



Children's Story – *Answer Mountain* Colleen M. McDonald

Reading

Adapted from the original by Rev. Fred L. Hammonds

I had two dreams recently that had to do with previous eras of my life. Both are periods of my life that in contrast to where I am today are foreign to me.

In the first dream, I am in a charismatic prayer meeting. I didn't recognize the place but I had a friend of mine from seminary at this meeting. In the dream, my friend is seized in the spirit and begins to sing a song, two verses. He finishes and then I am seized in the spirit and sing the final verse of the song. The people in the meeting tell us that we must write the song down in order to preserve this song and we begin a search for pen and paper. Which cannot be found. So I am singing my verse over and over again so that I would not forget the words that had moved the congregation so very much....

Time passes and I am still searching for pen and paper. I travel to distant lands and cultures and still I cannot find them. Finally I stop at a fish market and there is yesterday's NY Daily News. The newspaper used to wrap the fish in. And I tear off the front page and grab the wax crayon and write down the song. End of dream.

The second dream I am at some point in the not too distant future and sent back in time to the late 1980's. It is the height of the AIDS pandemic in terms of fear. Remember the time period of the 1980's in relation to AIDS. There is no true understanding of how this virus is working. There are no effective medications. People who are diagnosed with AIDS are told to get their affairs in order because they have less than a year to live. People with AIDS are still quarantined in hospitals and nurses and doctors alike will refuse to treat them for fear of contracting the disease.

Here I am, from the future, knowing that this present condition regarding AIDS will not last. In a few years there will be not just one medication to attack the virus that causes AIDS but several kinds of medications that combined will cause what the medical world called the Lazarus effect. People will rise up from their death beds and regain health and live with the virus for perhaps their normal life span.

In my dream I am trying to tell these people with AIDS what I know to be true. I knew this because I was coming to them from a future that was even further in the distance than the present day.

Stating these future events to these people was like telling them some piece of fiction. It could not be comprehended. The dream ends with these people looking at me with blank faces of total dismay at my words of what will be true.

to see original go to : <http://serenityhome.wordpress.com/2009/10/25/sermon-five-smooth-stones-continuous-revelation/>

Sermon

If someone had told me two years ago that our congregation would be seriously considering leaving this property, I would have become very anxious. I don't like change. It may not seem like it to many of you, because I'm up here every Sunday being a change agent, trying to find words to help us engage in the slow process of transformation that our liberal religious tradition promises can be there for each one of us. There's a saying in our vocation that ministers preach what we need to hear! I will put up with all kinds of inconveniences so that I don't have to change. It's easier to stay in what I know that doesn't work than to move into the unknown. Ask my partner! She's the mover and shaker in our family. I'm the stick in the mud. What I'm learning about myself is that I just don't move as fast as she does, that it takes me time to get ready to go into new places, and if I'm pushed too hard, it will take longer! I think that's what Fred Hammond must have realized in his dream that his pronouncement of what was coming for those suffering from HIV made not one iota of difference. They couldn't hear it at that time. That truth just had to take its course. I think that's what revelation is, truths that are coming to be in their own time. Our discussion about relocating is a truth that is coming to be in its own time. It may feel fast, like the moment has suddenly come upon us, but we've been working towards this moment for many years, and now that it's here, what are we doing to do with it? What are we going to do with the Epiphany that is upon us?

I have a question for you. I know Christmas is a month gone, and thank god for that, but I'm curious, how many of you have ever been part of a Nativity scene? And how many of you were the wise men? Alright! I see some women raising their hands! Lucky you! I always wanted to be a wise man but I never got to be one because I was a girl, and when I was a kid that just wasn't done. I imagine today it might be different, a girl might be chosen to be a wise man, but when I was little, the best a girl could do was Mary, and I never wanted to be Mary. I wanted to be a wise man! They got fancy crowns with plastic jewels and gold foil when everyone else got towels tied to their heads or halos made from wire hangers and cheap tinsel. The wise men got silky bathrobes when everyone else got terry cloth and cotton. But most importantly, the wise men got to carry the frankincense, gold and myrrh. I didn't matter to me that these gifts were usually empty Jack Daniels bottles wrapped in tin foil; they looked so pretty, and so regal! But mostly, I think the reason I liked the wise men most is because that is when the whole nativity story felt most real to me and I felt that I might be able to touch the reality of what that night might have been like, because as a girl I assumed this story was literally true and I so wanted to connect with it and to feel its specialness.

