

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-14

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

[When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]

Well, congratulations, we made it. Tomorrow we crossed the Christmas finish line. It's over for another year and can be packed up and put away. We all tried to get everything done that we were supposed to, we shopped until we dropped, we wrapped everything in sight, decked the halls, ate until we felt like we should burst, probably spent more than we should have, (but it IS Christmas, after all), we've done everything we were supposed to do.

Well – everything? I have to admit I may have not quite gotten to everything – I waited too long to wrap things, (to be honest, I will finish that tonight), I didn't quite recapture the Christmases of my youth and, I must admit, once or twice I didn't get to the candles on the

Advent wreath at home until Tuesday – or maybe Wednesday... Well, either way, it's almost over now and we can pack it away until next year – when it rears its head once again at Thanksgiving – or Halloween – or whenever the retail market thinks it is time to roll it out again – it's over for another year .

Or is it? Is it really?

Has Christmas really come down to this? Is it really a burden with a finish line – a thing to dread each year as retailers “Black Friday” fires the starter pistol at the beginning of the season? How can we possibly keep track of the true meaning of Christmas in the midst of what surrounds us each day on the lead up to the big event? Or, perhaps more directly, George Bernard Shaw, known for his direct irreverent approach, describes Christmas as an “atrocious institution. We must be gluttonous because it is Christmas. We must be drunk because it is Christmas. We must be insincerely generous; we must buy things that nobody wants, and give them to people we don't like; we must go to absurd entertainments that make even our little children satirical; we must writhe under venal officiousness from legions of free-booters, all because it is Christmas – that is, because the mass of the population, including the all powerful retailers, depends on a week of waste and impermanence to clear off its outstanding liabilities at the end of the year”. If Shaw's view of Christmas hits a nerve for you, I'm sorry – I have to admit it hits a nerve for me, too.

I once heard it described saying Christmas is actually a dangerous thing – because if you *really* believe in what Christmas represents, you are upsetting the status quo in a big way. Jesus, in what he brought into the world is a bigger matter than Christmas. If people honestly mean to be Christians, they cannot stop with the sentiment of Christmas.

As the carol says, “a new king's born today”. We celebrate the birth, and all that it means – all the potential for the change in the world and the change inside ourselves. Can we really just box that up and put it away until next year? A new birth needs to be cherished every day. We celebrate the birth and we can see the work that is to follow.

In today's gospel we hear of the words the angels offer to the shepherds “to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger”, and when the shepherd's shared these glad tidings, “all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them”, as we still are today, especially if we do as Mary did and “treasure all these words and ponder them in our heart”. If we take them deep into our hearts for pondering, for daily contemplation and care, they can't be put away until next year – they become part of who and what we are.

In the midst of the 12 days of Christmas which we have now entered, I think we also need to give some thought to the wise men and their travels. The story of the wise men is told only in the Gospel according to Matthew and has become an iconic part of the Christmas story. “Wise” men, though. This group of travelers was considered wise enough that Herod consulted them, and feared their knowledge, their words and their predictions.

But what do they do in this story? This group of wise men has taken off across the desert to follow a star. There is no suggestion they have a map, there is no calling triple A for directions and there certainly aren’t any GPS systems available – Is traveling like this considered “wise”? Not by today’s standards! They also have scripture, which, being scripture, gives them a little more to go on, but isn’t necessarily the clearest version of “take a left at this sand dune then bear right at the oasis”. This is perhaps not the best, most wise way to travel – but, out of all the available recommended traveling tools, they travel with faith. It is their faith that gets them where they are going. Maybe there is wisdom in those travel plans! They pack their gold, frankincense and myrrh and find the baby and give an offering of gifts for a king.

In today’s world we are not encouraged to find our way by following our hearts, or listening to God, but maybe it can be different at Christmas. We have our schedules and checklists of things to do and what to buy – we maximize every moment of time we can on the lead up to the big event – Christmas Day – we check our maps every few minutes to make sure we are on course THEN, of course, we come to the climactic moment where we have reached our destination we pack it away for another year – perhaps with a few more notes tucked into the guidebook about travel plans for next Christmas. All very neat and tidy

This sort of Christmas – the kind Shaw describes – the rush and the panic and the attempts to grasp things we can no longer grasp seem, at best, counterproductive for the faith journey I have described. Christmas calls out for that time in all of us to honor the new-born child – it calls for us to put down our maps and our checklists and our sales flyers and our expectations and to go outside, even just for a few moments, to follow a star, because that star calls to our hearts, and who we really are.

How has the travel to Christmas been for you? Did you look to the sky to find the star to follow? Were you following a guide book or a map? What was born in you this Christmas? How will you care for that birth? How will you nurture and care for the gifts your faith in God has provided?

...and here’s the gift – if you didn’t do these things, remember, it’s still Christmas. There are 12 days, after all, and in these 12 days we can celebrate Christmas as a journey – not a finish line – not a destination – not something that can be put back in a box and stuffed back in the attic - but a journey we are invited on again and again.

Howard Thurman offered a Christmas Prayer that spoke to that work. This is called “the Work of Christmas”

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 brothers,
To make music in the heart.

Follow that star. Celebrate the birth. From the bottom of my heart I wish you all a Merry Christmas.

Amen -