THE THREE WISE MEN

A sermon by the Rev. H. Paul Santmire
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My text is from the second chapter of Matthew: " . . . And lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him" (Mt. 2:9b-11a)

Over the vacation I came upon a moving little book I want to tell you about. I had taken the television set into my study to watch an endless succession of football games. And to make some useful use of the time, as well, I was reorganizing my library. It was then that I came upon the little book Night Flight by Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

This is the story of a pilot, Fabian, and his dedicated executive, Rivière, as they battle with the elements in the early days of aviation. Three mailplanes are in the air heading for Buenos Aires. Two of them swim through the night skies and make their way to the waiting mailplane for Europe. The third becomes engulfed in a cyclone and is blown miles and miles off course out over the ocean. As he heads West to be over land again, the pilot catches sight of a few stars above. Knowing what fate awaits him if he cuts himself off entirely from any hope of seeing the earth, he nevertheless soars up above the vast storm into the nocturnal embrace of the stars.

"In a flash, the very instant he had risen clear, the pilot found a peace that passed his understanding," according to the story. "Not a ripple tilted the plane but, like a ship that has crossed the bar, it moved across a tranquil anchorage. In an unknown and secret corner of the sky it floated, as in a harbor of the Happy Isles. Below him still the storm was fashioning another world, thridded with squalls and cloudbursts and lightenings, but turning to the stars a face of crystal snow."

The story unites the pilot and his executive on the ground in a heroic struggle. This book, I think we can say, is a beautiful modern exemplar of a universal human drama: men left to themselves with the powers of nature, and drawing from this experience a profound kind of wisdom to pass on to their children and their children's children.

In all likelihood the three wisemen of Christian legend were tutored in this universal kind of wisdom. That's the first thing I want to talk about this morning; call it the wisdom of the stars. Then we'll take a glimpse at another kind of wisdom, something which the three wisemen first encountered as they found themselves traveling into the territory of biblical faith.

I.

First, then, the wisdom of the stars. I am no expert on astrology. Indeed, I have only recently discovered what my sign is. And I have yet to discover

what my sign means! Nevertheless, I invite you to join me on a night flight, and see if we can catch sight of some of the wisdom men have developed throughout the ages in their struggle for survival.

As we soar aloft, we enter a world of unmoved motion. Though generations of men may come and go, the stars continue in their paths. Though generations of men may seek the Happy Isles on earth--peace on earth and good will toward men--the stars continue untouched and unmoved on their way. They are, and they represent, the relentless, absolute powers of nature.

In our own day we have been told that it's likely, according to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, that this whole vast theatre of nocturnal light is destined for extinction--extinction by entropy, by the so-called heat-death of the universe, when all motion will cease in a dead state of frigidity.

This ultimate background of our universe today is not unlike what the ancients called remorseless fate, the turning of the spheres, grinding out the fortunes of men on earth. I suppose the main difference between the modern and the ancient visions of the universe in this respect was that some of the ancients saw a deity as the ultimate reality. I'm not talking now about the many gods who worked their ways on earth with men, as in Homer. For they, even Zeus, were subject to fate. I'm talking now about the god beyond these gods, the god of the philosophers. This god beyond the gods is the Unmoved Mover. He or It exists serenely by itself, with no real contact with this earth. For Aristotle, indeed, the Unmoved Mover doesn't even know that the world exists! So independent is this god of the world's fateful history!

This means for men on earth, then, that the ideal life is not the life of love, for ultimately there is no sympathy, no compassion. The highest virtue can only be a heroic kind of duty, the self-imposed duty to do what one must do in the face of all the elements. As the story says of the airline executive who is tracking the mailplanes in the night: "To love, only to love, leads nowhere. Rivière knew a dark sense of duty, greater than that of love."

What does this duty mean? In practice, I think, it means the exaltation of those specific virtues which are usually identified as <u>masculine</u>. The hero is the embodiment of the typically masculine. Achievement; will-to-power; success in the face of great odds; cold, relentless logic.

This is Revière, musing to himself: "To make oneself beloved, one need only show pity. I show little pity, or I hide it. Sure enough it would be fine to create friendships and human kindness around me . . . But I'm the servant of events and, to make others serve them too, I've got to temper my men like steel. That dark necessity is with me every night when I read over the flight reports . . . It is as if my will alone forbade the plane in flight from breaking or the storm to hold the mail up. My power sometimes amazes me."

