

“Look For Your Keys in the Light”
Matthew 2:1-12

There’s an old story about an inebriated gentleman who was found one evening crawling on his hands and knees under a street lamp. “What are you doing down there?” asked a passerby. “I’m looking for my car keys,” replied the man. Seeing no car parked nearby, the questioner was puzzled. “How did you come to drop them here?” “Oh,” said the gentleman on the ground, “I didn’t drop them here. I dropped them in the parking lot behind the pub.” “Then why are you looking for them here?” asked the passerby. “Because,” answered the befuddled searcher, “there’s more light here.”

That story is probably more in the category of what I sometimes call “a preacher’s story” than it is reality, but it points to a great truth – it’s better to look for our keys in the light.

I think of the time Peter made his great confession of faith at Caesarea Philippi. In answer to Jesus’ question, “who do people say that I am,” Peter responds, **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** Jesus tells him that such faith is the foundation, the rock, upon which the church is to be built and says, **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you lose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”ⁱ**

Of course that’s all about calling Peter into a position of leadership in the church, but in a sense we have all been given the keys to the kingdom of heaven because Jesus, himself, is that key. So the church lifts up an ancient Advent prayer:

O Key of David
Scepter over the house of Israel,
you open and no one can close,
you close and no one can open:
come to set free the prisoners
who live in darkness and the shadow of death.ⁱⁱ

Somewhere along the line we’ve lost the key to living life as God intended with it we have lost the essence of our humanity. Yet in our hard-headed and hard-hearted ways, we don’t seek first God’s kingdom and righteousness,ⁱⁱⁱ we keep looking for it in all the dark places, such as the parking lot behind the pub. Remember this definition of insanity – “doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result each time!”

There’s a whole laundry list of dumb things we do to save ourselves and make ourselves secure and to find meaning and purpose for our lives. Since Langdon, Cheryl and I had a profound discussion around the lunch table on Friday, I’ll lift up one of those dumb things. We talked about the dark cloud of materialism that hangs over our culture and the fact that so many believe

that the key to happiness is having just one more thing.

Toward the end of his life, Martin Luther King, Jr. was at his prophetic best when he said that it was not racism or imperialism or militarism that represented humanity's root problem, it was materialism. The late Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic contemplative, wrote, "Our minds are like crows. They pick up everything that glitters, no matter how uncomfortable our nests get with all that metal in them."^{iv}

Our nests are uncomfortable. Shane Claiborne leads an alternative Christian community in Philadelphia known as "The Simple Way." In his book *The Irresistible Revolution*, he describes an impromptu demonstration on Wall Street, during which he announced to the surprised crowd:

Some of us have worked on Wall Street, and some of us have slept on Wall Street. We are a community of struggle. Some of us are rich people trying to escape our loneliness. Some of us are poor folks trying to escape the cold. Some of us are addicted to drugs and others are addicted to money. We are a broken people who need each other and God, for we have come to recognize the mess that we have created of our world and how deeply we suffer from the mess. Now we are working to give birth to a new society within the shell of the old. Another world is possible. Another world is necessary. Another world is already here.^v

That's what Christmas is all about – another world is already here. The prophet once prayed, **"Why don't you tear the sky open and come down?"**^{vi} God did precisely that. **"The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us..."**^{vii} Epiphany is a season of light, reminding us that though Christmas lights have been stored in the attic for another year, the true light **"still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."**^{viii}

Epiphany shows us the wisdom of looking for our keys in the light, rather than in the darkness where we lost them. Such wisdom requires us to turn around, to repent, in order to see the light.

And so we read the story of Wise Men from the East who followed a star to the Savior's birth. Surely they had to turn around to see the light. They were astrologers. They were longing for something they didn't even know. The fact that they were also Gentiles tells us that Christmas is not just an inconsequential Jewish story for the tiny village of Bethlehem, but is breaking news for all the world.

In W. H. Auden's Christmas oratorio, *For the Time Being*, each of the Wise Men gives an account of the reason he follows the star.

