

Sunday, January 8, 2012

Making Room for Joy

Matthew 2: 1-12

One of the great joys of my life these days is walking my dog, Karma, in Open Lands. There are so many things that are great about living in Lake Bluff--the lake, the wonderful people--but one of the best is open space to explore. I feel a huge sense of gratitude to everyone who has made sure that this space was preserved. I walk with that gratitude every morning.

One of the great things about the walks is that no matter what I'm thinking about when we begin, that usually passes quickly into a kind of peace. Somehow, there is just a rhythm that gets going, step after step, arm swing after arm swing, glance to the left, glance to the right. It is calming and soothing to be there. Once that calming has set in, I can begin to take in some surprises: the buck that we see a couple of mornings a week; the subtle changes that happen in the landscape, day in and day out; the way the breeze sweeps across the prairie grasses. Sometimes, there are moments of incredible beauty that you know as you take them in will never last: the ground fog hovering and swirling around you or the moment when single droplets of rain are clinging to every surface around you. It is not unusual for me to be stopped in my tracks, thinking, "That's amazing!" And that is a really good way to begin a day.

Occasionally, something different happens. This week, I was walking in Lake Bluff Open Lands, making our way over to Lake Forest, when Karma spotted something ahead. Now, (don't tell anyone, okay?), like every other dog owner who walks in Open Lands, I walk my dog off leash. Karma ran ahead. She peaked around a corner in the trail and froze. Then, after a moment, she came flying back to me. Now, normally, if she saw another dog, she would lay down. (Don't ask me why she does this. She came up

with this on her own.) The only other time she has come running back like that was the time we saw a coyote, far down the trail. Sure enough, when we got to the corner, the coyote was not far away. When the coyote saw me, she ran off.

Needless to say, we went the other way. Now, as far as I'm concerned, the coyote has every right to be there. It was just a surprise. It was also an invitation to let fear creep into the walk: "Karma...stay close, buddy. There are coyotes out here." We walked a little further and came around another corner. I looked to my right and there she was again...Same one....I think. The rest of our walk happened without another encounter. However, it was hard not to wonder what might happen next. It was hard not to walk in fear. Karma stayed close. I kept an eye out. When we got back to the car, I was a little bit relieved. Then, I realized that I really hadn't noticed much of anything other than the presence or the absence of coyotes for the whole walk.

When we walk in fear, there is no room for much else in our lives. Fear demands our attention. If you study the "flight/fight" response that is programmed into all of us, you realize that we are built to respond to fear. That's how our ancestors survived in a dangerous world. The next time you feel afraid, just feel your heart rate increase, feel your hands grow cold, feel the adrenaline rush, and then try to doubt the power of fear. If you want to look at fear from another angle, look at how many things are marketed to the power of human fear: amusement park rides that "thrill" us; movies that make us jump from our seats; news programs and newspapers that scream at us about the dangers of the day. We are built to respond to fear. Fear sells.

Fear also takes a terrible toll. There are real things to worry about and be afraid of in our world. Yet, almost none of those triggers are the physical threats that taught our bodies to respond with physiological changes when we are afraid. Hence, stress, the constant activation of that fear response without any physical

outlet, threatens our lives. We get all “wound up” because the fear and our response are real. However, without an outlet for all that energy, instead of “winding down,” we get all tied up in knots. We eat or drink or smoke to soothe ourselves and turn fear into addiction. We turn fear into anger and act out. Or, even if we manage to find a way through the stress, when we walk in fear, we simply miss the chance to enjoy the most amazing parts of this life. Like me on my walk with Karma, we get to the end of a day or a month or an era in our lives and think, “Well, the thing I was most afraid of didn’t happen. I wonder what else did?”

Among the Christmas stories that we tell at this time of year, one of the recurring themes is the message: “Do not be afraid.” In Matthew’s Gospel, an angel appears to Joseph to tell him, “Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.” In Luke’s Gospel, an angel appears to Zechariah, Elizabeth’s wife, and tells him, “Do not be afraid.” The angel appears to Mary and tells her, “Do not be afraid.” Finally, an angel appears to the shepherds and tells them, “Do not be afraid, for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all peoples.” The prerequisite, it would seem for being able to receive the good news is that one must put away one’s fears. Interestingly, at the other end of the Gospels, on Easter morning, this message would be delivered again, “Do not be afraid!” Fear, it turned out, could block the chance to receive that good news, too.