While most of us associate the wise men with Christmas, where they really belong is in the Epiphany, which is in January. It is said that when the wise men looked on the infant Jesus, they realized they were looking at what had been prophesied. Their realization was the epiphany, that there would be a new king, greater than any king, and that this king would bring wisdom and peace and the reign of God on earth. They did what they thought was the proper thing to do when in the presence of a king; they brought him frankincense, gold and myrrh. The message of the Epiphany is that we are to be ready, at all times, as the wise men were, for the revealing of the divine in the world, and that we should each, in our own way, follow the star, travel as far as we need to travel, whether that is physical travel or spiritual travel, so that when we come upon the one, when we gaze upon the Epiphany, we will be prepared as well to offer frankincense, gold, and myrrh, in the form of our whole selves, which is the most precious thing we have to give. That's the message of the Epiphany, which Christians around the world celebrated this month.

Many of us here grew up in religious traditions where we were asked to believe that this story is literally true. If you want to understand God, if you want to be obedient, and faithful, and saved, you need to believe that everything written in the Bible happened. It is divine revelation, every word literally dropped from the lips of

God into the page. The theological term for this is Biblical literalism and most people, even people who aren't Christian, assume that to be a Christian means to believe these stories literally. And it's just not true, because we are part of a religious tradition that offers a very different understanding of revelation.

Even though Unitarian Universalism is no longer predominantly Christian, when we came into being 225 years ago, we were among the first to suggest that a person of faith didn't need to believe these stories literally in order to be faithful. The stories could be seen in another way.

Two weeks ago we looked at Judaism, and specifically at how the book of Exodus in the Torah came into being. We explored how these scriptures, which told the story of the Israelites' release from slavery and eventual arrival into the holy land, were human creations brought together over centuries, emerging in their current form at a time that the Jewish people were rebuilding their culture, their religion, their whole society after a time of exile and harsh oppression.

The story of the wise men has a similar kind of history, although the story doesn't take centuries to form, it only takes decades. There are four gospels in the Christian Bible, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, and each of them tells the story of the life of Jesus in a different way, because each emerged from different sects of the earliest followers of Jesus who were competing for who would prevail in their understanding of who Jesus was. None of the Gospels could have been written by people who actually knew Jesus, because they were written too long after his death, and after the date that we suspect the last disciple with living memory of Jesus, died. What we think we know (and I emphasize "think" because this was 2000 years ago, records are scarce), is that when Jesus died, about 30 A.D., those who followed him were mostly illiterate, and they tried to preserve his memory by telling each other how they remembered him, the things they had experienced together. These gradually became stories that were memorized and retold. As they were told, of course, they changed, depending on what part of the story the teller wanted to emphasize. In the early years, the followers of Jesus wanted to emphasize that Jesus was the fulfillment of what was predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures, and they did this not to create a new religion. Every one of the writers of the New Testament identified as Jewish. They wanted room for Jesus in their religion, which was Judaism. There was no Christianity at this time and no consideration of moving outside Judaism. In fact, when non-Jewish people wanted to follow Jesus, many disciples insisted that they convert to Judaism.

Their purpose in those first years was mostly to gain recognition of Jesus within their Jewish community by presenting him as the fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures. Eventually, the stories were written down. First, someone wrote the gospel of Mark, and attributed it to the Disciple Mark. That was common in those days and not considered plagiarism or anything like that. You showed your respect for someone by attributing your own words to them. You erased yourself so that they might have the honor of your work. And then, the Gospel of Mark was used by those who wrote the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, and they added their own stuff, stories that aren't in Mark. Mark doesn't have a birth story at all. Only Luke and Matthew do, and only the Gospel of Matthew has the story of the wise men.

