

Yonder Star That Leads Us On – Rev. Doug McCusker

I'll bet a lot of you use GPS when you are going somewhere that you've never been before? I do. I use it all the time. I'm an old cartographer, so I am amazed at the accuracy of today's maps. Especially when it shows the little circle that signifies my position. It's kind of creepy how a satellite, a man-made star, knows exactly where I am, even when I don't.

And yet, it throws me off from time to time. Last month, I was invited to a prayer breakfast at 7:30 in the morning. It was still dark when I set out. I'm still relatively new here in Fredericksburg, so I asked the GPS to show me how to get to the Fredericksburg Expo Center. I thought it was strange when it told me to go north toward Stafford. But I blindly went along. I thought there was an expo center near Wegmans, but maybe there was another one like the GPS said. But when it led me to a backroad warehouse next to the railroad tracks, I looked around to see if I'd been punked by merry pranksters.

My guiding star wasn't at fault. Someone identified a bogus location on the map and the GPS took me right to it. I didn't listen to my intuition and went along blindly, pretty much knowing the whole way that something wasn't right. Knowing how to get somewhere involves several things: knowing where you are when you set out, knowing where you want to go, a set of directions, and a good map on which to plot your course.

Most importantly, you need to pay attention, and be present along the journey. All kinds of things can happen to throw you off: road closures, traffic gridlock, a deer darting in front of you, a flat tire, losing your GPS signal and bad information. It's one thing to know how to get somewhere, it's quite another to navigate through all the obstacles without losing sight of your destination.

In the beloved Christmas story that Chris and Jason read to us this evening, lots of people are traveling. Mary and Joseph head down to Bethlehem to be counted in the census; shepherds run to the site of the newborn Messiah; and wise men come from many kingdoms to bestow gifts to the King of the Jews. Even the angels had to travel from heaven to earth.

All of them were led by God in one way or another, sent to fulfill a unique and important purpose. They think they know where they are going, but in order for it all to come together, they must trust their intuitions and be fully present to that which leads them on.

The angels, stars, and prophecies, are all guides that help the humans navigate through the obstacles that threatened to block their paths. And let's not forget the baby Jesus. Right at the center of this story is the most important beacon of all. For he represents the way of redemption for all human kind. For many people, Jesus is believed to be God incarnate in a little baby. There are neon signs everywhere but the only one who doesn't see them is King Herod because of the fear and malice in his heart. He is blinded and easily led astray.

This timeless tale is loaded with metaphors that help guide us even in our 21st century lives. That's what makes this a sacred story repeated every Christmas all over the world. The stories and traditions shine on our paths and it is up to us to pay attention and discern their messages.

I have a spiritual director who I visit every month. She listens to me talk about the things that crop up in my life and encourages me to tease out the meaning for myself, to figure out what they are trying to teach me. She is my coach who is training me to keep my eyes open and to trust my intuition.

When I first came to see her, she asked me if I'd ever had a profound spiritual experience which I couldn't explain, but had influenced my life going forward. So, I told her about the little birds in my backyard.

Eight years ago, I had come to a crossroads in my job. I was a cartographic systems engineer for the Defense Department. Our agency had only recently merged into the intelligence community and so I was required to take a polygraph test.

No problem, I had nothing to hide. WRONG! I couldn't pass the stinking test. Deep down, my intuition had been telling me that I no longer fit in that line of work. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq bothered me and the bureaucracy was killing my spirit. I was making good money and doing my job diligently, but the joy was gone. I tried to ignore these messages and press on. The inner turmoil registered on the polygraph which made the investigators think I was a spy.

They gave me a couple of tries with the test, but each time I flunked they interrogated me longer and longer. I was certain that they would turn me over to the FBI and that I'd lose my job. At the time, I had no idea why I couldn't pass the polygraph test. I was anxious and confused. I suffered alone, not telling my co-workers or even my spouse. As each day went by I could feel myself spiraling down into a vortex of self-doubt.

One day in the middle of all this, I was chopping leaves in the backyard with my lawnmower. I was making a huge racket and spraying leaves and dust everywhere. Out of the corner of my eye I saw two little birds standing on the trunk of an oak tree at eye level about 10 feet away from me. Somehow, over the noise I could hear them chirping. Behind me were two other birds on another tree doing the same thing. There I was in the middle of a scene that made no sense. What were these birds doing there? Why hadn't the lawnmower and dust scared them away?

I turned off the machine and fell to my knees. Tears ran down my face. I was overcome with emotion. I looked at the birds and simply said "thank you". "Thank You for being here, for not abandoning me." I was not alone. I had never been alone, but it took these little spiritual guides to show me that. I went into the house and told my wife all about my polygraph tests and about the anguish I'd been going through. All she said was "If you lose your job and we end up homeless, I'll share the box on the street corner with you."

I was redeemed, saved from my blindness. Immediately, my fear and confusion was gone. Even on the street corner, I would be loved. By paying attention to those little birdies, my yonder stars, I pursued a different path, a path to ministry, which has led me here.

Can I explain with my left brain what those birds were doing there? No, but it doesn't matter. I found meaning in their presence, and it saved me. We all have yonder stars shining down on us. We need to lift our heads, pay attention and alter our course lest we end up lost along the railroad tracks.

What is your navigational star? What is it calling you to do? Have you been trying to ignore it? Hark the herald angels sing. Trust your intuition and set out for your own country by a different road.