

January 8, 2012, Communion Sunday, Epiphany

Isaiah 60:1-6, Matthew 2:1-12

Intents and Purposes

Have you ever met anyone who seemed to know exactly why they were born? Some people are so focused, so driven, so sure of themselves. They have a very clear understanding of why they are on this earth, and they are bound and determined to accomplish their objective. There is no uncertainty, no question, no hesitation.

There is no turning back, not ever. They KNOW what they are about and they are going to do what they are meant to do. There are no distractions, no being side-tracked. No matter what anyone says to them, they know they are doing the right thing and they are going to keep doing it.

Do you know anyone like that? Single-minded. Committed. Purpose-filled and determined.

When they wake up each morning, they only have one intent. They are going to live out their life's purpose---with every breath, every step, every word.

I'm not saying they're superhuman. I'm not saying they don't make room for love in their life or that they always run over other people to get what they want, although sometimes they do.

I'm saying they know what their life is about. They know who they are, and they know what's important to them. And they know what is MOST important to them. They have their priorities in order, their heads on straight, and their goals clearly in front of them.

I am blessed to have known and to still know a few people like that. We are all blessed that people like that are among us.

I'm talking about people like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Billy Graham.

I'm talking about people like Greg Mortensen.

Greg who?? I see the question on some of your faces.

Greg Mortensen has written two books about his purpose, and I am in the middle of reading the second one. His first book, "Three Cups of Tea," told about Greg's project to build schools in Pakistan. His second book, "Stones to Schools," continues the story of the same project, now

expanded into the east end of Afghanistan, including the northeasternmost part that extends north of Pakistan until it touches China.

Greg first went to that area of the world about 15 years ago as a mountain climber. He got lost coming down the mountain and was rescued by the people of a remote village. While he was recovering from his injuries, being cared for by the villagers, he found himself promising one of the girls that someday he would return and build the children there a school.

Greg saw the children working at learning. They had been meeting outside in the cold, using sticks to write in the dirt. And so, he promised.

And despite his lack of experience in international relations, his lack of experience in having any kind of building built,

Greg kept that promise.

Even though he is an introvert who hates getting up in front of people, especially to ask for money, he has travelled around this country to share his purpose and raise funds. Even though he is a shy person who is uncomfortable meeting new people, he has travelled throughout Pakistan

and Afghanistan, meeting with village elders and wo

Then they return to their home villages and work to decrease the mortality rates of mothers, babies, and children. And because the girls have come home educated, life is better for the whole village.

The villages benefit from the education of the boys, too. They have an alternative to going to Taliban-run schools. They don't have to leave their village to go to school, and they can learn what all children should learn---to read and write and do math----and there are no strings attached.

Greg Mortensen's intent is to build as many schools as he can in the most remote villages in central Asia. His purpose is to change the world one village at a time, one child at a time.

This purpose has taken him out of his comfort zone into places that are dangerous and challenging. He has been imprisoned and he has been in danger many times. And still he keeps working. He has helped to build over 145 schools in northern Pakistan and eastern Afghanistan, and over 64,000 children have received an education in those schools.

A peaceful mission in an area plagued by war and violence.

What a God-given purpose!

You might say that Greg saw the light of a bright star when the people of that village found him, lost and suffering from exposure after his attempt to climb a mountain. When that little girl convinced him to promise to come back and build a school, the light of that star came up over the horizon and he has been following it back to central Asia over and over again ever since.

Greg's life has intent and purpose, following that star of hope and peace.

And on this Three Kings Day, I would like to point out that the wise men's lives also had intent and purpose.

Those wise men, those magi, those "Three Kings," had watched the stars for years, studying them. They knew what stars were overhead on a typical night and how those stars moved with the passage of the night and with the seasons.

When one unusually bright star appeared, they knew it was special, that it had appeared for a purpose, a reason.

It's possible that they had been looking for a star like this for years!
Maybe it was the reason they had become magi---star-watchers!
Astronomers!

