

Departing Bethlehem

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Luke 2: 20; Matthew 2: 12-13

The first Sunday after Christmas is always just that little bit strange or.... disorienting.

Everything looks so much the same as it did just a few days ago at the Christmas Eve Service. The fellowship hall is still trimmed out for the holiday, the poinsettias still grace the chancel, the window wreaths and the greenery hang just as they did the other night, so there is a feeling that Christmas continues—in fact, I guess as the twelve days of Christmas go, we're only up to six geese a laying...and yet there is also and already a sense of returning to normalcy and moving on, as if it is time to begin the task of boxing up Christmas and getting on with January. Is it really done so soon?

When we begin disassembling Christmas at home, one of the strangest and most bittersweet tasks for me is the boxing of the manger scene—the one I brought home from the Mediterranean thirty years ago that has been a part of our family since.

I pick up Mary and I study her—mother of Jesus, singer of the Magnificat, so young to be having a baby, so filled with faith and fiery passion...she has been brought to Bethlehem to bear God's own son...I look at her closely. And then I wrap her in tissue and put her in a small box.

Then there's Joseph—he who never gets any lines in the annual Christmas pageant, he who stands quietly in the background. Yet it

has also taken a deep faith to bring him to Bethlehem, and his life will be quite different as he departs. He gets his own piece of tissue and his own box.

Then there are the shepherds to be boxed as well—what is it like to hear angel songs, I wonder? And after one has heard them, what is it like to go right back to tending sheep? The sheep don't tend themselves, you know. Back to normal, back to normal, back to normal...back in the tissue, back in the wrapping, back in the box.

And of course, there are the wise men included in our nativity set—three by tradition, though Matthew's gospel never tells us how many, we just number them by their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. We often lump them into the manger scene and the Christmas pageant, which is to mingle Matthew and Luke's very different and very distinct accounts...but we do it anyway. Two of the kings are fair skinned and one dark in our manger scene, two are standing and one is kneeling. I wonder about the star they followed—what did they see in the sky, what was their journey like?

They come such a long way to offer their gifts and then go...back in their own boxes and back to the distant country of the top shelf in the storage closet.

It is strange, I often think as I try to fit Christmas back into the appropriate boxes...we spend a month getting to Bethlehem: a month of preparing, a month decorating, a month of advent candles, a month of sermons and songs...and then we stay at Bethlehem such a short time before departing.

That's part of why the Christmas Eve service is so special, I think—it permits us to capture one frozen moment at the manger, a snapshot of hovering angels, a reminder that it all happened, it wasn't just a dream. A whiff of peace on earth, good will to

all...and then it is suddenly the Sunday AFTER Christmas once more, and I find myself wondering anew, how does one depart this moment, this Bethlehem, this spiritual place or state?

The Bible offers us precious little assistance with the departing. In both Luke's gospel and Matthew's, it takes pages to get to the birth or to Bethlehem, but only a sentence to leave. Of the shepherds, Luke says only: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." Just that much and nothing afterward.

Of the wise men, Matthew remarks only that, "Having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by a different road." It isn't very much to go on...but perhaps it is enough for us to contemplate—how will we depart Bethlehem this year?

The first thing that these scripture passages reaffirm is that we all must return to some sort of normality—the shepherds return, the wise men return, we also must leave the manger, depart Bethlehem this day, and go back to whatever it was we were doing, just like we did last year, and the year before that, and the year before that. Back home, back to work, back to school, back to the routine. We can't stay at the manger, as much as we might like to.

But will we walk away unaffected or unchanged? That is the point to ponder.

The shepherds leave Bethlehem filled with a sense of awe at the majesty of God, the goodness of God, the nearness of God's presence—they have encountered the Holy. Perhaps it is a feeling that they have encountered before, gazing upon the glory of a Judean sunset, or pondering the miracle of their own existence. This is not necessarily the first or only time that they have felt close

to God. Yet on this night, they have been FRESHLY FILLED. They depart with fresh hopes, renewed faithfulness, and a sense that God is much less distant than they might have imagined.

Can we not say the same? Does the presence of God we have experienced in this year's moment at the manger not rekindle in us some long-lost yearning or some burning wonder? And can we not carry some of that with us as we depart?

In her collection of poetry entitled Kneeling in Bethlehem, the Presbyterian poet Ann Weems writes,
Later...

After the angels...

After the stable....

After the child...

They went back, as we always must.

Back to the world that doesn't understand our talk of angels
and

Of stars and ESPECIALLY not the child.

We go back complaining that it doesn't last. THEY went back singing praises to God! We do have to go back—but we can still sing the alleluias!!!

(PAUSE)

What we must do then, in this day and in this moment, is to grasp as much worship and wonder as we can carry, until our hearts like Christmas dinner plates are filled to overflowing and there is no place for our feeling to go except heavenward, in shouts of "Glory to God who has given so much!" "Glory to God who has come so near!" "Glory to God!"

That is how we must leave Bethlehem anew—bursting with grace and gratitude like the shepherds, filled with alleluias and glorifying

God! It isn't just a feeling, a sentiment, a warm and cozy glow—it is a renewed awareness: we have news to proclaim! God is in our very midst!

But how else do we depart? If we're going to include the wise men at the manger scene, we might also take instruction from how they return. The wise men, Matthew tells us, having received a message from God, returned home by a different road. They returned home—that is to say, they went back to where they came from...but they returned by a different road, which is to say, they **WENT BACK TO THE SAME PLACE DIFFERENTLY.**

Now there is a thought for us to contemplate...for we all can likely say that in arriving at Bethlehem this year, we have not always traveled the best of roads. I say that with confidence because even the best of us are human. In our own way, we all have walked roads of anger, or regret, unforgiveness or un-kept promises. We may have judged our neighbors too quickly or too harshly. We have been less generous to others than we might have been, with our time or our resources or with our good graces—or perhaps we have not been generous enough with ourselves, and we have traveled roads of shame and regret. Whatever road we have traveled, an angel's message awaits us at the manger as well:

“When you leave this place, go home by a different way. Go back to the same place, differently.”

It no longer matters how we arrived—those roads, whatever they may have been, brought us here, and that is all that now matters. The one in the manger offers us the assurance that we can leave Bethlehem today along new roads of forgiveness, of renewed commitment, of opportunity, of hope. We can leave by paths new with promise and with challenge. The way may be unfamiliar—but

God will guide and a little child shall lead us, as the scriptures say. We, like the wise men, can depart by a different road.

Maybe we've had it a little bit wrong all these years—building our hopes toward Christmas Eve and its fleeting, candlelit moment at the manger. The babe in the manger, after all, represents only the beginning of God's presence with us.

The promise, in fact, leads out from Bethlehem—out from the manger—out from the place of holy harmony and sanctuary, and into the world and into our everyday, workaday lives. The peace on earth, goodwill to all that is promised by the angels is a gift with some assembly required. As theologian, educator, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman writes in his poem, *The Work of Christmas* (From "The Mood of Christmas and Other Celebrations:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

The necessary tools are what we carry with us as we depart: hearts filled with joy and gratitude and a willingness to walk a different path as God commands.

Linger at the manger a moment longer, therefore, but then prepare to depart.

Leave, like the shepherds, filled with wonder and with praise and with proclamation. Depart, like the wise men, by a different road, with new opportunities for faithfulness...old roads must not be traveled again. It is time to depart Bethlehem. Carry what you need to carry. Leave what you need to leave. And God be with you this day and always. Amen.