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Journey of Light

Matthew 2:10

One of my favorite Frank Capra movies is “Mr. Deeds Goes to Town” with Gary Cooper and Jean Arthur. It tells the story of a young man from a small town in Vermont who unexpectedly inherits \$20 million dollars from an uncle he has never met. Longfellow Deeds moves to New York City to take possession of his uncle’s fortune. There he encounters a variety of challenges as people try to take advantage of him. Big city people assume that Longfellow Deeds will be an easy mark because he is a guileless and naïve small town boy. But they soon discover that his common sense and understanding of human nature enable him to see through one devious scheme after another.

When Longfellow learns that he does not like living the life of the pampered rich, he decides to give his money away. He puts together a program to help farmers who have lost their farms and homes during the depression. This act of compassion generates two very different responses among the people who have tried to take advantage of him. Some are inspired by Longfellow Deeds’ generosity causes them to reexamine their lives. They see themselves in a new light. Their faith in human nature is restored. They are blessed by their new friend and they resolve to change their way of life.

But others view the generosity of Longfellow Deeds as a threat. They respond with alarm and resentment. The lawyers who embezzled huge sums from the uncle’s estate are afraid that their crime will be exposed. So they initiate a cleverly conceived legal action to have Longfellow Deeds committed to a mental institution and removed from financial control of his fortune. For them Longfellow’s generosity and compassion for those less fortunate is not good news. It is a dangerous initiative which drives them deeper into the darkness and fear of their existence.

We find the same dynamic at work in the second chapter of Matthew’s gospel. The Magi have been following a magnificent star. It has led them from their homes in the East into the land of Judah. They are overwhelmed by the radiance of this star. They are convinced that it is ushering in a new era for the human family. They believe that God is opening a new chapter which will change the course of human history.

When the Magi arrive at the court of Herod in Jerusalem they describe their reason for coming. They have been drawn to the city by the unusual radiance of the star. They are surprised to learn that others do not share their joy at this event. Their announcement generates fear in the court of Herod. The nature of their conversation with the King changes abruptly as Herod insists on speaking to them in secret. The light which draws the Magi to the land of Judah drives Herod deeper into fear and darkness.

Matthew understands that the light of Christ has a double effect. It brings blessing and hope to those who seek God’s love and presence. It brings fear and darkness to those who live only for themselves. Matthew also sees that the coming of Christ confronts us with the most important question of our lives. Will we travel with the Magi on a journey of light or will we go the way of Herod deeper into the heart of self serving darkness? There are many ways by which we can answer that question. One of those ways will be demonstrated by our newly elected church officers today as they respond to

the questions of ordination and installation. These are questions which call us to align our lives with the radiance of God's compassion.

Sergius Bulgakov was confronted with this issue some years ago. He was professor of political economics at Kiev Polytechnic University in the former Soviet Union. As the years passed he found that the philosophy of Marxist materialism did not feed his soul. He began to see himself in a new light when he encountered a painting by Raphael. He saw Raphael's "Sistine Madonna" in a Dresden art gallery. He described the painting's impact on him in these words:

The eyes of the Heavenly Queen, the Mother who holds in her arms the Eternal infant, filled my soul. I cried joyful yet bitter tears, and with them the ice melted from my soul...

Bulgakov went back to the painting day after day to pray and weep in front of the infant. All the while there was welling up within him a new vision of what he could do and be in the radiance of the light which streamed from that infant. He was ready now to use his life to serve other people. He left his professorship in the Soviet Union to teach theology and serve as dean of the Russian Theological Institute of Paris.

The same light which flooded Bulgakov's life is shining on us today. The infant invites us to follow the example of the Magi by rejoicing in his radiance and practicing his compassion.