

Finding Our Way Home: The Gospel and the Wizard of Oz

Ezekiel 36:26; II Timothy 1:6-7; Romans 12:2

The Wizard of Oz has captured our hearts since the movie version came out on T.V. It was one of the first T.V. movies in “living color” and we were entranced. A Southern Baptist friend told me that when she was growing up the one Sunday night a year when she could stay home from Sunday night church was the Sunday night once a year when The Wizard of Oz was on T.V. We have watched it over and over again.

Today’s sermon is entitled “Finding Our Way Home: The Gospel and the Wizard of Oz.” The gospel is about coming home, home to God, home to your true self, and home to the Beloved Community of God. This longing for home is a spiritual longing deep within us, deeper than the house we live in, our hometown, even than our family. It may lay more in front of us than behind us. And sometimes we have to go far from home to find it again.

I

Dorothy’s home was in Kansas, and the opening scenes are shot in black and white. Everything about life in that Kansas town was grey, grim and hard-scrabble hard, even the people themselves.

One day Dorothy and her dog Toto are swept away in a tornado. When she comes down she finds herself in the Land of Oz, and suddenly, everything is in brilliant living colors: the yellow brick road, the Emerald City, her magic red shoes. A survey was taken asking, “What moment in a movie can you not forget?” Many answered, that moment in the Wizard of Oz when everything turned to color. Have you had moments in your life when your grey life turned to color?

On the way to the Emerald City along the yellow brick road she meets friends and foes, good witches and bad witches, just as we through life meet good fortune and ill fortune, people who want for us our best and those who don't, those who may even mean us harm.

But God is leading us at every point home.

II

Along the way Dorothy meets the Cowardly Lion in search of his courage, the Scarecrow in search of his brain and the Tin Man in search of his heart. My guess is that we all have identified with at least one of these characters, maybe all of them. How about you?

First, the Cowardly Lion. We feel his pathos. What good is a lion without his courage? And who are *we*? Courage as I said a few weeks ago, is *the strength to be who God made us to be and who God is calling us to be*. Moral courage is

the strength to stand up for what is right even when it is difficult to do so. It is more than physical courage. So the biblical words and phrases for courage have to do with the heart, strength of heart! The Psalm cries out: “Be strong, and let your heart take courage” (Ps. 31:24). And Jesus says: “In this life you will meet tribulation, but be of good courage, for I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

And Paul, writing to young Timothy says:

Rekindle the gift of God which is within you through the laying of hands; for God did not give you the spirit of cowardice, but rather of power and love and a sound mind. (II Time. 1:6-7)

All true courage is rooted in love, love of someone or something. It is the power of love.

III

Dorothy also meets the Scarecrow in search of his brain. All he thinks he has up there in his head is straw. I know a lot of people who grow up thinking they aren't very smart. That's what they've been told. One of the most frequent and terrible of the words we aim at people is the word “stupid”. I know a very bright and accomplished woman who grew up thinking she was low on intelligence because scores on an I.Q. test had been mis-reported to her. She felt “lesser than” in the realm of brains. Thankfully, we are recognizing today a whole

realm of intelligences, more than math or verbal, social intelligence, emotional intelligence, music intelligence, mechanical intelligence. In my 9th grade aptitude test I scored 35 percentile in mechanical intelligence. My twin scored 90, and never let me forget it.

Some of the smartest people I've ever known have no academic letters after their names.

When the Bible thinks of knowledge it lifts up *wisdom*, something deeper than knowledge and facts, the poet T.S. Eliot wrote:

Where is the wisdom, we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? ("The Rock")

Ours has been called "The Information Age". I think it has been a mixed boon. We are bombarded by information, but knowledge is harder to find, and wisdom even harder.

IV

Now comes the Tin Man in search of his heart. He was once a young man deeply in love with a beautiful young woman. But a jealous witch cast a spell over him and now he had become a Tin Man. He felt empty inside. A hollow man. When he cried tears ran down his cheeks and caused his jaw to rust shut, so he carried an oil can with him so he could speak and eat.

We all, the whole human race has a “heart problem” and it has to do with something more than blood flow and workable valves. Ezekiel offered these words from God:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you, and I will remove from your body a heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

Sometimes our hearts are turned to stone. Life can do that to us. Tragedy, betrayal, heart-break can do it. Anger can turn our heart to stone, or envy, or a mountain of grievance.

But God comes to give us a new heart and to put a new spirit within us.

Paul once prayed that God “enlighten the eyes of our hearts.” God’s light streams into our darkened hearts, and now we see the world in a new way, the eyes of our hearts enlightened. We see with the heart.

The Tin Man believes he has no heart, and he is like the sad clown in the circus, tears running down his face.

V

They arrive in the Emerald City, and after they conquer the Wicked Witch of the West, they return to the Emerald City, and go to meet the famous Wizard of Oz. They see on a large screen his huge image and loud voice. But then Toto the dog

pulls the screen down, and the Wizard is but a little man projecting his false voice and image to the world. It is a ruse. We learn that he is a benevolent ruler, but he is not a wizard. He calls himself a “humbug” and says poignantly, “I am a good man, but a bad wizard”.

He too was far from home. Flying a balloon he was carried by the wind and deposited in the Land of Oz. Because of his dramatic entrance from the sky, the villagers proclaimed him the Wizard of Oz, and he had been trying to keep up the masquerade as long as he could. He probably suffered what many of us suffer, that which is called “the imposter syndrome”. We fear we are not what people think we are. The Wizard was himself all too ready to return home.

He proved that he was a good man by giving the Lion a medal, the Scarecrow a diploma and the Tin Man a ticking heart-shaped clock. He helped them see that the traits they had longed for were there within them all along.

We saw it too The Lion was very strong and once leaped across an abyss to save his friends. The Scarecrow thought himself “lesser than” in the brains department but he was the one who came up with the plans when they needed them most. And the Tin Man all along showed an empathy for the rest. He really did have a heart.

That's true for us too: We already have within us what we most want and need to be, those qualities that show we are children of God, created in the divine image.

In *Winnie the Pooh*, Christopher Robin is about to leave the nursery with all his toy friends. He says to Pooh:

You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you thin.

Yes, it's us he is talking to, to the Cowardly Lion within and the Scarecrow within and the Tin Man within: "You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think".

Then Christopher Robin said, "But the most important thing is, even if we're apart...I'll always be with you". That's what Jesus promised too, to be with us all the way, giving us courage, renewing our minds and giving to us a new heart.

And yes, leading us home, home with God, home with our own true self and home to a Beloved Community where we are loved for who we are, no matter what, and where we belong forever.