The first one says, "to discover how to be **truthful** now is the reason I follow this star."

The second, "to discover how to be **living** now is the reason I follow this star."

The third wise man, "to discover how to be **loving** now is the reason I follow this star."

Auden speculates on the sacrifices the Wise Men must have made for this journey. He has the three lament together about the difficulties of the journey and then they bemoan

the fact they haven't the vaguest idea who they are and what they are about.

Then they join in a chorus to articulate their common quest: "To discover how to be **human** now is the reason we follow this star."

Is this not the quest of all who come to the Christ and hail him as light of the world? Do we not find in Jesus what it means to be genuinely human?

We think we come to Jesus to find out what God is like. And we do. We learn once and for all that God is love. Still, "God's sovereign love is a mystery beyond the reach of [human] minds."^{ix} Still, we wonder with the prophet and the apostle, "**Who has known the mind of the Lord?**"^x

There is no mystery, however, in God's intention for human life. We see that clearly revealed in Jesus. "In Jesus of Nazareth true humanity was realized once for all."^{xi} Jesus is an epiphany, a manifestation, an appearance of a genuinely human person for all people, even those of other religions and of no religion, even those who ponder more the daily horoscope than they do the scriptures.

What does it mean to be genuinely human? using Auden's framework, it means TO BE TRUTHFUL NOW. Jesus said, "**I am the truth.**"^{xii} Don't think of truth as some abstract, philosophical proposition. Think of it more in terms of steadiness, stability, faithfulness, constancy, integrity, loyalty, authenticity. Who has the world ever known to be more truthful, more single-minded, more resolute, more dependable than Jesus? He became obedient to God, even to the point of death! He was loyal to his disciples, even though they disowned him. If you want to know someone who is true, look to Jesus!

To be genuinely human also means TO BE LIVING NOW. He not only brought abundant life to others, he, himself, lived life to the fullest. Jesus was no ascetic. He knew the joy of celebrating with friends at a wedding and he did not hold back the tears when he learned of the death of Lazarus. "He loved all kinds of people and accepted their love."^{xiii} He knew the pain of being rejected and misunderstood - "**Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners,**" they said about him.^{xiv}

The kind of human life God has in mind for us is not stoic withdrawal, but one which feels wholeheartedly all the joys and pains and sorrows and frustrations that life brings.

To be genuinely human also means TO BE LOVING NOW. Yes, the greatest of these is love.^{xv} His obedience even to the point of death was not forced obedience. He was obedient because he loved. "**No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.**"^{xvi} And we know that those of us whom he calls friends so often function as his enemies and still he loves.^{xvii}

To be so TRUTHFUL, so LIVING, so LOVING is to be genuinely HUMAN, NOW! Don't forget the NOW! Jesus didn't come just to take us off into the sweet bye and bye. Jesus came to show us how to live fully in the present so that we would both glorify God and enjoy God forever.^{xviii}

O Star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright;
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to thy perfect light!

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- i. Matthew 16:13-20
 - ii. *Liturgical Year: The Worship of God*, Supplemental Liturgical Resource 7, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, ©1992), p. 71. See also Isaiah 22:22
 - iii. Matthew 6:33
 - iv. New Seeds of Contemplation, (1961 by Abbey of Gethsemani. P. 104).
 - v. Quoted in Sojourners, *How to live as if another world were already here*, by Tom Sine, January 2008, p. 22
 - vi. Isaiah 64:1, *Good News Bible*
 - vii. John 1:9, 14
 - viii. John 1:5
 - ix. Confession of 1967, Book of Confessions, 9.15
 - x. Isaiah 40 and Romans 11:34
 - xi. Book of Confessions, *Confession of 1967*, 9.08
 - xii. John 14:6
 - xiii. Declaration of Faith, Chapter 4, Lines 39-40
 - xiv. matthew 11:19
 - xv. 1 Corinthians 13
 - xvi. John 15:13

xvii. Romans 5:8

xviii. From first question of Westminster Shorter Catechism