

HOME BY ANOTHER WAY
Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton
December 24, 2016, Christmas Eve
Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7; Matthew 2:1-12

Christmas Eve at last - a night of mystery and wonder. The stuff of which memories are made. The city quiets and enfolds itself in darkness like a down comforter on a damp and chilly night.

The stores are closed at last and taxis make their way to St. Pat's for Midnight Mass or Old First Pres for the Protestant take on a holy night when we sneak out in the darkness to – attend of all places - a church – where else? - to hear again a story of shepherds and angel choruses, of dreams of assurance and warnings of danger, a census that history did not record, and a little town of Bethlehem with an inn and a stable cold and dark, where a star lingers above it. There the Wise Men, Magi, carriers of maps, and charters of star formations, watch astronomical movements and pack gold and spice... their gifts for him, pa-rum-pa-pa-pum.

It is a night for lovers. Not just the couple in the stable but for all of us who want to love or be loved as well. Funny how this holy night brings that out in us.

Last Sunday we had a candlelight and carols service in the afternoon. It ends with the choir singing *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, and each chorister stops to light a candle from the ones on the communion table which they then carry down the aisle in their hand. They'll do the same tonight, as will all of you, carry candles.

But I noticed something about that recessional last week I hadn't noticed before and that was that following the benediction as I walked down the aisle, couples were kissing, first one over here, and then another couple over there, couples of all sorts and combinations. Somehow the candlelight, and the choir, and the beauty of the thing got through to people. Imagine that – church – a place to kiss, and there's not even a wedding! But then at the heart of it is a story of love and reconciliation between God and humanity. God become flesh and expressed in body as well as spirit.

Which is, I suppose why we come out on Christmas Eve to see what we can see, and hear an old familiar story in which we can both get lost and also found.

A few years ago Garrison Keillor did a riff on the nativity story in a radio episode of *A Prairie Home Companion*. He did a sketch imagining what might have been said that night of traveling vulnerability and no rooms in the inn.

It starts out with a dialogue between a young couple and another traveler.

"This the line for rooms at the inn?" asks a young man.

"I think so. We're from Nazareth," says the expectant father. "We came down for the census."

"You got a reservation," asks, the fellow traveler.

"No, we're on standby," answers the Nazarene father-to-be.

"Well, these inns always over-book. You'll probably get a room."

Suddenly an announcement comes over the loudspeaker above the reservations desk.

Folks, if I could have your attention – Thank you for your patience. I'm very sorry but the inn is completely sold out for tonight. I want to apologize for any inconvenience this may cause you, but due to a systems error in our Jerusalem office, there simply are not any rooms. This is not the fault of the Bethlehem staff. Once again, I apologize for the inconvenience. I hope you have a good evening here in Bethlehem or wherever your final destination may be. And I hope you will think of Holy Day Inns in the future, when making your travel plans.¹

Not likely what really happened... but the story of the Inn at the end of the world this night is where our thoughts are taking us in the darkness and the candlelight. And never mind that the church with

its quirky calendar saves the story of the Magi not for Christmas Eve but for Epiphany, Twelfth Night, though Matthew has embedded it in the darkness of the night and the intrigue of Herod's reign, an ominous foretelling of a life that will not go as well as Mary and Joseph might hope this night of their firstborn's birth.

Even the gifts that the Magi bring are symbols of a larger purpose foreshadowed in the story. Gold they bring to bestow upon him eminence and a wealth he will never know, though wealth befitting a king. Frankincense, a resin of olfactory powder, perfume suitable for a royal. And myrrh, a strong aroma, an oil for anointing which will come in handy that last night at the table when the woman anoints his feet and then again – handy - not long after - inside the shroud, to offset the stench of death. These are not just any gifts they bring. Not by any means.

There is a darkness in the story Matthew tells, a plan afoot, and a tale of dreams and portents, and kings rivalling kings, ending at last with Herod beaten at his own game, snookered, because the Magi go *home by another way* and leave Herod with no news of the birth of his rival king.

In rage and anger, Herod orders the slaughter of all the children of Bethlehem two years old and younger so as to remove any threat to his faltering reign. When you have all the power in the world and everyone around you is a yes-man, you can do those kind of things – slaughter children, invade towns, silence the opposition.

How precarious must his hold on power have been to murder the innocent children of Bethlehem (an ancient Aleppo, perhaps) in this way? Frederick Buechner puts it so well, "For all his enormous power, [Herod] knew there was somebody in diapers more powerful still. The wisdom of the foolish is nowhere better illustrated."²

Matthew's is the darker of the Christmas tales, unlike Luke who is bright with angel choruses singing of disarmament and shepherds abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night; later running to Bethlehem to see this thing which the Lord has made known to them.

Matthew, in contrast, sees a darker plot, the power of the empire vs the power of God's love.

And so Matthew tells us from the outset of the story that the kingdom of this world will stand in opposition to the kingdom of our God. *In the time of Herod the King....* he begins his story, which fixes it politically... Wise Men came from the East inquiring "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"

Which was news to Herod, because Herod was the king of the Jews, a precarious deal negotiated with Rome, which is probably why the Magi's question made Herod's hair stand on end.

He summoned the Wise Men secretly, and told them that after they had found the child, they should come and tell him where he was so that he too might come and worship him. An empty promise from a frightened man.

And we know the rest. The magi found their way, and followed the star and left their gifts. And being warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, *they left for home by another way*.