And this is why. The person who wrote Matthew believed that Jesus was the new Moses, the new hero who would take people from slavery into freedom. Moses was from Egypt, so the Matthew author really wanted Jesus to have a connection to Egypt. So he put in a story where the wise men tell Herod that a king is born, and Herod decides to kill all the babies in Bethlehem to protect himself from the threat. What other King in the Bible puts to death all the babies? Pharaoh, from the book of Exodus. This means that Jesus is threatened, just as Moses was threatened, by a jealous evil ruler. It gets better! So now Joseph gets a dream saying, go to Egypt. And so he and Mary with Jesus go to Egypt. Then he gets a dream saying it's safe to come back, so they travel back across the desert to Israel, in essence making the same journey that Moses did thousands of years before. It goes on. Moses and the Israelites wander the desert for 40 years. Jesus goes into the desert for 40 days and battles with demons. Moses climbs Mount Sinai and receives the Ten Commandments. Jesus

offers the Sermon on the Mount. The parallels continue. For the writer of Matthew, Jesus is the New Moses who has come to set his people free.

Have any of you learned this story in Sunday School? Not me. For some people, when they learn this history, they think it means they have to throw the whole thing in the trash. This is why Biblical literalists get so threatened by biblical history and will do everything they can to discount it, because they fear that if this history is true, then their faith has been for nothing.

But I think there is another way. For Unitarian Universalists, there has always been another way. I imagine, for instance, that the writer of Matthew was not unlike the writer of our reading this morning. In his dream, Fred Hammonds is with his friend at a prayer meeting, and his friend sings two verses of the song, and he finishes the song with his own verse. They are so moved by what has been sung that they decide it must be saved, and what begins is a whirlwind dream of searching for pen and paper, and ending up with a crayon and a piece of newspaper soaked in raw fish. The truth isn't just the words of his song anymore, it's who he sang the song with and who found it meaningful, and it's how he found the fish and the paper and the crayon. It's all part of the revelation.

And when I think of the writer of Matthew, sifting through his theological heritage and listening to the stories about a man he has decided to devote his life to, reading the book of Mark, hot off the scribes' table, seeing himself changed as he reads it, and then looking at the utter chaos and violence and suffering of his world and feeling that somewhere, somehow, there must be hope. All that gets wrapped up in a book he chooses to write that he hopes will change hearts and minds and lives, and maybe, just maybe, save not only his people, but the world. And then, he erases himself by attributing his work to the Disciple Matthew just as those who created the book of Exodus centuries before erased themselves by attributing that book to Moses. The circumstances of this book are just as much a part of the revelation as the words themselves.

So, what we have is a book by an unknown man, with the story he chose to include, of three wise men from the east, who come to look upon a child, whose birth had been predicted by the stars, who they believe is Moses returned, the presence of the holy, come to earth, once again, to lead an enslaved people to freedom. Their Epiphany is looking upon the child and recognizing what they see revealed before them, and by seeing, they are changed. For the Matthew author, the question was this. When you see Jesus, will you be like the wise men, seeing what has been revealed, or will you close your heart and stay with the status quo? For him, Jesus was like a voice from the future, showing the way out the desert into the Promised Land, and the Matthew author clearly saw that some could hear and some could not hear the message. Some, upon hearing his words of unconditional love that called us to forsake all privilege and stand with the most vulnerable and poor, had those same blank stares of the people in Fred's dream. It was inconceivable, a truth that could not yet be revealed to them, and they could not possibly see the freedom in it. Matthew asked them, when, when will you be ready?

What Epiphany are we being asked to see? The message of the Epiphany is that we are to be ready, at all times, as the wise men were, for the revealing of the divine in the world, and that we should each, in our own way, travel as far as we need to travel, whether that is physical travel or emotional travel or spiritual travel, so that when we come upon the one, when we gaze upon the Epiphany, we will be prepared as well to offer frankincense, gold, and myrrh, in the form of our whole selves, which is the most precious thing we have to give.

Amen.