

What we worship

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jay Sidebotham at The Church of the Holy Spirit on Sunday, January 3, 2010.

Over my desk in my office at home hangs a copy of the Commencement Address given by the author David Foster Wallace at Kenyon College in 2005, reprinted last year in the Wall Street Journal. I read it often, particularly the part when he talks to young people about worship. He writes: "In the day to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism...no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* we worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of God or spiritual type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough. Worship your own body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. Worship power, and you will feel weak and afraid. Worship your intellect, and you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the very edge of being found out." He goes on to talk about a life of freedom, his hope for these young people. The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline and effort and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over. The alternative, he says, is the rat race.

In past months, my thoughts turned to this commencement address as I thought about our journey through the Bible, about the Bible's consistent warnings about idols, about worshipping things that aren't ultimately worth worshipping, something we all do. I've come to see that it is not because God wants all the attention, like some narcissistic despot. Rather, the Bible tells us that worshipping idols is not good for us. It will not satisfy us. It's not how we're built. It's not the path to freedom.

My thoughts turned to this commencement address as I saw the three wise men coming over the horizon. As the hymn says, in somewhat lame poetry, they look-ed up and saw a star shining in the east beyond them far. The wise men coming from the east demonstrate attention, awareness, discipline, effort. And their journey is about worship. The climax of the story: They pay homage to the child. These wise men, these magi are good folks to think about, in the gracious coincidence of Epiphany and the new year, that annual opportunity to make resolutions and think about what we consider important, what we value, where we give our heart, what it is we worship.

We learn a number of things from the wise men. We learn that life is an unfolding journey. They see that star, but they don't know what it means. Discovering its meaning will take exploration. It means moving from where they are to that uncertain place to which they are called. The wise men show they are willing to do that, with no guarantee of what they will find. You could call that faith, which is after all a journey, a search, a process, or as Lily Tomlin once called it: *A collective hunch*. Can we risk it, even if we don't always know what we are looking for, even if we are often surprised. The journey itself is animated by a worship, by the spirit and incentive and hope that the journey is worth the risk, the promise worth the cost. For the wise men, the risk paid off. They come to see clearly what they are called to worship, what has value. And what riches did they receive, what fame, what insights, what an epiphany. Their story becomes a story for us, a story for the season of Epiphany which is really just a string of

stories about the ways that we come to see God's presence, and to find that what we worship is worth it.

We come to the end of a challenging year, at the end of a challenging decade, called all kinds of things: the oughts, the noughts, the naughties. My favorite name for the recent unpleasantness is not the great recession, but the great adjustment. If there is any silver lining in recent challenges, it's the opportunity to think about what we worship, where we give our heart.

So take this season: a new year, a new season in the church called Epiphany, to look up and see if you see any stars. Think about what it would mean to follow them this year. Where are you being led in your own spiritual life? Where are you being led in the relationships in your household, among family and friends? Where are you being led in your work, paid or volunteer? What is calling to you? How will you move toward it? Consider your relationship to this community, which holds Christ at the center. Shift from thinking about what you can get from this place to what you can offer God. And let your life in the world be that kind of offering too.

I commend to you Karen Armstrong's new book, *THE CASE FOR GOD*, her response to the spate of new books promoting atheism. Like David Foster Wallace, she is not ready to give up on religion in the world, because it matters what we worship. She talks about how we think about belief. It is not intellectual assent to dubious propositions, not doctrinal conformity. She says it is about spiritual exercises that make beliefs a living reality in the daily lives of the faithful. For her, the religious task is to help us to live creatively, peacefully and even joyously with realities for which there are no easy explanations and problems. Religion as a practical discipline. The point of religion: to live intensely and richly here and now. She says: Religious people are ambitious. They want lives overflowing with significance.

Which is why we call the wise men wise. They could have seen a star and said: that's nice, and gone back to their studies, or their game of camel polo, or their buddies at the magi club. They could have said: well that doesn't fit with what I already know. But again, as the hymn tells us, they look-ed up and saw a star and said: let's check it out. Let's see where it leads. It was not easy for them. They had to swallow their pride and ask Herod for directions (which should put to rest forever the sexist jokes that men won't ask for directions). They had to travel from what was familiar. They had to brave the role of being an outsider. They had to contend with danger. But it was worth it. They were ambitious, looking for lives overflowing with significance. How about you? You begin a journey this year. What star do you see? What star do you follow? Will you let it take you where you want to go? Will it lead to worship that will feed you, or do you in? What will you worship? How will you do that. In a moment this fine quartet will sing an anthem, aptly called *In the bleak midwinter*. It concludes with a question, and I draw it to your attention as you prepare to come to this table:

What can I give him, poor as I am. If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what I have I give him, give my heart.