



charlesbukowskiquotes



The best advice I've ever received: 'no one else
knows what they are doing either.'

Charles Bukowski

The three wisemen;
or thirty;
or three hundred.

Who can say?

*Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem,
but we don't know how many.*

In the end they presented three gifts,
but there may have been a whole contingent offering each gift.

The wisdom of the world
 bowing itself before the child who had,
 sometime earlier, been born in a stable;
who had,
 sometime earlier, been attended by certain poor shepherds,
the child who would,
 at the advice of these wisemen,
 flee for his life before the wrath of a jealous king.

I think of the wisemen
 and I think of the questions on the cross outside our doors.

Who are you?
Where are you going?
Why?

Who are you?
 Wise men from the East.

Where are you going?
 Bethlehem of Judea.

As to *why*,
 who can say?

Why would we come to visit a foreign king?
Why would we pay any attention to ancient Hebrew prophecies?
Why would we give up a season of our life
 to pay homage to a child born in a manger,
 placing ourselves alongside the donkeys
 and the camels
 and the ox,
never mind the shepherds and their sheep.

I do wish we could ask them.
I do wish motivations and inner dialogue
were as much a part of the biblical tradition
as they are the modern novel.

What I wouldn't give for a voice over every now and then,
Morgan Freeman jumping in to explain it all,
giving us a little sense of how things fit together.

But we don't get that.
We aren't offered it.

The story is beautiful as it is,
but it demands much from us.

It's our story,
of that there can be no doubt.

It is the story of our salvation,
certainly,
but more than that,
it is a human story.

Which is why it is the story of salvation.

God chose to become mired in the human story.
God's story and our story,
drawn together on the pages of our hearts.

Not because we did anything special,
though that does happen from time to time.
Not even because we were particularly awful,
though we are from time to time.

The most frustrating thing about the whole story of salvation
is that it's not because of us at all.

It's because of God.

Because *God so loved the world.*
And he has,
from the very beginning.

God knows what he is doing.
God is loving the world.

Do we know what we are doing?
That is often less certain.

In the years since my grandmother died,
I have visited her grave often.

I know that she is no more present to me there
than any other place,
and yet I feel closer there.
Perhaps because we walked those paths
and I can still hear her voice
telling me the stories,
the stories of the years engraved on those stones.

A few years after she died,
I went there on a January morning,
not unlike this morning.

I was on my way up to Carrollton
to have lunch with my mentor, Roger.
The priest who sent me to seminary,
who preached at my installation,
whose voice I carry with me
into much of my ministry.

And so that day
I was going to visit two people I love,
both very much still active forces in my life,
even if one is dead
and the other retired.

I pulled around the bend at the cemetery
and got out of my truck,
the same place
my grandmother and I had always gotten out to walk around,
the same place the tent was set up for her funeral 5 years ago
and my grandfather's funeral 22 years before that.

I got out of my truck
and started to talk to my grandmother.

I was telling her about life
and how things were going
and I suddenly started to cry
and to say out loud frustrations,
with myself and with others,
frustrations with my life.

I found myself standing over her grave saying,
I just don't know what to do.

And that was it.
That was the truth that I needed to say.

I just don't know what to do.

Not long after,
I got into my truck
and met Roger at the restaurant.

We exchanged pleasantries,
but I quickly got to the heart of things,
telling him about my experience
at the little cemetery in Alabama.

I reached the end of the story,
repeating those words,
the emotions of the morning
brought forward into the afternoon

I just don't know what to do.

Roger leaned over
and put his hand on my shoulder.
He looked me dead in the eye
and said very clearly,

None of us know what to do.

*Who are you?
Where are you going?
Why?*

Nobody else has any better answer than you.
None of us know what to do.

The wisemen came from the east,
claiming to follow a Jewish prophecy.

What on earth for?
We come up with all kinds of reasons for the things that we do.
My guess is,
those wisemen didn't leave home because of a prophecy.
The story even says, they left following yonder star.

Who follows a star halfway across the known universe?
Of course they made up reasons along the way.
Of course they rationalized it
and were happy to find that scrap of prophecy from Isaiah.

But really,
they didn't know what they were doing.

And they found God almighty anyway.

And that's the way it works.
That's the mystery of our salvation.

We don't have much to do with it.
We don't have to accomplish it.
We don't have to understand it.
We don't even have to make room for it.

There was precious little room for God,
and yet God found a place to be born.
Just the right place.
The dirty,
out of the way,
unexpected place.

The mystery of salvation is **not** how it happens.
God loves us.
That's how.

The mystery of salvation is not whether or not it happens.
God loves us.
Salvation happens.

The mystery of salvation is what on earth we're supposed to do about it.
What is our response to salvation?
To our salvation,
to the salvation of the world?

The truth is,
None of us know what to do.

We can give thanks.
We can spread the word.
We can remind each other
 that salvation is not dependent upon us.
We can gather alongside each other,
 either online or here in this lovely little church.

It sounds too simple.

 There must be more to it than that.
 And maybe there is.
 Remember, *I don't know what to do.*
 But neither does anybody else.

And so we just ask our questions.

Who are you?
 Where are you going?
 Why?

 We ask,
 knowing that we are not alone
 in not having many answers.

 We ask,
 knowing that our salvation
 does not depend upon the answers.

Instead,
 we ask,
 knowing that our salvation is already accomplished,
 because God loves us all.

At the end of the story,
the wisemen went back home.

But they could not go back the way they came.
It was too dangerous.

They had done the right thing,
warning Mary and Joseph of the danger to come.

They had done the right thing
and so that old, familiar way was blocked.

Our story says that they
Left for their country by another road.
Or more poetically,
They went home by another way.

What if they didn't know the way?
They only knew that they could not travel the old way.

What if they didn't know the way
and what if we are on that road with them,
not knowing the way,
only knowing that we must go *another way*?

Well, that would be good news.
Worth proclaiming as the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Because we aren't alone,
wise men and each other, walking the way together.
Because God is with us;
God has always been with us, since the very beginning.
Because, though we do not yet know the way,
the story says that we **are** headed home.