I scarcely need to mention here that this heroic man is the same man who throughout the ages has exalted the challenges of war and who has rejoiced in exploiting the world of nature. It was there in John F. Kennedy, the man who remains a hero for many of us. We will go to the moon, he said in classic heroic rhetoric, because it's there. So we have our space program today, with all the billions of dollars and man-hours it has consumed and continues to consume. So, by the same logic, we have the SST and all the rest of our technological monsters.

It's not too far from this point to the popular logic of our war in Vietnam. We must fight this war because it's there. That's our destiny. We have the might at our disposal, the immense machines of warfare, planes and rockets and tanks and artillery. And we have the will to fight on to victory over the forces of darkness, to ward off any threat to our manhood. I think that this kind of cold logic is rather close to the surface in many regions of our land.

It's even present, I guess, in the games we play. Above all, football. Wasn't it interesting that the "heroes" of the November prison camp invasion were celebrated at the half-time of the Army-Navy game?! To be sure, we are no longer throwing Christians to the lions and cheering. (Our games are much more civil these days, although our armies may not have changed that much from the time of Nero.) We still exalt the heroic quarterback, who strives against insurmountable odds and with great pain, to gain victory for his team. As Vince Lombardi, that great patron saint of contemporary America, knew so well--the only thing that counts for us is victory. Or should I say: the only thing that counts for us <u>men</u> is victory?

Perhaps there's more than meets the eye when the women of America cry plaintively to their husbands to come away from the football games on TV. Perhaps.

Anyway, I think we should be bringing our night flight to an end. I think we've seen enough. I think we've had sufficient glimpse of the wisdom of the stars, to know what it's all about.

II.

Back on the earth, it's still dark all over. But if we have eyes to see, and a little dose of imagination, we can see another story unfolding. " . . . And lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was."

Here we turn from the wisdom of struggling men throughout the ages to the new kind of wisdom discovered by the three wisemen of Christian legend. Here we turn from the wisdom of the stars to <u>the wisdom of the THE star</u>. Here we turn from surveying the heavens to surveying the earth, from astrology to anthropology--from the logic of nature, to the logic of humanity. Here we no longer are bid to soar up above the storms of life to the universal truth of remorseless fate; rather, we are bid to settle down to earth to the particular truth of the birth of a child.

The star is moving. That already tells a story. A story, by the way, that's usually missed in those dull-headed debates between people who either affirm that it was scientifically impossible for the star to move or that it was miraculously possible for the star to move. Forget that kind of idle chatter. Ask simply if the story means to say anything by the account of the moving star. I think it does.

The ultimate backdrop of this universe is bigger than these "immovable" stars. Not remorseless fate on high rules, when all has been said and done, not the iron entropic necessity of the stars. Nor the serenely isolated and indifferent Unmoved Mover. No, behind it all there's a logic even more profound, the logic which is manifest in the birth of a particular child.

According to the nativity story, indeed, behind it all is no Unmoved Mover, but a Divine heart which is constantly moved, which is full of compassion. Not remorseless necessity and an unmoved mover; but both Divine freedom and the power of compassion.

This motif, interestingly enough, appears in the story Night Flight. Toward the end of this story, the pilot's wife appears at the airport, very much troubled by having heard no news of her husband. As she arrived on the scene, according to the story, "She looked for something that might speak to her of Fabian; at home all things confessed his absence--the sheets turned back upon the bed, the coffee on the table, a vase of flowers. Here there was nothing of him; all was at war with pity, friendship, memories. The realization irked her," the author explains, "that in this room she was the envoy of a hostile creed and almost she regretted having come . . ." Then the men at the airport, one by one, catch glimpses of her. "She felt her presence here misplaced, indecent," the author says, "as though she were standing naked before them. But so potent was her truth, the truth within her, that furtively their eyes strayed ever and again in her direction, trying to read it on her face. Beauty was hers, and she stood for a holy thing, the world of human happiness." The author then concludes: "So now she was come to make a timid plea for her flowers, the coffee waiting on her table, her own young body."

Although the story doesn't say so directly, I would like to think that the pilot's wife was large with child. And although the story gives her no name, I would like to think that her name might have been Mary. In any case, she represents all those specific virtues which have been traditionally identified with the woman: not achievement, will-to-power, success in the face of great odds, cold, relentless logic; but generativity, the power of compassion, loyalty to her human ties in times of duress, and a warm, personal logic.