At the beginning of our text for this morning, we find wise men who are walking without fear. They have what turns out to be dangerous news to share: that a new king of the Jews has been born. The wise men waltz straight into Herod’s palace to deliver this good news and find out where the new king is. Now, any “savvy” person would suspect that the present king might not be thrilled to hear this news about the new king’s birth. After all, those in power don’t tend to be thrilled to meet the folks who would like to take their power away. The thing is that folks who are walking without fear don’t tend to be all that “savvy.” They aren’t “on-guard” so

that they won't be caught "off-guard." They aren't looking to outsmart anyone. People who are walking without fear are dealing with what's real and true. The wise men's mission isn't to soothe or placate the king. Their mission is to find the child. They want to pay their respects.

King Herod, the most powerful person in the land, is terrified. Historians tell us that he had already killed one of his own sons out of fear that the son was plotting to take away Herod's throne. Herod, it turns out, was just one more example of what power does to a person: how it corrupts a person over time; how that person's obsession becomes holding onto power; how, in due course, that person will do anything to anyone in order to maintain their position. Herod calls in his experts, the chief priests and the scribes, and asks them about the place of this birth. They give him a Scriptural answer: "Bethlehem." Herod "schmoozes" the wise men: "You know, fellas, I'd like nothing more than to have the chance to pay a little of my respects to this child and give him exactly what he deserves!" He makes them promise to stop back on their way home.

While all of this is going on, all of Jerusalem grows terrified. Why? The child wasn't a threat to their meager power. They were just ordinary people. However, they were standing downstream of Herod's power. If chaos and change and turmoil were coming to the palace then chaos and change and turmoil were going to tear up their lives and their world. They were afraid of Herod. Later in the story, when Herod goes on a killing rampage after he realizes the wise men are not coming back, we see that their fears were well-grounded.

Yet, while Herod grumbled and rumbled, while the religious experts checked and double checked their references, while the folks in the city whispered and chattered about their fears, the wise men just fearlessly walked on. (What a liberating thought in life: "Just because you're feeling something doesn't mean I have to feel it

too!”) They were not trying to control anything or manipulate anyone. They were being led and doing their best to follow. Of course, it may sound kind of crazy to us--following a star. Yet, we forget that following stars is how sailors navigated the high seas. We forget that following any calling or dream or mission in this world may seem just as crazy to those not on the trip. They had come a long way. The miles hadn't stopped them. Herod's fear and paranoia hadn't stopped them. The rumbles of the crowds in Jerusalem hadn't stopped them. They just kept on walking without fear.

Finally, the text tells us, the star stops. Now, however you want to file that in your head, perhaps you've had the experience that I've had: you're not sure where you're going but somehow you know you are there when you arrive. This is it! I don't have an explanation for the star but I do know that feeling. In order to have that feeling, you can't be filled with worry or dread that you are lost or never going to get there at all. In order to have that feeling, you have to have your eyes and your heart open. You have to be connected to what's going on around you. Maybe you even have to be open to the notion that you are being led, led not to something scary but toward something amazing, toward something just up ahead.

When the wise men arrive at the house where the mother and child are (yes...it says “house” not barn), they see the baby and they are overwhelmed with joy. That's what you have a chance to feel when you aren't walking through life in fear, when your eyes are open and you are really seeing what's happening, when your heart is open and you are feeling what is there to feel. What you see is not a threat to your power or an interruption to your plans or a potential problem to be dealt with. What you see is a glimpse of the kingdom of God. What you see is the world the way that God would have it be. What you feel...for a moment...is whole.

I believe that is what the wise men saw and felt in the presence of that child. They saw the face of God. They saw God with us...Emanuel. And that experience of God's presence made them wise enough to listen to a dream and avoid Herod on the way home.

Joy is God's gift to us, letting us know that at least for a moment we are right where we are supposed to be and doing exactly what we are being asked to do. I'm not talking about giddiness or happiness or pleasure or some other feeling that we manufacture and then try to sustain. No...I'm talking about that feeling which catches us off guard in the midst of the simplest moments in life which we know has been given to us as a pure gift. Joy is the realization that we still live in a world that is full of God's glory. Joy is the star that we are meant to follow.