They left for home by another way.... An interesting phrase thrown out so casually and yet so poignantly because with the diversionary tactics going home, the Magi become participants in a drama greater than the choice of the scenic route versus the most direct way, for life and death hangs in the balance of that choice, and the Magi are choosing life over death. They are trusting that God's power is greater than Herod's power.

Matthew wants us to know that nothing is happening by chance in this story. That even the most casual of phrases carries the most important of meanings. And with that turn, this becomes a story larger than just the birth of a child and a mysterious visit of three potentates with majestic mien.

This is a story of a God who intervenes to save his people, and brings together the lowest of the low, like the shepherds, with the highest of the high, like the Magi. And this God acts in a world of flesh and blood where children are born and children die. Where emperors flourish and Herod reigns for a while and even wanderers and wayfarers play a part in God's plans.

There is no getting around the fact that the world is pretty much turned upside down right now. The news in recent days if not weeks has been troubling.

The scenes of Aleppo in ruins, a city reduced to rubble, unfit for human habitation and Mosul comes next. The terrorism in Berlin attacking an open market that could just as easily have been Union Square. The assassination of a Russian ambassador at an art gallery opening in Ankara that could have been in Soho. The possibility of a nuclear arms race that could certainly level Manhattan and L.A. and Chicago and Moscow and Jerusalem and end sustainable life on this planet in a matter of 14 minutes back and forth.

So much for kissing in the pews. This is serious business that God is about and the world is hanging in the balance.

Which is why the story in Matthew's gospel tonight has special significance. For the child that is born in a cow's stall and laid in a manger is a challenge to every Herod ever born and to all the powers that threaten to undo or dissemble us. For what Matthew is trying to whisper in our ear tonight is that in going home by another way there is a not so secret plot afoot, a better plot than Herod's, and therein lies the hope of the world, if like the Magi we can go there too following that star to him who is born, a child and yet a king.

Sometimes you can almost see it. All the way home by another way, God's way.

This past week we received a shipment of warm winter coats for people who had none. It's part of our outreach as a church in an inhospitable time to welcome the outsider and to follow our Lord's teaching when he said, "I was a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me."

So not only did we have coats for our sponsored family of Eritrean refugees, Asmait, Degol, and their two-year-old daughter Efratha, but we also had coats for 52 other refugees seeking asylum because of a variety of reasons... because they are Christian, or because they are gay, or because they are women getting an education, or were living in a war zone and had seen family members disappeared or killed before them, so they are seeking asylum as refugees. If any part of this story sounds familiar tonight there is good reason.

So it was getting cold earlier in the week and we ordered coats for people who had none, and many of you paid for those coats out of your pocket sponsoring someone you had never met, and the remainder our deacons provided. New coats, warm coats for what will be a long winter.

One of the refugees and asylum seekers, who is waiting for approval of his application to stay, had heard about the coats here at the church from the agency with whom we are partnering, and so he came down from Bridgeport where he lives, and spent the night sleeping in the Port Authority Bus Terminal (talk about no room in the inn) and all so that he could be here early for one of the coats when we opened our doors in the morning, as if we were not already saving one for him. There are signs of getting home by another way, following where God shows us, if we will only notice.

Friday while I was working on this sermon I received an email from one of you who attached what was supposed to be a glorious Colorado snow scene of a hillside ranch owned by friends, and that had the caption "too beautiful not to share."

But frankly it looked like a Rorschach impression, a study in grays and blacks and whites, mostly whites, everything turned upside down. You know they've had big snow storms in recent days out there in the West. I could tell that there were fences in the picture, some corral posts strangely placed, a boot as big as a mountain on the left side of the picture, and an inverted Christmas tree with colored lights, very

small in the center. Some white planks off to the right. It was very impressionistic, left lots to the imagination. And as a study in white and gray and shadow it was interesting but I couldn't make any sense of it.

Until I realized that the photograph had been transferred in the email upside down. I couldn't get that thing to turn the picture around, so I picked up my computer screen and actually turned it 180 degrees and there in the picture was a beautiful ranch house, surrounded by pine trees laden with snow. There was a path through the snow leading up to the house, a path by another way and in the middle of the picture, a Christmas tree in beautiful colored lights. Home by another way.

And maybe what Matthew is telling us in his story of Herod and the Magi and their gifts for the child, is that there may be more of God's plan in the events of this night than we might have imagined just seeing it and hearing it the way we usually do.

If we look at it another way, if we turn it at just the right angle, if we see it with God in the picture and are less fixed on Herod and all his blustering, bullying, messing up the matter, so costly for the children, we might just see that this world is more God's than Herod's, especially if we look at it by another way. What Matthew wants us to know is that the future belongs to God, not to Herod, and we would be wise men and women to follow where God leads us and go where God guides us.

The good news of this Christmas Eve is the story of God's love for us made real in the birth of a savior in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

So take heart, you who are discouraged, must come home by another way.

Do not be afraid, you who are frightened of what the future will be, you must come home by another way.

Be strong, you who feel overwhelmed by life, you will come home by another way.

Be joyful, you who are discouraged and saddened, you will come home by another way.

God is more in the picture than we had ever imagined, if we will only look at it from the right angle. And God will lead us all the way home by another way because we have seen the child in the manger, the Lord of Dance, the Savior among us, the Word become flesh. And it is more than Herod ever reckoned.

Merry Christmas everyone. A brave and hopeful and merry Christmas to us all.

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¹ Garrison Keillor, A Prairie Home Companion, December 22, 2001.
<http://prairiehome.publicradio.org/programs/20011222/christmas.shtml>

² Frederick Buechner, New York: Harper & Row, 1979. 51.