Or maybe their purpose became clear the moment they saw that special, bright star, and they knew they had to follow it. Their own writings, maybe the ancient stories of their country, said that such a star announced that a new king has been born among the Jews, and so they went to find him!

Finding this new king and paying him homage, worshipping him---- became the purpose of their lives! They left home and everything they knew in order to go on a journey that might have been very dangerous for them.

King Herod might have had them killed in his obsession to kill the newborn king if they had not gone home "by another road!" After all, he did not hesitate to slaughter all of the baby boys in the area! Why would he care about the lives of foreigners??

Or they might have been attacked by bandits or wild animals. They risked everything to fulfill their life's purpose.

We find this story of the wise men only in the Gospel according to Matthew. Mark and John do not have a birth story at all, and Luke tells two other stories and does not mention the wise men.

Instead, Luke tells us about Simeon and Anna. They both found their life's purposes in waiting for the Messiah to be born. They waited at the Temple day after day, and finally, their purposes were fulfilled. After seeing the baby, Simeon felt that he could finally die in peace. And Anna went right out and told everyone that the Messiah was born!

Intents and purposes----

The wise men were intent on finding the newborn king with the purpose of paying him homage. They were intent on following the star with the purpose of worshipping the one who was born King of the Jews.

Simeon and Anna were intent on staying in the Temple day after day after day for the purpose of knowing that the Messiah was born.

As for King Herod, he was intent on finding out when and where the baby was born with the purpose of killing this supposed rival for the throne

he sat on. He was so intent on staying on that throne that he didn't care how many innocent babies he killed.

The purposes of the wise men, and of Simeon and Anna, were good. They followed the light and found the source of hope and joy and love and peace.

King Herod's purpose, on the other hand, was evil. He didn't even see the brightest star in the night sky. He had to ask the wise men to let him know where it led because he evidently couldn't see it! He was following darkness and he became the source of pain and suffering, death and destruction.

Which are you following? God's light or the darkness of self-preservation and selfishness?

In a couple of minutes we will be celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion. We will confess our sins and ask for forgiveness and then we will accept Jesus' invitation to come to feast at his heavenly banquet.

When we confess and are forgiven, when we are filled with the desire to live in love with God and with our neighbors, then we come to the table of the Lord, following the light of that star.

Our intent is to live as God wants us to live, at least for that moment. Our purpose becomes to know Christ and to feast at his table with everyone else who loves him. God provides the spiritual food, and we bring our hearts willing to worship.

Holy Communion---we come to be in union with our savior and with each other. This is our common purpose.

We come to worship Christ our king. We come with the intent of opening ourselves to his call on our lives, a call that invites all of us to be in his presence, to live in his love, to know his peace, and to be assured that he prepares a place for us at his table for the rest of eternity.

Christ's intent is that we share with others his invitation to the feast.

Christ's purpose is to bring all people to him in love, joy, hope, and peace, as we all follow the light of the star.

As for the purpose of each of our lives away from the Communion Table, God has called each of us to serve, not to be served. God has given each of us spiritual gifts to use in living out our life's purposes. God has given each of us both weaknesses and strengths that help us to carry out those purposes with intent.

God has called us all to turn away from selfishness and self-preservation---to follow our King into places that might be dangerous in one way or another—to live out our own life's purpose in ways that we could not imagine if we did not see the star shining in the night and follow it.

Greg Mortensen is just one man, but he is making a difference in the world, a difference for the better! If it were not for being lost in the wilderness of the high mountains of central Asia, he would never have been found and discovered his purpose in life.

Adversity can lead us to unexpected places!

But only if our eyes are open to seeing the light of the Star and our hearts are open to follow it!

What is your life's purpose?

What is your heart telling you? Which path leads you to a place of hope, fulfillment, and joy?

Where is the star leading you? What is the voice of God telling you in your dreams? Maybe that voice is telling you that it's time to travel through life on another road---one you do not know yet, but that leads to the place where the star shines its light on the King of Kings!

Rise up, and follow the star!

Amen!