

Following the Star  
30 December 2007

Psalm 148  
Isaiah 63, v 7-9  
Matthew 2, v 1-12

When I was a child, every year about this time I'd make a list of New Year's Resolutions. It usually included things like, "Be nice to my sister." And, "Write letters." Or, "Keep my room clean." As you can tell, some things don't change in 45 years.

But, I have recently read a wonderful children's story called *The Last Straw*, by Fredrick Thury, which gives me a different way to look at that list. It tells us another version of the Christmas story. Matthew didn't know all there was to know.

The story goes like this:

An old camel named Hoshmakaka hears a voice in the night telling him the wise men have chosen him to carry precious gifts to a baby king. Hoshmakaka objects, asking, "Why me? If these wise men are so wise, don't they know about my joints? My gout? My sciatica?" But the wind blew furiously and Hoshmakaka decides he'd better do as the voices asked. "When do I start?" he asked. "Today" is the reply.

Early in the morning, the servants of the Magi bring the frankincense, myrrh and gold and place them on the old camel's back. Several young camels ran up to see what was happening, and foolishly, Hoshmakaka boasts that he is as strong as ten horses and he has been chosen to carry gifts to the new baby king.

And so the journey begins.

At noon, a herd of mountain goats appears and asks Hoshmakaka to carry their gift of milk. At one o'clock a family of millers brings bags of ground corn. When the old camel objects, the young camels chorus, "But you're so strong! You're as strong as ten horses." So of course Hoshmakaka agrees to carry the load.

At two o'clock they run into some young women who have gifts of silk cloth. At three o'clock it's an old man with rare birds in silver cages. At four o'clock merchants appear with pillars of oak all the way from Lebanon. At five o'clock a group of bakers brings their finest sweetmeats and pastries.

At six o'clock the sun finally goes down and Hoshmakaka sinks gratefully into the sand, happy he doesn't have to pretend to be as strong as ten horses. He sees the splendor of the skies and the special brightness of the star he has been following.

But the dawn arrives, and with it a new horde of people bearing gifts, because word of the caravan has spread. All day long they come and the load gets heavier and heavier.

Finally, in the growing darkness, a small voice says, "I have a gift for the baby." Hoshmakaka looks down at a little child and says, "Please, no more gifts." But the child begs, saying the gift has no weight, it's little and light, it's a straw for his bed, "It's all I have."

So Hoshmakaka relents. All this time he has continued to walk because he knows if he stops, he couldn't start again. So the child places the straw on his back and Hoshmakaka continues to follow the star. He reaches the stable. "My knees are loosening. My legs, they wobble. My back is breaking. Will this last straw cause me to fall?"

And with that he goes down on his knees and, to his surprise, the wise men do likewise.

Then, from the humble manger, a tiny hand reaches out and touches the old camel. His pain disappears. He no longer feels his burden.

He whispers to the baby, "Hosanna from Hoshmakaka. Accept these gifts kindly. They come from far and wide, brought by a beast who once acted blindly."

And the story ends this way:

"From that time on, there was no burden, great or small, that Hoshmakaka would not gladly carry."

Isn't that a wonderful story?

So here's another way to look at New Year's resolutions:

Don't boast.

Pay attention to voices in the night.

Follow stars.

Don't carry too much.

Help your fellow travelers.

Don't stop.

Didn't your mother and father say that to you? Haven't we all told our children exactly that?

I have done – and not done – all of those things. Like all of us, I am guilty of the sins of commission and omission. What is so hard about this?

We get busy. We get caught up in the frantic-ness of our daily lives. Sometimes I get to the end of the week and I'm just beat, but I can't quite see that I accomplished anything. I sit at our

computer, as I do all the time, but instead of looking at the screen I look at the bulletin board behind it.

It's full of mementoes and reminders. It's the usual collection of photos and gift cards and fortunes from Chinese cookies. But it also includes a surprisingly large number of things from this church, things that help me remember why I came and why I stay. Things that help me remember what kind of life I really want to live.

One of them is a copy of our covenant, which includes our mutual promises "to love and support one another; to listen and learn from one another; to forgive and trust one another; to pray for and with one another."

Another is a reading from a service a number of years ago which I cut out of the program and saved. It's from the sixth chapter of Micah, and includes this exhortation: "God has showed you, O people, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" I remember David McCracken emphasizing the word "do, to do justice."

I have a prayer card from the funeral of my friend, Mary Giles. It's the prayer of St. Teresa, and it says, "Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten. Those who seek God shall never go wanting. Nothing can trouble, nothing can frighten. God alone fills us."

And I have the program insert from Nancy's ordination service which includes a piece called, "Following the Way" by Andre Fikri, a Muslim mystic. It answers the question, How do you follow the Way?, by saying: "Go where you are sent. Wait til you are shown what to do. Do it with your whole self. Remain til you have done what you were sent to do. Walk away with empty hands."

All of those notes, and the story about Hoshmakaka and our readings this morning from both Isaiah and Matthew, tell us the same thing in different ways.

They tell us to trust God and to do God's work in our life on this earth. They tell us to believe in God's goodness and to do our part in spreading that good news, by our words and by our actions. They tell us to follow the Golden Rule, to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

So easy to say; so hard, sometimes, to do.

Hoshmakaka has other things he'd rather be doing, his joints ache. But he hears a voice in the wind and he pays attention. He answers the call and he goes where he's sent. Does it get easier? No! Everybody he meets along the way literally adds to his burden until he's not sure he can make it. But he perseveres and reaches that stable. He does what he was sent to do.

What am I sent to do? What are you sent to do?

How might our Resolutions for 2008 look if we paid attention to Hoshmakaka's story?

We would say we will have more focus and less busy-ness in our lives.

We would say we will love kindness. We will love and support one another. This year we will do justice. We will work to ensure that the many gifts with which we have been blessed are shared with those in need. We will feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and imprisoned. We will lead by example, demonstrating The Way so that others may follow.

We will make a New Year's resolution this year to follow the star that points to Bethlehem. We will listen for the voice of God. We will give gifts, joyously, of our time, our talent, our treasure. We will do it with our whole selves.

And like Hoshmakaka, when we do these things, our pain will disappear, our yoke will be easy, our burdens will be light. We will be touched by the hand of God, just as he was.

If I do that and you do that, together we can create a just and kind world, a world that truly is God's kingdom on earth. Amen.

Mary Evelyn Arnold  
First Congregational Church  
Sonoma, California