When the three wisemen arrive in Bethlehem, that female context is where they see the infant Jesus. At this point the wisemen become wise men. I may be wrong at this point, but I don't think it's a coincidence that when the wise men enter the nativity scene their attention focuses on the child and the mother. It's almost as if Joseph isn't there!

I'm reminded of that delightful section in W.H. Auden's For the Time Being, where Joseph (bless him) is being put through some paces. The message is conveyed to him, rather directly, that at this time of redemption of the world, he will have to stand aside.

> For the perpetual excuse
> Of Adam for his fall--"My little Eve,
> God bless her, did beguile me and I ate,"
> For his insistance on a nurse,
> All service, breast, and lap; for giving Fate
> Feminine gender to make girls believe
> That they can save him, you must now atone,
> Joseph, in silence and alone.

The three wise men come and they see the child with Mary, his mother. At this point Joseph doesn't seem to matter. The eternal God, who is Lord of the stars, choses to be known as a child, in the context of femininity.

Here we can raise the question asked by St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (I Cor 1:18) Then Paul answers his own question: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." God chooses to make himself known in the lap of a woman! That most ridiculed, frequently dominated, allegedly weaker second sex!

Now I am aware that the typical masculine virtues, so-called, and the typical feminine virtues, so-called, are just that: typical, not to say stereo-typical. I am aware that women can be aggressive, that women can use logic, and that there are other authentic things for them to do than be mothers. But that really is off the subject here. Here I simply want to observe that guided by the star of Bethlehem we come upon a God who chooses to make himself known in a way defined by those stereotypical female virtues.

Why? We need not look too far for an answer. The God the biblical story points to isn't the God of the masculine heroic ideal. He's the God of peace over war, love over duty, justice over order, self-sacrifice over success. He's not the fateful God of might-makes-right, but the free God of compassion makes right.

Or, more concretely, he's not the God of military heroes. He's the God of Another Mother for Peace. Indeed, anyone who contemplates the scene that the three wise men saw can only say that here, preeminently, is <u>the</u> Mother for Peace, after whom all others can be called "another." Here is the one, preeminently, who says, "War is not healthy for children and other living things." This is the wisdom of the star of Bethlehem. This is the wisdom of compassionate humanity, as compared to the remorseless fate of nature.

This is the wisdom which will have us use our technology not to dominate the world and to exploit nature, but to rescue the oppressed and to heal the wounds of nature. This is the revolutionary wisdom of the "Magnificat," sung by Mary, and with her the Church throughout the ages, of the God who has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, who has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree, who has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away.

You will note that this is no stay-at-home-with-the-children-and-the-cooking kind of wisdom. It leads to <u>action</u> no less than the heroic masculine wisdom. The difference is not between activity and passivity, but between the will-to-power and the will-to-love, between insensitive domination and deep compassion. This is the biblical, feminine wisdom of the star of Bethlehem.

III.

So Joseph, where are you? Fabian, Revière, and countless others, who seek to soar to the stars in heroic virtue, where are you? Maybe I should also ask --as privately as I can--some of the exponents of women's liberation, who at times seek to appropriate all those heroic masculine virtues, aggressiveness, will-to-power, cold, relentless logic, and so on, --where are <u>you</u>?

Come to Bethlem and see. Here is no powerless passivity. Here is the revolutionary power of compassion. Here in this prototypical human scene, mother and child, is the ultimate reality of freedom and peace. That's the wisdom of the star which guided the legendary three wise men.

Where are you? You don't know, really? You don't know what you're doing? You don't know where you're going? Maybe you don't even know who you are? Well, look for that one star that moves; dream of it. And then think of humanity here on earth. That's all you need to do at first to begin to be wise.

You may rest content, if you will, to sing along with Auden's three wisemen, as they very humanly follow the star:

> The weather has been awful,
> The countryside is dreary,
> Marsh, jungle, rock; and echoes mock,
> Calling our hope unlawful;
> But a silly song can help along
> Yours ever and sincerely:
> At least we know for certain that we are three old sinners,
> That this journey is much too long, that we want our dinners,
> And miss our wives, our books, our dogs,
> But have only the vaguest idea why we are what we are.
> To discover how to be human now
> Is the reason we follow this star.

My goodness! A silly song like that can even make you a little happy, joyful-glad even.

This path to Bethlehem may truly be the path of wisdom. And that's something to rejoice about. "And lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him."