WISDOM

--a sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
University Lutheran Church
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"For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him."(Mt. 2:2)

That trenchant cartoonist of the Reporter magazine, Fernando Krahn, has a sketch in the current issue which comes near to being a perfect interpretation of our text. It shows what looks like a comet streaking across outer space. On closer examination, it's a star moving through space. In the cut-out area above the star, you can see what the star is thinking. Depicted there is a manger scene with three wisemen approaching.

Perhaps the cartoonist is saying more than he knows or intends, but he's touching a familiar theme in the history of the Church, especially in the history of the Eastern Orthodox Church: the theme of the wisdom of God holding the whole cosmos together and being revealed in the birth of the Child at Bethlehem.

Traditionally that has been a difficult theme for Americans to understand. We have our respectably modest Anglo-Saxon empiricism, and our practical, work-oriented puritan ethic. Above all, we Americans have been interested in deeds, not words, and even less in wide-ranging thoughts. Down to this very day, philosophers in this university city who like to think big thoughts find impermanent places. Whereas a man who can tell you fifty meanings of the word donut has a bright future. And of course people are generally more impressed by a man of action, who can meet a payroll or go canoeing down the Colorado river, than they are with a man who shows nothing but intellectual depth.

We American Christians follow suit at this point, for the most part. From the efficient work of the early New England puritans to the fervor of the Social Gospel of this century, we have emphasized deeds, much more than solitude and speculation. The moral, not the intellectual, has been our category. Even the less zealous of us Christians are much more prone to work at keeping the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount than we are to think about the God who here speaks and about his ultimate purposes with this world.

But that focus on deeds sometimes can become one-sided, even dangerous. Many social critics in our day have catalogued the ill-affects of our American fixation on the life of action. Thus one of them has written, with some sensitivity: "What power can accomplish, the United States can do. What prosperity can give, the United States can enjoy. Power and prosperity are good things to have if you know what to do with them. [Yet] at this moment, the United States is the most powerful, the most prosperous, and the most dangerous country in the world." He is pointing to the perils of action without thought.

You and I are free creatures, and in a very important sense, as St. Paul says, we can work out our own salvation. Yet we have to have some perspective by which to choose, perhaps even a profound vision. Otherwise we become captive of our life of action. We do not choose our goals. They are chosen for us. Herbert Marcuse has called this tendency the development of one-dimensional man. The idea is that you and I become like ants, swept along by the forces of society without really wondering or asking or knowing why we do what we do.

We all know of the one-dimensional businessman, who is simply carried along by the push for success in his company, and who more or less loses touch with his friends and his family. Like Willy Loman, he may even end his life in the oblivion of an automobile crash. Maybe he should have taken that THINK sign on his desk more seriously.

Less familiar to us, since we cannot see the forest for the trees, is the one-dimensional citizen of university city. He cascades down the academic tube like some James Bond in search of the missing gold. But more often than academic folklore suggests, the academic James Bond doesn't find the gold. He sometimes finds, when he graduates, nothing more than the same old wonky tube all over again. Maybe earlier along the line, he should have stopped his wonking, then and there, and attempted to -- think.

I mean about the real depths of life, what Tillich called the depth dimension. Walking home from the library late in the clear night, you are bathed in the moonlight and it glorifies the snow all around you. You stop. And you just look at the moon; and you wonder who you are and where you are going. Or you tell your friend about the elegance of that chemical formula, and you forget for a moment that you'd better memorize it for your final. Or, ponder a sleeping infant. See his deep peace. Maybe even ponder that One infant of whom the stars also think. John Milton was one of the wisemen who approached that infant sleep:

> But peaceful was the night
> Wherein the Prince of Light
> His reign of peace upon the earth began:
> The winds, with wonder whist,
> Smoothely the waters kist,
> Whispering new joys to the mild ocean....

Stop for a moment and think.

Of course, not just with the top of your head. That's where you can amass all those historical dates and all those formulas and all those ideas, which you may have to feed back in your bluebook. And surely, that top-of-the-head kind of thinking has its own important place. Without it we would hot have anti-biotic ointment to treat the burns of a child. Still, I am pointing to a different kind of thinking, -- with the totality of your being, not just your brain. Look for wisdom, as well as knowledge. For truth, as well as information. One of the Church fathers, St. Jerome, expressed this well in a reference to what he considered to be the idle thought-games of the platonic philosophers: "Plato located the soul of man in the head; Christ located it in the heart." I am pointing, then, beyond the man of action and beyond the man who efficiently employs his brain, to the man who thinks with his heart.

Consider a man such as the Jesuit paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin. He was surely no enemy of the brain. His scientific work has been applauded by no less an agnostic than Huxley. Yet Teilhard did more than think with his brain. In harmony with his scientific research, he dreamed a vision of a cosmic process. He spoke of the inwardness of matter, and the drive of matter toward greater and greater complexity. Through a process of randomness, he believed, life was bound to emerge; and through an analogously random process man was bound to emerge. From matter came the biosphere, then the noosphere, and then, finally, through yet another random course of events, the birth of a child who, in the fullness of time, was to be the focal point of the whole universe and its process. For Teilhard, in a profound sense, the very stars of the universe, from the very beginning, have thought about the birth of Christ.

Now that is a vision. It is not empirically verifiable. It's projected by the reasons of the heart rather than the reasons of the brain. But it is projected. And that kind of undertaking, is what Epiphany time asks us to do. To dream dreams. To wonder. To ponder. To reflect. To seek wisdom. And, somewhere in the process, to introduce into the thoughts of your heart the news of a child born in Bethlehem, who somehow is a friend of the stars.