was ecumenical, though. It was at a Methodist Quarterly Meeting in Chester, Pennsylvania, at the age of twelve that she believed "God touched this sparrow." From that time on she found something to which she could cling. And share....

In her later years, when Ethel Waters performances were mostly at crusades, it was said that she never really left show business, just changed her message. Perhaps so. But one thing is known. Ethel Waters, blessed with the talent she was willing to share at almost all cost, also was blessed with another gift: brilliant, spontaneous thought which she often shared best at Christian witness to the God she loved and served.¹

Like the Magi and like Ethel, we too have visions of love, of peace, of forgiveness, justice and compassion. We too have long journeys into foreign lands seeking salvation for what ails us and what ails the world. We too look to stars, tea leaves, prophets, and daily prayers for some sign that God hears the cries of the people and sends a savior. And during Christmas we Christians claim that our cries and the pleas of the world have been heard and answered in the baby Jesus, child of Joseph and Mary, God with us, savior of the world.

In Christmas we see our hopes made flesh and we believe that no matter how dark the long days of December have been, the sun will come again and light our lives with joy. And we too respond with the journey of our lives. Many of us are willing to leave the comfortable and the known of our homes and come out in the cold of night to watch the children dress as angels and shepherds and sing the songs of birth, or to feed the hungry.

Many of us are willing to risk livelihood with contributions gladly given, worship offerings of prayers, presence, gifts and service. We are willing to paint, climb ladders and pull wires so that a new congregation might have a place to worship. Many of us are willing to shop for gifts, not only for our children, grandchildren and friends, but for strangers, single moms and poverty encumbered dads that hearts might be warmed and love remembered at Christmas.

Many of us make a sacrificial gift from our sometimes stretched income, or from our stretched time, because we believe that God is love known to us in Jesus. And in Jesus we see the God we would worship with our own gold, our own frankincense and our own myrrh.

And like those first magi, sages from the east, we will go home carrying the vision made real in our hearts. Sharing the power of compassion, of goodness, kindness, forgiveness and patience, with a world that so needs the healing touch which has been given to us.

¹ Robert B. Pamplin, Jr. One Who Believed: True Stories of Faith, (Christ Community Church, Dundee, Oregon, 1993), 12-14

Go now, you who have seen Jesus, go and tell the world of
what you know with your deeds and if necessary, with your words.
Shalom and Amen